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# Teach for America: A Return to the Evidence

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## TEACH FOR AMERICA

### A RETURN TO THE EVIDENCE

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# TEACH FOR AMERICA A RETURN TO THE EVIDENCE

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## Executive Summary

Teach For America (TFA) receives hundreds of millions of public and private dollars and has garnered acclaim for sending college graduates, who do not typically have an education background, to teach in low-income rural and urban schools for a two-year commitment. The number of TFA corps members has grown by about 2,000% since its inception in 1990. The impact of these transitory teachers is hotly debated. Admirers see the program as a way to grow the supply of “outstanding” graduates, albeit temporarily, as teachers. Critics, however, see the program as a diversion from truly beneficial policies or even as a harmful dalliance into the lives of low-income students who most need a highly trained, highly skilled, and stable teacher workforce.

Despite a series of non-peer-reviewed studies funded by TFA and other organizations that purport to show benefits of TFA teachers, peer-reviewed research on their impact continues to produce a mixed picture. The peer-reviewed research suggests that results are affected by the experience and certification level of the TFA teachers as well as by the group of teachers with whom those TFA teachers are compared. The question’s specifics strongly determine the answer.

The practical question faced by most districts is whether TFA teachers do as well as or better than fully credentialed non-TFA teachers with whom those school districts aim to staff their schools.<sup>1</sup> On this question, the predominance of peer-reviewed studies have indicated that, on average, the students of novice TFA teachers perform less well in reading and mathematics assessments than those of fully credentialed beginning teachers. But the differences are small, and the TFA teachers do better if compared with other less-trained and inexperienced teachers. Again, the comparison group matters greatly.

The lack of a practically significant impact should indicate to policymakers that TFA is likely not providing a meaningful reduction in disparities in educational outcomes, notwithstanding its explosive growth and popularity in the media. The program is best understood as a weak Band-Aid that sometimes provides some benefits but that is recurrently and systematically ripped away and replaced.

Experience has a positive effect for both TFA and non-TFA teachers. Most peer-reviewed studies find that the relatively few TFA teachers who stay long enough to become fully credentialed (typically after two years) appear to do about as well as other similarly

experienced, fully credentialed teachers in teaching reading and sometimes do better than this comparison group in teaching mathematics. However, since more than 50% of TFA teachers leave after two years and more than 80% leave after three years, it is impossible to know whether these more positive findings for experienced TFA recruits result from additional training and experience or from attrition of TFA teachers who are less effective.<sup>2</sup>

TFA's revenue has rapidly expanded. Between 2000 and 2013, TFA's yearly operating expenditures increased 1,930%—from \$10 million to \$193.5 million. Of those expenditures, TFA annual reports show that about a third of operating costs are borne by the public. Also, over the past ten years, TFA has obtained nearly a half of a billion dollars from private sources. With an organization as large as TFA, there is no perfect way to assign specific costs, but dividing TFA's income reported in its 2011 annual report by the number of corps members yields a figure of approximately \$25,490 for each corps member recruited and placed. About a third of this money comes from local, state, and federal budgets, earmarked to support TFA as a perceived benefit to society. Another third comes from tax-deductible charitable donations from individuals and corporations to TFA (which is incorporated as a non-profit). And the final third comes from private foundations. Including what TFA spends directly per recruit, our calculations show that the total cost of the two-year commitment from a TFA recruit can easily exceed \$70,000 when including professional development, training and other costs.

Due to the high turnover of TFA teachers, the re-occurring costs of hiring 100 TFA recruits is quite high for society—about \$6,044,000 more than hiring 100 Non-TFA teachers. From a school and district perspective, TFA is also expensive. Recruiting and training replacements for teachers who constantly churn involves recurring financial costs. Districts also pay TFA a fee per corps member per year employed—resulting in a substantial on-going expenditure.

Thus, despite hundreds of millions of dollars in funding and extensive lobbying by supporters and prominent alumni, TFA appears to offer few if any benefits for improving teacher quality in hard-to-staff schools. Why, then, is there so much discussion, even controversy, surrounding TFA?

Despite persistent claims to the contrary, a simple answer to the question of the overall utility of TFA teachers for urban and rural schools is elusive. The program is sometimes viewed by policymakers and advocates as a way to meaningfully address the very real need for high-quality instruction in hard-to-staff schools—and it is clearly not that. At best, hiring TFA teachers is a stop-gap measure for some desperate schools that is somewhat better than their other poor options. But even in those cases, the program is a diversion away from truly beneficial policies.

Instead of trying to understand whether or not TFA teachers are as good as non-TFA teachers (a question that cannot be answered unless we first identify which TFA and non-TFA teachers we're asking about), we propose a shift in thinking about the impact of TFA. We should be trying to dramatically improve the quality of teaching. It is time to shift our focus from a program of mixed impact that, even if the benefits actually matched the

rhetoric, would not move the needle on America's educational quality due to the fact that only 0.002% of all teachers in the United States are Teach For America placements. It is therefore recommended that policymakers and districts:

- Invest strategically in evidence-based educational reform options already incontrovertibly identified in the peer-reviewed research literature as substantially improving student success by larger margins than the mixed evidence on TFA.
- Devote effort to understanding the peer-reviewed research literature on the impact of new, promising innovations.

