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Building The Movement To End Educational Inequity

Wendy Kopp, Phi Delta Kappan, Bloomington: Jun 2008, Vol. 89, Iss. 10; pg. 734, 3 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

In order to provide more students growing up in poverty today with excellent teachers and also to build this force of leaders, Teach for America recruits our nation's most promising future leaders, invests in the training and professional development necessary to ensure their success as teachers in our highest-poverty communities, and fosters their ongoing leadership as alumni. In our nation's capital, for example, Teach for America alumni serve as the schools' chancellor, deputy chancellor, 10% of school principals, one of two newly elected state board members, a policy advisor to the mayor, and the only national teacher of the year in the city's history.

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[Headnote]

Teach for America is working, Ms. Kopp argues. And studies show that TFA teachers do as well as or better than teachers with traditional certification.

TEACH FOR America exists to address educational inequity - the stunning reality that in our nation, which aspires so admirably to be a land of equal opportunity, where one is born still largely determines one's educational outcomes. Despite plenty of evidence that children growing up in poverty can do well academically - when given the opportunities they deserve - the stark reality in our nation today is that the 13 million children growing up below the poverty line are already three grade levels behind children in high-income communities by the time they are 9 years old. Moreover, even the half of low-income children who do manage to graduate from high school are performing, on average, at the level of eighth-graders who live in affluent communities.

Why do we have this problem? We believe that the foremost reason is that children in low-income communities face extra challenges of poverty that other children don't face, including lack of adequate health care and housing and lack of access to high-quality preschool programs. The situation is compounded by the fact that the schools they attend were not

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designed to put children facing extra disadvantages on a level playing field with students in other areas. These circumstances persist because our national policies and practices, driven by our national priorities, have not been sufficient to tackle either the socioeconomic challenges or the inadequacies in our school systems.

At Teach for America, we know we can solve this problem because we see evidence in classrooms across the country that, when students growing up in poverty are given the opportunities they deserve, they excel. Knowing that we cannot expect every teacher to go above and beyond traditional expectations to the extent necessary to compensate for all the weaknesses of the system, however, we believe our best hope for a lasting solution is to build a massive force of leaders working from inside and outside education who have the conviction and insight that come from teaching successfully in low-income communities. We need such leadership working at every level of our school systems, working outside the system to address the socioeconomic factors that contribute so significantly to the problem, and working in policy and the sectors, such as journalism and business, that influence policy. In order to provide more students growing up in poverty today with excellent teachers and also to build this force of leaders, Teach for America recruits our nation's most promising future leaders, invests in the training and professional development necessary to ensure their success as teachers in our highest-poverty communities, and fosters their ongoing leadership as alumni.

The evidence indicates that our approach is working. Last year, more than 18,000 graduates of top universities competed for the opportunity to teach in urban and rural communities. Our incoming corps of 2,900 members achieved an average GPA of 3.6; 95% of them held at least one leadership position in a campus activity. Twenty-eight percent of the corps members identify as people of color, and 29% are male. They come to this effort with a desire to reach the nation's most disadvantaged students, and based on the results of the most rigorous evaluation conducted to date, they are in fact teaching students who begin the year, on average, at the 14th percentile against the national norm.

The research actually does not show that our teachers have less impact than fully certified teachers, as Megan Hopkins seems to suggest. Multiple rigorous studies, such as the one she cites by Thomas Kane, Jonah Rockoff, and Douglas Staiger, have actually found that certification is a weak predictor of effectiveness and that Teach for America teachers do as well as or better than those from traditional preparation routes.

Moreover, the "small study" to which she refers was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research; the random-assignment methodology used in that study is widely considered the "gold standard" in research. This rigorous study found that students taught by Teach for America corps members made more progress in both reading and math than would typically be expected in a single year. In math, the impact of hiring a Teach for America teacher over another new teacher was the equivalent of reducing class size by eight students (as in the Tennessee class-size reduction experiment). The study found that Teach for America teachers produced gains in math that were not only larger than those of other beginning teachers but also larger than those of veteran and certified teachers.

The preponderance of evidence shows that corps members effect greater academic gains than other teachers in their schools. And while fewer than 10% of corps members report that they might have taught even if Teach for America hadn't been an option, more than 60% of our

12,000 alumni are working full-time in education. While they are still in their twenties and thirties, they are pioneering vital reforms, modeling excellence as teachers, serving as school principals and district administrators, and even getting appointed to superintendentcies. They are making a tangible difference in communities across the country where we have been placing corps members for a decade or more. In our nation's capital, for example, Teach for America alumni serve as the schools' chancellor, deputy chancellor, 10% of school principals, one of two newly elected state board members, a policy advisor to the mayor, and the only national teacher of the year in the city's history. Other Teach for America alumni work from the social services and the legal profession to mitigate the pressures on schools in the first place, and still others work from corporations to marshal additional resources toward the effort.

In our program's 17-year history, we have engaged in ongoing research to continuously improve our program. In the process, we have given extensive thought to the suggestions made by Ms. Hopkins and have made decisions based on evidence of what is likely to maximize the impact of our model. For example, we have not moved to a three-year commitment because of evidence that doing so would significantly decrease the size, diversity, and quality of our corps, particularly in such key areas as math and science. We weigh this information against the reality that most of our corps members do, in fact, remain in education over the long term, despite the two-year commitment. We have also remained committed to enabling corps members to make first-year teacher salaries, knowing that asking them to work for a stipend or reduced salary would reduce the socioeconomic - and in turn racial and ethnic - diversity of the corps.

While we do remain committed to placing corps members in schools where they can reach our country's most underserved children, we have also made an unprecedented investment in their professional development. This is hard work, but by investing in measuring corps members' academic impact and in the continuous improvement of the training and professional development we provide, we aim to produce a corps of first- and second-year teachers who move their students forward significantly more than would typically be expected in a year.

It is also worth noting that principals in our partner schools give consistently high ratings to the preparation of our corps members. In a recent nationwide survey of principals with corps members in their schools, nearly all reported that corps members' training is at least as good as the training of other beginning teachers, and nearly two-thirds rate the training of corps members as better than that of other new teachers.

In very recent years, to increase the impact of our alumni, we have launched initiatives to support those who aim to pursue educational leadership through continued teaching, principalships, launching new social enterprises, policy and advocacy, and securing elected office. In some ways this development is responsive to Ms. Hopkins' suggestion that we offer incentives to entice members to remain in teaching, though, as outlined above, we continue to believe that it is important to foster the efforts of Teach for America alumni to effect change from other professions as well.

We laud the efforts of the local programs that Ms. Hopkins highlights. These programs show much promise for meeting the national need for qualified teachers. As we see evidence of their success, we look to such programs to help us identify good practices, and we incorporate those practices into our approach when applicable. Still, Teach for America is

not beginning to meet the demand from districts and education reformers for our corps members and alumni, and this continuing demand fuels our commitment to grow even as we strengthen our program model and even as others experiment with new approaches to meeting the need for talent.

Finally, we are grateful to the university partners who work with us in pursuit of our mission. You can read about some of these partnerships elsewhere in this special section. We hope this conversation will open more opportunities for collaboration with others in the higher education community, and we appreciate Ms. Hopkins' willingness to bring this discussion to a broader audience.

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