

TRAINING THE NEXT TEACHERS FOR AMERICA:

A Proposal for Reconceptualizing TFA

By Megan Hopkins
From *Phi Delta Kappan*

SOON after I began my first year as a Teach for America (TFA) corps member, I realized how underprepared I felt teaching first grade. Not only was I unsure how to manage and organize my classroom, but I also lacked the necessary content and pedagogical knowledge to teach effectively. Perhaps most important, I did not have deep understandings of or appreciation for the experiences of my students or their community.

The five-week training institute I attended had not been enough to develop my educational "toolkit" or prepare me to provide students with the type of education that might begin to equalize their chances in the system.

Although I grew as an educator over time and am still committed to working in education, it was an uphill battle. And, like most other TFA corps members, I left teaching within the first three years. Since my involvement with TFA, the organization has made considerable efforts to refine its preparation model, yet the program continues to draw criticism for teacher underpreparation and low retention rates.

I wish to recommend alterations in the preparation of corps members that would: (1) extend the TFA commitment to three years; (2) convert the first year of teaching to a residency training year, offering classroom training

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Reconceptualizing Teach for America

with expert veteran teachers while corps members also complete coursework toward certification; and (3) offer incentives for teaching longer than three years. These changes could help TFA fulfill its mission of creating leaders who will make lasting changes in the field of education, while also enhancing program quality during the time they serve in our nation's most under-resourced schools.

These recommendations could be supported, in part, by the Teaching Residency Act, introduced in the Senate by then Sen. Barack Obama, and the Preparing Excellent Teachers Act, introduced in the House by Rep. Rahm Emanuel. Both bills, introduced last summer, would enable prospective teachers to work under expert mentor teachers for an academic year while they complete coursework for certification.

The bills aim to expand the reach of highly successful models for urban teacher residencies—programs that provide substantial preparation for carefully selected novice teachers who commit to teaching for a minimum of three to four years in the districts that sponsor them. The passage of this legislation would create an opportunity for TFA to embrace promising new strategies for teacher preparation and induction.

Why Change TFA?

Recent research suggests the

need for a change in TFA's approach. The TFA model assumes that extensive formal teacher training is not essential for its recruits—most of them graduates of top colleges with strong leadership abilities and a desire to improve educational opportunities for children.

Yet the reality is that TFA teachers are initially less successful in supporting student learning than are traditionally prepared teachers who are fully certified when they enter the profession. One study found that TFA recruits had more positive effects on students' math achievement as they finished their certification and training; however, they continued to have negative effects on elementary students' reading achievement throughout the study.

While the research is limited to comparing student performance on standardized tests, and it is arguable whether these tests accurately measure student achievement, the studies show that TFA corps members are not as successful as the organization assumes they will be. Particularly when they begin teaching, TFA teachers are less successful than their peers who receive more formal training.

TFA is also often criticized for high turnover rates, as studies have found that 80% or more of corps members have left teaching positions by the end of the third

THE EDUCATION DIGEST

year, just when they are beginning to be more successful. This figure compares to about 30% to 40% of traditionally certified teachers in the same districts who leave by the end of the third year. Districts—and their schools and students—bear the cost of this high level of attrition, and not surprisingly, some district officials have expressed concerns about this turnover rate. TFA should consider incentives for corps members who are willing to remain longer in the classroom.

What Approaches Might Improve the Model?

In comparative international studies of teacher preparation, the U.S. has been shown to undervalue preservice training. In particular, it is much less likely in the U.S. than in other developed nations that prospective teachers will learn to teach under the wing of a master teacher while they are learning about curriculum, instruction, learning, and child development.

Most European countries include a year of closely supervised clinical practice in a school associated with the university as part of preservice preparation. Other countries, such as Japan, require extensive on-the-job training for teachers in their initial “apprenticeship,” with coaching and 60 days per year of seminars and classroom visits.