Based on the review of the evidence, we make the following recommendations to districts in regards to hiring through TFA:

- Support TFA staffing only when the alternative hiring pool consists of uncertified and emergency teachers or substitutes.
- Consider the significant costs of TFA teachers, estimated at over \$70,000 per recruit, and press for contractual five-year commitments to improve student test-score achievement and reduce costly teacher turnover.
- If not already compulsory, require TFA teachers to receive additional teacher training that is based on well-supported best practices for in-service teacher professional development. We recommend this for non-TFA teachers, too, but feel it is especially important for TFA teachers given their limited pre-service training.
- Independently obtain contracts and data to compare, by community, finder fees, placement and attrition rates of TFA teachers, and various costs.

# TEACH FOR AMERICA A RETURN TO THE EVIDENCE

## Introduction

Teach For America (TFA) is a rapidly expanding non-profit organization that fast tracks recent college graduates into urban and rural schools for a two-year teaching commitment. TFA receives hundreds of millions of dollars, has garnered significant public and political support, and continues to expand its reach. The idea for TFA was born in former CEO Wendy Kopp's Ivy League dorm room as her senior thesis project. TFA began in 1990 with 500 teachers in six communities. Over the past 23 years, TFA has grown to more than 10,000 teachers in rural and urban areas in 48 regions across the United States. TFA has rapidly expanded by drawing hundreds of millions of dollars from a variety of public and private sources. In 2013, Wendy Kopp left TFA to work on replicating her teacher placement model in other countries via the Teach For All network. Teach For All's global reach is now more than 11,000 teachers who are impacting nearly 800,000 students across the world.<sup>3</sup>

TFA departs from traditional teacher education models.<sup>4</sup> The majority of TFA teachers, called corps members, attend five weeks of training during a Summer Institute between graduating from college and beginning their teaching assignments.<sup>5</sup> The summer training includes experience student teaching and lessons in pedagogy, content, and classroom management. This approach differs from the traditional teacher education programs by condensing corps members' student teaching experience, lessons on core teaching concepts, and specialized training, while students in traditional teacher education programs typically spend a year or more building their skills through these activities and working alongside expert teachers. Some corps members report that they had very limited preparation to teach Special Education and English Language Learner (ELL) students while others report no specialized training.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a recent study reviewed TFA's summer training curriculum and found that only 6 of 800 pages discuss ELLs, and corps members are given only one 90-minute session on ELLs during the five-week summer training institute.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, TFA candidates often have no indication of the grade level or type of students they will be teaching until they arrive at their assigned districts to shop for jobs, or even after they arrive at their assigned school. This is likely a function of district hiring practices that are exacerbated by the TFA staffing model; traditionally trained teachers have trained to teach in specific areas, such as elementary education or secondary science, but TFA's summer training does not provide specific endorsements or specialization.

Once placed for the school year, nearly all TFA teachers enroll in coursework in local colleges to pursue full teaching credentials.<sup>8</sup> TFA has been seeking more formal credentialing arrangements for some of its corps members. A recent example of this is a

proposed partnership between the University of Minnesota that has drawn opposition from students and faculty.<sup>9</sup> An example of an existing partnership can be found at Arizona State University, where a TFA supporter and private donor gave \$19 million to the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College with the stipulation that a partnership be formed with TFA.<sup>10</sup>

TFA also wields significant political influence. Numerous TFA alumni have left the classroom after their two-year commitment and are positioned in influential roles

*The cost of TFA is still under debate. Unlike most other alternative teacher preparation programs, TFA receives hundreds of millions of dollars in contributions from private sources and allocations from local, state, and federal sources.*

affecting educational policy—from local and state school boards to Capitol Hill.<sup>11</sup> TFA recently initiated a fellowship program to place alumni into one-year fellowships in congressional offices on Capitol Hill, doing the work of regular congressional staffers.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, TFA spends hundreds of thousands of dollars on lobbying for government appropriations and public policy that is friendly to the organization.<sup>13</sup>

TFA and its alumni and supporters also are a particularly prominent voice in the school reform and school choice conversation. About one-third of all new TFA recruits are placed in charter schools.<sup>14</sup> TFA and many of their alumni are also prominent advocates of the market-based school reform movement in the public discourse (e.g., Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Washington, D.C., schools and founder of Students First; John White, Louisiana State Superintendent of Education; and Michael Feinberg, founder of Knowledge is Power Program Charter Schools).

The cost of TFA is still under debate. Unlike most other alternative teacher preparation programs, TFA receives hundreds of millions of dollars in contributions from private sources and allocations from local, state, and federal sources. In fact, over the last decade they have collected over half a billion dollars from private sources alone.<sup>15</sup> Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars that TFA has garnered over the past decade, districts that hire TFA teachers are contractually required to pay several thousand dollars per year to TFA for each teacher placed. Once hired, districts pay TFA teachers the same salary as other teachers in the district with the same education and years of experience; however, unlike their peers who graduated from traditional teacher preparation programs, TFA recruits also receive additional compensation from the federal government in the form of AmeriCorps stipends to assist with student loans or continuing education.<sup>16</sup> They also get housing subsidies through public-private partnerships in real estate development.<sup>17</sup>

As is true for many educational reforms, the impact of TFA is hotly contested. Education experts, policymakers, practitioners, and even TFA alumni have taken strong positions and advocated for or against the TFA model. A new development in the debate surrounding TFA since the last NEPC TFA brief is the growing number of TFA alumni who are studying



and critiquing the organization.<sup>18</sup> For example, TFA alumni have published critical perspectives in prominent media outlets such as *The New York Times*,<sup>19</sup> *Harvard Crimson*,<sup>20</sup> *Harvard Magazine*,<sup>21</sup> *The Atlantic*,<sup>22</sup> and on personal blogs.<sup>23</sup>

This brief follows a 2010 NEPC brief that included a review of the peer-reviewed research on the effectiveness of TFA along with the costs of the program and the location of its teacher placements. In this brief, we sought to update the public on peer-reviewed TFA research since 2010.<sup>24</sup> We found only one new peer-reviewed study examining the impact of TFA on academic achievement published in an academic journal since 2010.<sup>25</sup> We did note many evaluations of varying quality and scope, funded by TFA and other organizations, that have not been peer-reviewed during the intervening years. Instead of reviewing each of these internally funded evaluations, we focus on the findings and methodology from the 2013 Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Mathematica study, due to the fact it was not funded by TFA<sup>26</sup> and because of its prominence in the public discourse relative to the other evaluations.

