



CENTER FOR URBAN AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

School of Education
IUPUI

Teach for America

Research Brief

Nationally, efforts to expand the pool of candidates to fill teaching vacancies in the nation's most resource poor school systems have increased. Particularly in urban and rural environments where there are disproportionate numbers of low-income and minority students, states are addressing staffing deficits by adopting policies and programs that allow for provisional or alternative credentials (that may later be converted to permanent licensure following a probationary period). Teach for America (TFA) is one such program. While the cost-savings and time to licensure are certainly benefits to TFA, research has also revealed some potentially serious downsides. The purpose of this brief is to outline the pros and cons of TFA as evidenced by independent research.

What is Teach For America

TFA actively recruits recent college graduates and mid-career professionals to commit to teach for a minimum of two years in high-need, low-income schools throughout the country. The vast majority of recruits have no prior teaching experience, university-based courses in education, nor certification upon entry into the program. TFA corps members receive alternative certification through coursework taken during an intensive five-week summer institute. Upon completion of the training, they are placed in a high needs school to complete their two-year service commitment. TFA applicants complete two interviews during the application process. During the final day-long interview, participants indicate their preferences for placement which are considered along with their ability to meet state and district hiring standards and each region's grade-level and subject needs. Participants are then placed according to the areas of highest-need indicated by school districts. TFA teachers are official faculty at their schools and receive the standard teacher salaries, benefits, and an AmeriCorps "education voucher" that may be used to cover costs of credentialing courses, previous student loans, or additional education after their two-year commitment.

Student Achievement Outcomes

While TFA has significantly increased the pool of candidates in urban and rural areas, many questions remain about teacher quality, student achievement outcomes, and the program's overall pecuniary benefits. Relevant studies on teacher attributes and student achievement outcomes have focused on alternative certification programs like TFA. Teacher attributes include: certification status, content area expertise, educational preparation, degree levels, test scores, and undergraduate institutions.

Recent studies examining TFA teacher effectiveness (quality) have produced mixed results and are, at best, inconclusive (Baker & Dickerson, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Berry & Thoreson, 2001; Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2006). While some studies show initial gains for TFA teachers in student performance on standardized tests (Decker, Mayer & Glazerman, 2004; Xu & Hannaway, 2009), others report less favorable results (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). The main findings of TFA and the impact on student achievement are summarized below.

Xu and Hannaway's (2009) assessment of North Carolina high school student achievement and the Mathematica (2004) study are among studies showing positive student gains for TFA teachers. Xu and Hanaway examined data from North Carolina's End-of-Course (EOC) exams for high school students and determined that TFA teachers had a positive effect on student test scores in comparison to non-TFA teachers in Algebra I and II, Geometry, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Physical Science, and English. These effects were particularly strong in math and science. For the Mathematica report, Decker, et. al. (2004) used data from 17 schools from Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Delta to compare gains in reading and math achievement of students of TFA teachers and other teachers in the same school. Results indicated that, on average, students of TFA teachers raised their mathematics test scores (on the Iowa Basic Skills test) 0.15 standard deviation above students of comparison certified teachers.

Other studies, however, have not yielded such positive results. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) concluded that Arizona elementary students (grades 3 and above) of certified teachers out-performed students of teachers who were certified in an alternative route on all three subtests of the SAT9 – reading, mathematics and language arts. Similarly, a Texas study examined data on 132,000 students and 4,400 teachers in grades 3-5 over six years on six achievement tests: the TAAS, SAT-9, and Aprenda (for Spanish-speaking students) in reading and mathematics. Researchers found that compared to fully certified teachers, teachers who have not completed a certification process (including TFA teachers) had significant negative effects on student achievement on five of the six tests included in the study (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2005).