Master teachers supervise beginning teachers by observing,

suggesting areas for improvement, and discussing effective instructional strategies.

Similarly, to strengthen teacher preparation in the U.S. and to alter experienced teachers’ roles in teacher training, some schools and universities across the country are collaborating to create professional development schools. These schools are designed to support the learning of new and experienced teachers and to restructure schools of education. In partnership with universities, veteran teachers serve as mentors and work with university faculty to develop the preparation curriculum and make decisions about instructional practices.

Such schools promote collaboration and provide hands-on training for new teachers, and they redefine the roles of experienced teachers by giving them an opportunity to take on leadership positions. Studies show that teachers trained in professional development schools feel better prepared, more often apply theory to practice, are more confident and enthusiastic about teaching, and are more highly rated than teachers prepared in other ways.

More recently, shortages of high-quality teachers have led large urban school districts to initiate their own versions of the professional development school approach. Together, programs started in Boston, Chicago, and

Reconceptualizing Teach for America

Denver form the Coalition of Urban Teacher Residencies. Each program builds on a medical residency approach to train new teachers.

The programs recruit recent college graduates and midlife career changers to complete a year-long paid residency with an expert mentor teacher while they also take coursework toward certification and a master's in education. After completing a year-end portfolio evaluation and the required coursework, program graduates begin teaching independently in their residency districts the following year, and they continue to receive mentoring. Program participants must commit to teach in the district for at least three or four years. This model of preparation brings committed, well-prepared individuals into high-need urban schools with the hope of keeping them there.

A TFA Residency

I recommend that TFA develop a residency training model with the following features:

- 1. Extend the program's current two-year commitment to three years**, with corps members serving as residents during their first year.
- 2. Require first-year corps members to complete a residency year in an experienced teacher's classroom within their placement district and at (or near) their placement grade level.** During this

year, corps members will co-teach with a mentor deemed highly effective at raising student achievement. The mentor teacher, in collaboration with a TFA program director or university instructor, will scaffold the corps member's training, so that the corps member first observes the mentor teacher and discusses instructional strategies and eventually leads the classroom while the mentor assesses and provides feedback. Not only will corps members acquire collaborative skills and instructional expertise, but they will also gain an understanding of the community context in which they will teach, and they will complete coursework for certification.

3. Cluster TFA "residents" at high-performing urban schools. The programs in the Coalition of Urban Teacher Residencies concentrate participants at a small number of schools that have many expert teachers and adept administrators. Residents under this model would collaborate within a school community that provides a positive culture and support.

4. Offer courses through a university partner for first-year corps members to obtain certification and a master's degree. While TFA currently partners with local universities in most placement sites, stronger relationships between TFA and these partners—and between coursework and clinical experiences—must be developed

THE EDUCATION DIGEST

if residents are to integrate theory and practice and apply what they learn.

5. Provide incentives to teach longer than three years, such as opportunities to take on leadership roles, as well as stipends and forgivable loans for accepting additional responsibilities. Teachers who serve longer than three years could also serve as liaisons among members of the partnership and provide support and professional development to novice teachers. These longer-term corps members could serve as mentors in a residency training school and partner with university colleagues in offering support and coursework.

Challenges to implementation

Since these strategies would require an overhaul of TFA's approach to teacher preparation, there are many issues to address before proceeding.

Funding. School districts currently provide full salaries to TFA corps members. A different funding structure would need to be developed to support corps members during their residency year, as many districts could not afford to support two teachers for a single classroom. Additional funds would also be needed to compensate mentor teachers and longer-term TFA teachers who took on leadership roles, although these roles already exist in a number of districts.

Some possibilities follow:

- As the Chicago teacher residency does, TFA and the districts could adopt a graduated pay scale that would pay first-year corps members less than the normal first-year teacher salary, while longer-term corps members would receive a stipend in addition to their regular salary for fulfilling a mentor or leadership role. Teachers who decided to remain for longer than their commitments could be granted forgivable student loans, with a specific percentage of the balance forgiven for each additional year teaching. Federal funds are available to help underwrite such programs in high-need schools.