This brief begins with descriptive analyses of TFA’s publicly available data on the current numbers and geographic distribution of TFA teachers. We then review the recent research literature that includes analyses of TFA teachers’ impacts on student test scores. We also discuss attrition rates of TFA teachers and the cost of TFA for school districts and local communities. To address community concerns about TFA in regions across the US, we include a research template for the general public to conduct citizen research on the corps in their own communities. We conclude with recommendations for policymakers and districts.

## Numbers and Geographic Distribution of TFA Teachers

Currently, more than 10,000 TFA teachers are located in Washington D.C. and 34 states across the country.<sup>27</sup> TFA has moved into eight new states since the 2010 NEPC TFA

**Table 1. Distribution and Growth of TFA Teachers by U.S. Census Bureau Regions (2009-2013)**

Region	2009 Number of TFA Teachers	2009 % of all TFA Teachers	2013 Number of TFA Teachers	2013 % of all TFA teachers	% Change 2009-2013
South	3,212	44.8	4,905	46.3	+52.7
Northeast	1,899	26.5	2,213	20.9	+16.5
West	1,427	19.9	2,012	19.0	+41.0
Midwest	633	8.8	1,465	13.8	+131.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,171</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>10,595</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>+47.7</b>

Data Source: Teach For America

**Table 2. Distribution of TFA Teachers by State 2009-2013.**

State	2009 N of TFA Teachers	2009 % of all TFA Teachers	2013 N of TFA Teachers	2013% of all TFA Teachers	% Change 2009-2013
Alabama	Est. 2010	N/A	143	1.3	N/A
Arizona	322	4.5	300	2.8	-7
Arkansas/Mississippi (Mississippi Delta)	358	5.0	569	5.4	59
California	727	10.1	782	7.4	8
Colorado	184	2.5	265	2.5	44
Connecticut	160	2.2	191	1.8	19
Florida	197	2.7	493	4.7	150
Georgia	210	2.9	300	2.8	43
Hawaii <sup>28</sup>	53	0.7	185	1.7	249
Illinois	399	5.5	635	6.0	59
Indiana	91	1.3	181	1.7	99
Kentucky	Est. 2011	N/A	45	0.4	N/A
Louisiana	652	9.0	560	5.3	-14
Massachusetts	50	0.7	170	1.6	240
Minnesota	43	0.6	72	0.7	67
Missouri	317	4.4	310	2.9	-2
Nevada	98	1.4	270	2.5	176
New Mexico	96	1.3	119	1.1	24
New York	820	11.4	688	6.5	-16
North Carolina	401	5.6	524	4.9	31
Ohio	Est. 2012	N/A	149	1.4	N/A
Oklahoma	81	1.1	340	3.2	320
Pennsylvania/Delaware /New Jersey (Mid-Atlantic)	445	6.2	463	4.4	4
Rhode Island	Est. 2010	N/A	51	0.5	N/A
South Carolina	Est. 2011	N/A	205	1.9	N/A
South Dakota	62	0.9	65	0.6	5
Tennessee	152	2.1	520	4.9	242
Texas	844	11.7	1206	11.4	43
Washington	Est. 2011	N/A	26	0.2	N/A
Washington D.C. Area	424	5.9	650	6.1	53
Wisconsin	38	0.5	118	1.1	211

Data Source: Teach For America

report.<sup>29</sup> For reference, TFA comprises about 0.002% of all teachers in the US.<sup>30</sup> Detailed information on how TFA selects sites is not publicly available, but TFA does publish data on sites that engage its services. Data extracted from various tabulations on the TFA website reveal patterns across regions and states. In 2013, the highest percentage of TFA teachers (46%) and greatest number of states with sites were in the South. The lowest percentage of TFA teachers (14%) and the fewest sites were in the Midwest. Over the last several years, however, TFA has experienced its greatest growth in the Midwest, expanding 131%. The South was second in growth, with a 53% increase between 2009 and 2013 (see Table 1).

Texas has the most TFA teachers at 1,206, nearly twice second-place California (782), followed by New York (688), Washington, D.C. (650), and Illinois (635) (see Table 2).<sup>31</sup> The Midwestern growth of the TFA corps was driven by growth in Wisconsin (210%), Indiana (98%), Minnesota (67%), and Illinois (59%) since 2010 (See Table 2). The states with the largest growth since 2010 are Oklahoma (320%), Hawaii (249%), and Tennessee (242%). In sum, the growth of TFA reflects many educational leaders' increasing willingness to hire TFA teachers across the US.

## The Evidence on the Impact of TFA on Academic Achievement

TFA has argued that “studies . . . show that TFA teachers do as well as or better than teachers with traditional certification.”<sup>32</sup> Concerned stakeholders want to know if this statement is valid. Since our last NEPC TFA brief in 2010, there has been only one new peer-reviewed publication on the impact of TFA on student achievement. Most of the peer-reviewed studies published on TFA since the last brief have focused on building a deeper understanding of TFA and TFA teacher experiences rather than trying to estimate the impact of one type of teacher versus another.<sup>33</sup>

However, as superintendents, school boards, and community members aim to understand how they should weigh the hiring of TFA teachers in their schools (often as they lay off teachers already employed in their districts), understanding the impact of TFA teachers in the classroom is of critical importance. Here we review two publications on the impact of TFA teachers on student achievement test scores. One is a new peer-reviewed publication of a study we covered in 2010 (when it was published as a report), and the other is the 2013 IES Mathematica study that has received extensive media coverage.

*Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach For America in High School*, by Zeyu Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor.<sup>34</sup>

There has only been article on the impact of TFA on student achievement published in a peer-reviewed journal since our last brief three years ago. This study is largely the same as it was when it was published as an IES report in 2009 and was covered in the 2010 NEPC brief.<sup>35</sup> The study, now published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, made two changes we could discern: the authors add another year of data and further restricted the sample to just those schools that had at least one TFA teacher. Previously, the study included all the schools in a district if the district had at least one TFA teacher.

The analytical model, however, remains the same. Adding another year's worth of data and limiting the sample did not significantly change the study's findings and did not change its conclusions at all. The study concluded that high school TFA teachers are "more effective than other teachers, including more experienced teachers and those fully certified in their field."<sup>36</sup> We noted that the What Works Clearinghouse at the U.S. Department of Education was critical of the 2009 study for not being able to link teachers with the students they taught, a shortcoming replicated in the new publication. The study makes a best guess on which teachers taught which students based on which teacher proctored the student's standardized testing session and the student's classroom demographics.<sup>37</sup> IES found this to be an important limitation that could result in "imprecise" and possibly misleading estimates.<sup>38</sup>

*The Effectiveness of Secondary Math Teachers from Teach For America and the Teaching Fellows Programs*, by Melissa A. Clark, Hanley S. Chiang, Tim Silva, Sheena McConnell, Kathy Sonnenfeld, Anastasia Erbe, and Michael Puma ("Mathematica study").

The 2013 IES Mathematica study of TFA was funded with \$11 million in taxpayer dollars from IES.<sup>39</sup> The study received significant press, and it has been a recent focal point of recent arguments about the efficacy of the corps.<sup>40</sup> As such, we include a review of this study, even though it has not been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Mathematica's study of middle and high school TFA math teachers used randomly assigned students in a controlled experiment to estimate the impact of TFA teachers in comparison with non-TFA teachers. The teachers were not randomly selected.<sup>41</sup>

**What did they find?** The study found that students of TFA teachers scored 0.07 standard deviations higher in math than students of non-TFA teachers. Students of TFA and non-TFA teachers scored similarly in reading. The authors of this study equate 0.07 standard deviations to 2.6 months of schooling.

**What does that mean?** While 2.6 months sounds impressive from an educational policy perspective, it may be more appropriate to compare this impact with the impact of other educational reforms. For example, class-size reduction was found—in the most conservative meta-analysis to date—to have an impact of 0.20 standard deviations, which Dr. Eric Hanushek has described as being "relatively small."<sup>42</sup> In other words, class-size reduction has 286% more impact than TFA. A recent meta-analysis of Pre-K published in *Teachers College Record* demonstrated an effect size of 0.85, which is 1214% more impact than the TFA effect reported by Mathematica.<sup>43</sup>

Another way of thinking about the finding of 0.07 standard deviations is explained by Dr. Andrew Maul: "A difference of 0.01 standard deviations indicates that a quarter of a hundredth of a percent (0.000025) of the variation can be explained." This means that the TFA impact in math explains 0.015% of the variation in students' math achievement.<sup>44</sup>

**How valid was the study?** While Mathematica's sample spanned many states and included thousands of students and hundreds of teachers, there are several concerns. First, the TFA teachers chosen for the study are not representative of TFA teachers and their placements in general. We do not know if the TFA teachers in the study are representative

of TFA middle and high school teachers, as TFA does not publish these data. About one in every three TFA teachers are placed in charter schools, but none of the teachers in the sample were located in a charter school.<sup>45</sup> In the study, 80% of the TFA teachers in the study were white, compared with about 45% of incoming corps members nationally.<sup>46</sup>

The findings from the Mathematica study depart from decades of research on teacher quality—and common sense—which leads us to interpret all the findings with caution. For example, they found that prior measured ability in math, taking math courses, majoring in math, and ongoing certification and training did not increase students' math achievement. In fact, ongoing teacher training was found to have a negative impact on student achievement. A comparable analogy would be an airline pilot who would be no better at flying a jumbo jet despite prior flight training and measured ability in a flight simulator. Also, ongoing pilot training would have a negative effect on his/her ability to fly a jumbo jet. Moreover, the Mathematica study's findings run contrary to the logic that drives TFA's model. They found that the selectivity of the college the teacher attended does not matter and that teacher effectiveness increased with experience—meaning that for a district to depend on novice teachers to staff its schools is not optimal for students, schools, or districts.

Moreover, technical statistical concerns have been raised about the report. These concerns focus on the Mathematica researchers' reporting of their findings, differences between the TFA teachers in the sample and the non-TFA teachers to which they are compared, and the combination of state- and nationally normed tests used to measure teacher effectiveness.<sup>47</sup>

Considering the limited representativeness of the sample, its small effect, the unusual results relative to decades of peer-reviewed research, and the specific findings that controvert TFA's basic reform model, this study has questionable validity despite having randomized students in a controlled experiment design. Moreover, the findings underscore the limited impact of TFA on student achievement—the consistent finding of previous peer-reviewed research examined in the 2010 TFA brief.