What is common throughout the literature is that teacher effectiveness and student achievement improves each year over the first five years of service for all teachers (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2006; Decker, et. al., 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005). Research indicates this is also true for TFA teachers. If they stay in the classroom beyond their two-year requirement, TFA teachers show significant improvement after the third year of teaching (Boyd, et. al., 2006). For instance, A New York City study of students of first year TFA teachers found that negative effects of lack of preparation diminished in math on standardized state math tests for grades 4 through 8 as teachers completed training and certification and gained experience (Kane, et. al., 2006).

Similarly, longitudinal studies in Texas, New York, and North Carolina found that if alternative certification teachers (including TFA teachers) completed the education coursework for certification and gained experience, they were as effective as other certified teachers (Boyd, et. al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2009). However, given the fact that there are extremely high attrition rates of TFA teachers,

they are not teaching long enough to overcome the deficits they bring because of their alternative certification and inexperience in the classroom.

Retention and Turnover of TFA Teachers

Previously TFA focused much attention on recruitment, but are now realigning efforts to increase retention among its teaching force. TFA has reported that their teachers continue to teach beyond their two year commitment at their placement schools, charter schools and other schools founded by their alumni, and that others train for administrative positions. However, several independent studies have consistently reported high attrition among TFA teachers.

According to TFA and some researchers, a significant number of TFA teachers remain in the field well beyond their initial commitment. Donaldson, Johnson, Willett & Murnane (2008) surveyed 3,283 of the 2000-02 TFA corps members. Of their respondents, 43.6 % indicated they voluntarily remained in initial low-income schools beyond two years, but only 14.8 % stayed in those placements for more than four years.

However, most studies indicate that retention remains an issue. Raymond (2002) reported that at the end of two years, more than 60% of TFA teachers in her study had left teaching in the Houston district, compared to 45 to 50% of other new teachers who left the district. , Darling-Hammond et. al (2005) determined that between 57 and 90% of TFA teachers had left after two years, and that between 72 and 100% had left after three years. More recently, a 2006 study found that between 10 and 15% of each TFA corps class leaves before completing their two-year commitment (Boyd, et. al., 2006). A comparison study of New York City (NYC) teachers found that 90% of TFA recruits left by year four. In the same study, close to 60% of other uncertified teachers left in the same time period and about 50% of NYC Teaching Fellows, who are also uncertified had also left. In contrast, just over 40% of "regular certified" teachers left in the same time period (Kane, et. al., 2006).

Long-term teacher retention impacts the learning environment in multiple ways. As teachers increase their experience in schools, their increased individual and collective knowledge of pedagogy and practice directly and positively impacts student achievement. Their retention also results in cost-savings for distressed school districts, reducing the need to constantly recruit, hire, and mentor new teachers. This allows needed funds to be allocated toward other essential educational resources. Currently, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) estimates that growing teacher dropout rates cost over \$7.3 billion annually (Carroll, 2007). The commission suggests turnover issues are draining resources, diminishing teaching quality, and undermining the ability to close the student achievement gap. NCTAF's estimate is significantly higher than the \$4.9 billion estimate reported by the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2005. NCTAF's estimate considers recent growth in the teacher workforce and the rate of teacher turnover, and is based on the cost generated by teachers who leave their school or district during a given year. NCTAF notes their estimate does not include the district's cost for teachers who move from school to school within a district, nor does it include any federal or state investments that are lost when a teacher leaves. Were all of these costs taken into account, the true cost would be far in excess of \$7 billion annually.

Conclusions

Our review suggests that more, rather than less, supervised education coursework and training is associated with positive outcomes for students and teacher retention. It is encouraging and not surprising that TFA teachers who achieved certification performed commensurate to their certified peers after three years. However the high attrition rates in TFA coupled with inconclusive evidence of student achievement raise serious questions regarding the long-term benefits of the TFA program for urban and

rural schools and communities. While some urban and rural schools struggle to fill teaching positions with certified teachers in high need areas, bringing in TFA teachers for one or two years does not address the persistent challenges facing students and the schools as a whole. Significant capital (human and financial) is consumed by cyclical hiring and replacing beginning teachers who are more likely to leave the school than their certified counterparts.

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