- Model first-year funding on the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) model, which offers \$10,000 stipends to first-year residents. Residents must pay \$10,000 tuition for university coursework, but BTR offers a no-interest loan to cover this cost, which is reduced and ultimately eliminated if residents teach in the district for three years.

- If TFA alters its approach to include a year of residency, it may be able to reduce its summer institute training or even replace it with training administered within the cities or school districts where corps members are placed, thereby greatly reducing the costs. Corps members may benefit from intensive training under an expert

Reconceptualizing Teach for America

mentor from their placement district who could provide knowledge about the specific context in which they will teach.

- Instead of devoting funding to recruitment and to expanding the corps at the current rapid rate, TFA could use this funding to implement the preparation model proposed. While this may hinder meeting TFA's expansion goals, the model would produce a number of high-quality teachers who would be likely to remain more than two or three years at their placement sites, reducing the demand for new teachers and providing greater benefit to districts, schools, and students.

Capacity. If TFA desires to initiate these changes, it will need to consider its capacity to do so. One issue will be recruiting enough mentor teachers for first-year corps members. TFA currently recruits veteran teachers for its summer institute, and these people are certainly candidates for mentoring positions during the school year. And because TFA has been placing teachers in some cities for over 10 years, some sites have a reasonable number of alumni still in teaching who could mentor and also provide connections to other experienced teachers.


TFA would also need to form partnerships with local universi-

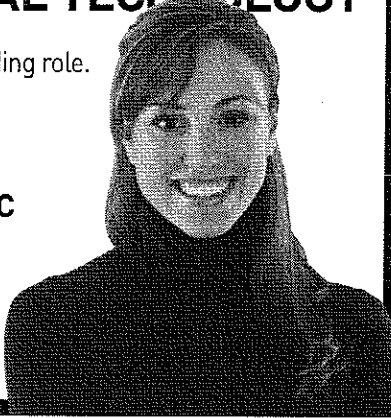
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ties and school districts. Thus far, it has secured such partnerships within each placement city, but none has thus far been as involved as this new strategy would require. New models of coursework may need to be developed, and instructors may need to be hired. The Boston Teacher Residency has a curriculum coordinator who works to develop the coursework and to seek university faculty members to help design and teach each required course. The Chicago Residency works with National-Louis University and the University of Illinois at Chicago to design and offer coursework linked to the clinical experience.

Existing structures. TFA would have to make some decisions about its existing structures. For example, it would have to consider making changes to or eliminating the summer institute to supply funding for a new system. It would have to consider the current support systems within each placement city. For example, the roles and responsibilities of program directors would change, as they not only would work with corps members but also would collaborate with mentor teachers, school principals, and university faculty members.

Possible objections. If the TFA commitment is extended to three years, some applicants may be reluctant to apply, thus limiting the pool of highly qualified candidates.

However, better training and support should encourage others, and the incentives offered in the third year and beyond should overcome some resistance.

Next steps. Before implementing a program-wide change, TFA would be wise to pilot the new strategy in one placement site and assess its effectiveness. Such a site should be chosen after assessing such resources as the availability of mentor teachers, the number of effective schools to serve as residency sites, and the potential for district and university support.

Conclusion

While these proposals would require substantial redesign of the TFA model, the results are likely to be worth the investment. TFA has the potential to effect large-scale change in the field of education. It recruits highly qualified, motivated members who appreciate the importance of equal educational opportunities, and many go on to devote their lives to this mission. However, these individuals are not as effective as they could be, and their students do not perform as well as students in classrooms where teachers have more formal training. Corps members given a full year to learn effective instructional practices and to fully prepare to work within the context of their placement site will be better prepared to enter their classrooms as skilled teachers. 