### Summary: Is TFA as Effective as it Claims?

The question for most districts is whether TFA teachers do as well as or better than fully credentialed non-TFA teachers with whom school districts aim to staff their schools. The addition of the 2013 Mathematica report to the conversation about the efficacy of TFA actually underscores our 2010 conclusions, after reviewing the relevant peer-reviewed research, that TFA's impact on achievement is affected by the experience level of the TFA teachers and the group of teachers with whom they are compared.<sup>48</sup> Studies have consistently found that, when the comparison group is *other teachers in the same schools who are less likely to be fully certified*, novice TFA teachers perform equivalently in raising reading and math scores, while experienced TFA teachers perform equivalently in raising reading scores and only slightly better in raising math scores. Thus, most peer-reviewed studies indicate that the students of novice TFA teachers perform significantly

lower in reading and mathematics than those of fully credentialed beginning teachers—except at the secondary level.

A plethora of non-peer-reviewed “studies” or “evaluations” can be found to support any position on the effectiveness of TFA. However, a review of all of the peer-reviewed research examining the impact of TFA on student achievement over the past decade—

*While the debate about the impact of TFA teachers on student achievement continues, there is little disagreement across the research literature regarding the attrition of TFA teachers.*

outlined in this brief and our prior one—clearly shows that TFA teachers are not decidedly or substantially better than non-TFA teachers. Secondary math TFA teachers are statistically significantly “better” than non-TFA secondary math teachers, but the importance is negligible, especially when one considers the methodological challenges of the studies that posit this result and the small percentage of TFA teachers who teach secondary math. As such, policymakers and educational leadership should focus less on which pathway is best and instead focus on what features from each pathway result in the best outcomes for students and on other educational reforms that have consistently proven to have a much greater impact on student achievement.

### Attrition of TFA Teachers

An additional finding of virtually all of the studies we reviewed in 2010, and of the 2013 Mathematica study, is that, on average, TFA teachers and non-TFA teachers grow more effective with experience, with a major incremental increase in effectiveness after the second year of teaching. Hence, pathways to teaching that are designed for teachers to stay in teaching longer should, on balance, have an additional positive effect on student achievement.

While the debate about the impact of TFA teachers on student achievement continues, there is little disagreement across the research literature regarding the attrition of TFA teachers. We previously reported that, based on TFA’s longitudinal national survey of alumni, Miner<sup>49</sup> suggests that “all one can say with certainty is that . . . at least 16.6 percent of those recruited by TFA were teaching in a K-12 setting beyond their two-year commitment.” A number of research studies examining TFA in localities nationwide have looked more closely at the retention rate using state and district administrative data. For example, a recent national study by Donaldson and Moore Johnson (2011) provides more information about the proportion of TFA teachers in the classroom.<sup>50</sup> TFA claims about 50% of its alumnae remain in the “education field.” This vague assertion avoids noting the much smaller percentage of TFA teachers who actually stay teaching in public education and the even smaller percentage of TFA teachers who stay in their initial placement. Donaldson and Moore Johnson found that while the majority of TFA teachers leave their assignments after two years, 28% of TFA teachers do remain public school teachers after

five years—compared with about 50% of non-TFA teachers.<sup>51</sup> After seven years, only 5% are still teaching in their initial TFA placement.

Miner<sup>52</sup> cites Barnett Barry, founder, partner, and CEO of the Center for Teaching Quality, aptly summarizes the retention picture: “TFA gets its recruits ready for a sprint, not a 10K or a marathon.” The weight of the empirical literature consistently finds high rates of attrition for TFA teachers out of the classroom. The high attrition rates of TFA teachers are predictable. TFA teachers have not made an explicit long-term commitment to teaching, in contrast to individuals who complete college-recommended teacher education programs. TFA has traditionally made the two-year commitment clear—validating the conception of teaching not as a profession but a short-term stopover before graduate school or employment in the “real” world.

### Cost of TFA

Beyond the impact of TFA on educational outcomes and equity, an analysis of the program’s usefulness and viability must consider TFA’s costs. These include costs to the teacher, to the district, to TFA, and to the public. Inevitably, someone must pay, and the cost to one constituency might be decreased by a proportionately increasing cost to another constituency. Therefore, policymakers should think about the consequences for each group incurring costs and try to strategically distribute costs to secure optimal outcome.

Between 2000 and 2013, TFA’s operating expenditures increased from \$10 million to \$193.5 million. Of those expenditures, TFA annual reports show that about a third of operating costs are currently borne by the public from federal, state and local coffers (see Table 3).

**Table 3: TFA Operating Contributions Sources**

	2005	2008	2011
Public Funds (Federal, State, Local)	33%	33%	30%
Foundations	33%	26%	30%
Individuals	20%	26%	27%
Corporations	14%	15%	13%

Data Source: Teach For America

Across the nation TFA spends nearly \$600,000 per year for “direct contact with legislators, their staffs, government officials and legislative bodies” in order to obtain millions of dollars in public money (and lobby for educational policy friendly to the organization).<sup>53</sup> Media reports have highlighted TFA’s extensive lobbying and funding requests in states across the nation. For example, in the state of Louisiana, TFA lobbyist requested \$5 million in funding.<sup>54</sup> The *Louisiana Voice* also reported that in neighboring

Mississippi TFA asked for a \$12 million appropriation.<sup>55</sup> In Texas, the legislature cut \$5.4 billion dollars from the education budget in 2011, but TFA still received its request of \$8 million. In some states, TFA’s requests for millions of dollars in state funding have met resistance from policymakers who have cited the organization’s extensive public and private financial resources. In 2013, the Nevada state assembly<sup>56</sup> and the Governor of Minnesota<sup>57</sup> denied TFA millions of dollars in state funding despite the organization’s lobbying efforts.

In addition to lobbying state legislatures, TFA has made extensive inroads in Washington, D.C. Stephanie Simon reported that TFA has recently taken up the practice of paying the salaries of education staffers for members of Congress serving on the Education and Workforce committee.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, TFA has received hundreds of millions from the federal government. For example, TFA recently obtained a \$50 million I3 grant from the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>59</sup> TFA’s 2011 annual report lists 12% of its revenue coming from federal sources. With revenues of \$270,000,000, that works out to about \$32,000,000 per year.

While public money makes up about a third of TFA’s income, it also receives extensive funding from foundations, corporations, and individuals. TFA was the recipient of nearly a half a billion dollars from private sources over the past 10 years. Data from the Foundation Center in New York show that TFA has obtained \$469,265,615 from private sources.<sup>60</sup> The largest private donor to TFA between 2003-2011 was the Walton Family Foundation, with gifts that totaled \$95,320,478.

As we suggested in 2010, the cost of TFA to taxpayers is actually higher than the direct local, state, and federal allocations revealed in TFA’s annual report. For example, in addition to the thousands of dollars that districts pay TFA for each of its corps members, a district must still maintain a human resources department that recruits, screens, interviews, and places all other non-TFA new teacher candidates. Thus, a participating district has to pay twice for new TFA teachers—the outsourced costs of teacher recruitment and training by TFA, costing thousands of dollars per teacher, along with the fixed costs of in-house provision of human resources for all other teachers in the district. These costs are exacerbated by the high turnover of TFA teachers, leading districts to have to replace nearly all TFA teachers after just a few years of service. As a result, the actual costs of TFA to the public are higher than the direct local, state, and federal allocations.

**Table 4. Comparison of Pecuniary Cost to Society for 100 Teachers After 5 Years<sup>61</sup>**

	TFA	Non-TFA
TFA overhead	\$5,098,000	0
Salary and Attrition Costs	\$1,080,000	\$750,000
PD, Mentoring, and Education	\$2,016,000	\$1,400,000
<b>Total cost to Society after 5 years</b>	<b>\$8,194,000</b>	<b>\$2,150,000</b>



To estimate these costs, we can consider the special costs incurred by TFA, the extra costs incurred by districts, and the costs of traditional teacher preparation, which most TFA recruits undertake during their two years in the classroom. In 2013, for example, TFA took in approximately \$25,490 for each corps member it recruited and has currently placed.<sup>62</sup> The per-TFA-teacher overhead costs also includes fees local districts are charged by TFA—as much as \$5,000 per recruit per year.<sup>63</sup> TFA’s per-teacher overhead also funds expenses in the national office, whose spending has been profiled as excessive by some critics.<sup>64</sup> Also, salary costs and the costs of attrition typically exceed \$15,000 for each teacher who leaves a district.<sup>65</sup> A third cost is that of the local teacher education, mentoring, and professional development programs in which new teachers enroll, which exceeds \$28,000 on average.<sup>66</sup> (For fully credentialed non-TFA teachers, this cost would instead be \$8,000, by counting only mentoring and professional development cost). Thus, the total cost of the two-year commitment from a TFA recruit can easily exceed \$70,000. Due to the high turnover discussed above, the recurring costs of hiring 100 TFA recruits is quite high for society—about \$6,044,000<sup>67</sup> more than hiring 100 Non-TFA teachers (see Table 4).

## Citizen TFA Research

Following the 2010 NEPC TFA brief, we received many requests for input from parents and educators across the nation regarding the impact of TFA in their communities. Many of the requests came from new communities in the eight states to which TFA has expanded in recent years, such as Seattle, Washington. It is important to note that the numbers of TFA teachers, attrition rates of TFA teachers, and cost to communities, among other aspects, do vary by community. To address this variation, we suggest stakeholders in communities across the U.S. conduct citizen research to understand the various aspects of TFA in their districts and schools. The vast majority of records relating to TFA in each community are available via public records requests. Below, we have included a template for a public information request that individuals can request from districts to better understand the various aspects (attrition, cost, etc.) of TFA relative to non-TFA teachers in each community.<sup>68</sup>

### Citizen Research Template for TFA Public Information Requests

#### *General Information*

- The most recent contract between the district and TFA.
- Emails between local TFA Executive Director and/or TFA representatives and district leaders and administrators.
- Any and all information regarding the potential growth or shrinkage of the TFA corps in the district.

### *Achievement*

- Any and all information regarding the peer-reviewed and/or independent evidence used by administrative staff to determine the effectiveness of TFA and non-TFA teachers for students of different race/ethnicities in the district.
- Any and all information regarding the evidence used by administrative staff to determine the effectiveness of TFA and non-TFA teachers for English Language Learners in the district.
- Any and all information regarding the evidence used by administrative staff to determine the effectiveness of TFA and non-TFA teachers for Special Education students in the district.

### *Teacher Turnover*

- Any and all information on 2-year, 5-year and 7-year attrition of TFA versus non-TFA teachers.
- Any and all information about how many TFA and non-TFA teachers were new to the district in each of the last three years.
- Any and all information on the turnover rates for TFA and non-TFA teachers for your district in each of the last three years.

### *Costs*

- Any and all information about how much money total was paid to TFA from all sources.
- Any and all information regarding a fee per teacher or other charges to your district paid to TFA.
- Any and all information regarding total expenditures for the human resources department for your district in each of the last three years.
- Any and all information on how much money the district received to support TFA teachers from external sources: State; Federal; Non-profit.
- Any and all information the district paid for TFA and non-TFA teachers to attend certifications programs and the total cost to the district for this benefit.
- Any and all information on how much money total was spent on TFA teachers.

## *Teacher Training and Professional Development*

- Any all information about TFA charges to the district for ongoing professional development in each of the last three years.
- Any and all information on how much was spent on all teacher professional development per teacher for your district in each of the last three years.
- Any and all information on whether TFA and non-TFA teachers were assigned veteran mentor teachers in your district.

## **Conclusion**

Improving teacher quality has been a major focus of educational policy. As such, understanding the impact of Teach For America has been of great interest to educational stakeholders. Building on the 2010 NEPC brief, we conclude that new research supports the findings of previous research. Specifically, TFA teachers are generally about the same as our current pool of teachers. In certain specific areas, TFA teachers are slightly worse than non-TFA teachers (such as reading); in other specific areas, TFA teachers are slightly better than teachers in the same schools who are less likely to be certified or traditionally prepared (such as secondary school math). Moreover, even if TFA teachers performed substantially better in the classroom than certified non-TFA teachers—a claim not expansively supported by the breadth of peer-reviewed research—TFA teachers only make up about 0.002% of the US’s 3.5 million teachers.<sup>69</sup> Thus, despite hundreds of millions of dollars in funding and extensive lobbying by supporters and prominent alumni, TFA should not be considered a major factor for improving teacher quality in hard-to-staff schools. Why, then, is there so much discussion, even controversy, surrounding TFA?

TFA supporters see non-TFA teachers as a major contributor to the failures of today’s schools and the introduction of non-traditional entrants, including TFA recruits, as a key solution, despite their short tenure and limited effectiveness. In contrast, TFA critics tend to focus on improvement of the current teaching pool through much broader reforms of human capital management, including better education and professional development. This constituency urges educational reforms focused on improved in-service training, mentoring, and the professionalization of teaching—the teacher quality strategies of high-performing countries worldwide such as Finland and Singapore.<sup>70</sup> TFA could be seen as the antithesis of teacher quality approaches in the most successful countries worldwide as the corps focuses on a short-term solution as the best hope for a high-quality teaching force. These two groups understandably clash over the impact of TFA. TFA proponents see TFA as providing urban and rural schools with “outstanding recent college graduates” who will “go above and beyond traditional expectations” to improve students’ academic achievement.<sup>71</sup> TFA opponents claim that the corps is not a solution but an expensive, short-term classroom tourism that exacerbates the revolving door of teachers in hard to staff schools. Who is right?

Despite the positive effects purported by a litany of public and privately funded studies thrust into the media and public discussion, the predominance of peer-reviewed research published in academic journals demonstrates that TFA teachers appear less effective in both reading and mathematics than fully prepared entrants teaching similar students, at least until the TFA teachers become prepared and certified themselves. While the small number of TFA teachers who stay this long are sometimes found to be more effective in mathematics than other teachers, their attrition rate of more than 80% in many communities—compared with national attrition rates of about 30% for new non-TFA teachers<sup>72</sup>—means that few students receive the benefit of this greater effectiveness, while districts pay the costs of constant attrition.

Finally, even the publicly and privately funded TFA studies that have reported a positive impact of teachers have consistently shown only a small effect. For example, the 2013 Mathematica study claimed an effect of 0.07 for secondary math TFA teachers. While TFA is currently a popular school reform approach, policymakers and districts must invest in a broad range of solutions that are already established in the peer-reviewed research literature as having substantially positive effects on student success relative to TFA. As discussed earlier, peer-reviewed meta-analyses of many other educational reforms have demonstrably more success than TFA; those include Pre-K (effect size=0.85—1214% more impact)<sup>73</sup> and reducing class size (effect size=0.20—286% more impact).<sup>74</sup>

Policymakers and stakeholders should consider TFA teachers for what they are—a slightly better alternative when the hiring pool is comprised primarily of uncertified and emergency teachers. If educational leaders plan to use TFA teachers as the solution to the problem of teacher shortages, they must be prepared to continually lay out hundreds of millions of public and private dollars into recurring TFA recruitment, training, and administrative costs to ensure a constant flow of novice teachers who churn out of teaching after the first few years on the job. So, the most useful question to pose may not be whether TFA is preferable to non-TFA uncertified and emergency teachers, but instead, how we might interest America's most talented college students in teaching as a *profession*.

## Recommendations

Despite persistent claims to the contrary, a simple answer to the question of the overall utility of TFA teachers for urban and rural schools is elusive. Instead of trying to understand whether or not TFA teachers are as good as non-TFA teachers (a question that cannot be answered unless we first identify which TFA and non-TFA teachers we're asking about), we propose a shift in thinking about the impact of TFA. We should be trying to dramatically improve the quality of teaching. It is time to shift our focus from a program of mixed impact that, even if the benefits actually matched the rhetoric, would not move the needle on America's educational quality due to the fact that only 0.002% of all teachers in the United States are Teach For America placements. It is therefore recommended that policymakers and districts:

- Invest strategically in evidence-based educational reform options already incontrovertibly identified in the peer-reviewed research literature as substantially improving student success by larger margins than the mixed evidence on TFA.
- Devote effort to understanding the peer-reviewed research literature on the impact of new, promising innovations.

Based on the review of the evidence, we make the following recommendations to districts in regard to hiring TFA:

- Support TFA staffing only when the alternative hiring pool consists of uncertified and emergency teachers or substitutes.
- Consider the significant costs of TFA teachers, estimated at over \$70,000 per recruit, and press for contractual five-year commitments to improve student test-score achievement and reduce costly teacher turnover.
- If not already compulsory, require TFA teachers to receive additional teacher training based on well-supported best practices for in-service teacher professional development. We recommend this for non-TFA teachers, too, but feel it is especially important for TFA teachers given their limited pre-service training.
- Independently obtain contracts and data to compare, by community, finder fees, placement and attrition rates of TFA teachers, and various costs.

## Notes and References

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1 It is important to distinguish between fully credentialed teachers and “credentialed” teachers. This was a central issue in *Renee v. Duncan* 573 F.3d 903 (9th Cir. 2009). All teachers—even substitutes—have some form of “credential” authorizing them to teach kids in schools. The real difference is whether they have completed the full certification requirements required by their state. The research literature often fails to distinguish between these two types of TFA participants—those who lack full certification (typically still in their first year, though some don’t complete until their second), and those who have completed it. Once they complete their certification and gain a year or two of experience, TFAers may sometimes do as well as their fully credentialed peers; but the real issue is how do they do on Year 1, Day 1, when they lack both a full credential and experience.

Source: Kini, T. (2013, December 3). Personal Communication.

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61 Notes to Table 4:

For “TFA overhead” (column 1, row 2), \$5,000 per year for two years is \$10,000. Multiply \$10,000 and 100 teachers.

Donaldson and Moore Johnson (2011) reported 28% retention for TFA and 50% Non-TFA new teachers after five years. That means that after five years we estimate there will be 28 TFA teachers and 50 non-TFA new teachers.

For “Salary and Attrition Costs” (column 1, row 3), we multiply 72 leaver TFA teachers by \$15,000. For non-TFA teachers we multiply the 50 teacher leavers by \$15,000.

For “PD, Mentoring and Education” (column 2, row 4), we multiply 72 leaver TFA teachers by \$28,000. For non-TFA teachers, we multiply the 50 teacher leavers by \$28,000.

See:

Donaldson, M. L., & Moore Johnson, S. (2011). Teach For America teachers: How long do they teach? Why do they leave? *Kappan Magazine*, 93(2), 47-51.

62 Dividing TFA’s income reported in its 2011 annual report by the number of corps members.

63 The yearly fee paid to TFA varies by district. For example, in Houston, each TFA teacher costs the district \$2,000 annually in finder’s fees, while in Dallas and San Antonio the cost is \$3,000 per teacher annually.

64 Some critics have argued that TFA spends lavishly. For example, the *Louisiana Voice* reported that TFA federal tax returns show the salary of former CEO Wendy Kopp was nearly \$400,000—about the same as the U.S. President. Additionally, the 15 support staff in the inner circle that surrounded the CEO drew nearly \$3.5 million in salary and an average salary of \$233,000—more than the U.S. President’s 15 cabinet members, who averaged \$199,700 in 2011 See:

Aswell, T. (2013, March 5). Teach For America solicits donations, public funds, finder fees while amassing \$1 billion fortune, tax records show. *Louisiana Voice*. Retrieved December 30, 2013, from <http://louisianavoice.com/2013/03/05/teach-for-america-solicits-donations-public-funds-finder-fees-while-amassing-1-billion-fortune-tax-records-show/>;

CNN (2013, April 9). Obama Cabinet: Who's taking a pay cut? *KSAT*. Retrieved December 30, 2013, from <http://www.ksat.com/news/politics/Obama-Cabinet-Who-s-taking-a-pay-cut/-/2567674/19646716/-/wcovhs/-/index.html>.

65 Barnes, G., Crowe, E., & Schaefer, B. (2007). *The cost of teacher turnover in five school districts: A pilot study*. New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future; 97.

66 The total per-pupil costs of preparation programs from federal, state, and local (tuition) sources typically average from \$20,000 to \$40,000 annually; costs for beginning teacher mentors average \$5,000 per candidate annually; and costs for teacher professional development average between \$3,000 and \$7,000 per teacher annually, not counting the cost of teacher time. See:

Vasquez Heilig, J., Cole, H. & Springel, M. (2011). Alternative certification and Teach For America: The search for high-quality teachers. *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 20(3), 388-412;

Guin, K. (2004, August). Chronic teacher turnover in urban elementary schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 12 (42); 1, 3; (noting the cost of teachers leaving could be as high as 150% of the teacher's salary);

Watlington, E., Shockley, R., Guglielmino, P., & Felsher, R. (2010, Summer). The high cost of leaving: An analysis of the cost of teacher turnover. *Journal of Education Finance*, 36 (1), 22-37; 26;

Milanowski, A.T. & Odden, A.R. (2007). *A new approach to the cost of teacher turnover* (Working Paper No. 13). Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 3.

67 Subtract \$2,150,000 from \$8,194,000.

68 We piloted the public information template by submitting our first version to the three of the largest urban districts in Texas (Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio). We discovered that some districts were cooperative while others were not. One district even took three months to respond to our request for public information—which violates Texas statute. The same district also tried to charge several thousand dollars for information while the other two districts provided the same information free of charge. Be sure to request cost quotes up front and refer to your local statute and attorneys for workarounds if you encounter a resistant district. See:

Vasquez Heilig, J. (2013, December 4). Sneak Preview: How citizens can hold Teach For America accountable. *Cloaking Inequity*. Retrieved December 30, 2103, from <http://cloakinginequity.com/2013/12/04/sneak-preview-how-citizens-can-hold-teach-for-america-accountable/>.

69 U.S. Census Bureau (2012). Table 260. Public school employment: 1990 and 2008. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: Author, 168. Retrieved December 30, 2103 from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0260.pdf>.

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