

## VIEWPOINT

## The real value of Teach For America: a civil debate

## A poor pairing: underserved students with underprepared teachers

BY DEBORAH APPLEMAN

Two weeks ago, Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America (TFA), spoke to a large and mostly appreciative crowd at Convocation. While this campus has enthusiastically received the tenets of Teach for America (the very first cohort of TFA recruits in 1990 included six Carleton graduates), I have been strongly opposed to TFA and its organizing principles since its inception.

At first blush, it seems ridiculous to object to any attempt to bring gifted men and women into our nation's troubled and under-resourced public schools. I admire the spirit, the courage, and the altruistic instincts that lead Carls to apply for Teach for America. If you apply for Teach for America and are accepted, I will do everything I can to support you, but I can't actively endorse your participation. I feel a professional obligation to explain why.

As a teacher and educator who deeply believes that teaching is both art and science, I strenuously disagree with the notion that underprepared teachers can teach effectively in the nation's most challenging schools. Although TFA has greatly improved its training, selection process, and support system over the last 16 years (I have their current training manuals on my shelf), I still oppose its underlying premises, as do most of the nation's most respected educational professionals. Linda Darling Hammond of Stanford University and David Berliner of Arizona State University are among those who have offered stinging critiques of TFA's structure and its selection, training, and placement processes.

**The deprofessionalization of teaching**

Implicit in Teach for America's approach to teacher training is the insidious assumption that anyone who knows a subject and is willing to be with kids can teach—with little training. Teachers, it is believed, can learn on the job. While I value classroom experience as the most important component of training, many educators find the structure of Teach for America's training ludicrous. What would lawyers or doctors think about proposals to train young and eager would-be professionals for a summer, give them a guaranteed job for two years, and then teach them law or medicine as they practiced it?

While I would not assert that a traditional teacher preparation program is the only way to become a teacher, eight weeks is simply not enough time to prepare recruits for the complexity of public school teaching. Good teachers need what researchers call "pedagogical content knowledge," the ability to

translate what one knows into what kids can learn. This kind of knowledge requires an opportunity to integrate thoughtfully what one has learned about a particular subject with knowledge about child and adolescent development, cognition, the sociocultural contexts of schooling, learning theory, and effective pedagogical strategies for such essential skills as teaching reading. In TFA's triage approach to teacher training, despite the improvements that Molly cites, there is little time to cover the practical, nor is there enough time or even any apparent attempt to provide the grounding in educational theory, history and philosophy that enables teachers to gain perspective on their own teaching style and philosophy. Good teachers need more than idealism.

And they need to stay more than two years. Research on teaching tells us that most good teachers don't even reach a high level of effectiveness until they have gained 3 to 5 years of experience in the field.

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**Anecdotes aren't enough**

In her convocation speech, Ms. Kopp offered inspiring anecdotes of the astounding successes of individual recruits. It is difficult to gather specific evidence to either verify or dispute these anecdotes, because TFA as an organization—to the mystification of both supporters and critics—has virtually nothing in the way of longitudinal data to offer, either in terms of the longevity of corps members in the teaching profession, or of the academic achievement of the students taught by those corps members. Last year, fifteen years after its inception, TFA offered its first research presentation at the American Educational Research Association, but even that presentation didn't offer concrete longitudinal data on the relative effectiveness of building an enduring teaching corps or of indi-

vidual academic breakthroughs. We need more than stories.

Those who have subjected the practices of TFA to research and rigorous analysis have raised troubling questions concerning claims about student gain scores on standardized tests, a dubious measure, to be sure, but one that TFA uses in its promotional material. The studies that Molly cites are contradicted by the findings of other studies that not only do not support TFA's claims of student achievement gains, but show that the students of TFA teachers perform below the students of certified teachers.

Researchers have also raised questions about the effectiveness of TFA in building a durable and dedicated teaching corps for our nation's children. I concede that there are many corps members who have stayed in education, in teaching, and in administration and public policy. A few, as Molly rightly points out, have even started their own schools. Yet, after experiences that are as frequently demoralizing and harrowing as they are inspiring, thousands have also left teaching—for good.

**The colonial structure of TFA**

Cultural critics such as Cameron McCarthy have opposed Teach for America on other grounds. He laments a structure that encourages young people of privilege to tour the lives of children of poverty without making a lasting commitment to them.

The story of TFA becomes a kind of master narrative, a story of heroic and altruistic young people that focuses much more squarely on them than it does on the lives of the children they are committed to serve. There is an elitist overtone to the structure of TFA — that the best and the brightest can make a difference in the lives of children who are less fortunate, even when they are not professionally prepared to do so. In her critique of TFA, Linda Darling Hammond quotes Jonathan Kozol, who writes, “Charity is not justice.” The best intentions of our brightest graduates do not simply materialize as the good teaching that children deserve.

If you have decided to become a teacher in one of our nation's public schools, I applaud you. Teaching is an honorable profession: a vocation, a calling, a destination. We need people like you to teach for America. But we need you to enter America's schools with the confidence, competence, and commitment to stay there long enough to make a difference in the lives of children.

*Deborah Appleman is the Chair of the Educational Studies Department at Carleton.*

*Teach for America*

THERE IS CURRENTLY A LOT OF INTEREST FOR TEACH FOR AMERICA (TFA) ON THIS CAMPUS, IN PART BECAUSE OF WENDY KOPP'S FEBRUARY 3RD VISIT, AS WELL AS TODAY'S APPLICATION DEADLINE. IN ORDER TO ENCOURAGE USEFUL CAMPUS DIALOGUE ABOUT TFA, DEBORAH APPLEMAN, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES, AND MOLLY KLANE '07, TFA'S CAMPUS CAMPAIGN MANAGER, OFFER THE FOLLOWING VIEWPOINT PIECES. THEY HAVE BEEN IN FRIENDLY DEBATE ABOUT TFA FOR A FEW MONTHS AND WANTED TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO ENGAGE IN SIMILARLY CIVIL AND IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS.

Teach For America, founded by Wendy Kopp (right), sends outstanding college graduates to teach for two years in high-need public schools.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KERRY RAAFT/MEDIA REALITIONS

## A critical component of addressing educational inequality in America

BY MOLLY KLANE

Educational inequality is a massive and growing problem in America. By the third grade, nine-year-olds in low-income communities are three grade levels behind their more affluent peers in reading and math. The achievement gap between students in high and low-income communities increases over time: students in low-income communities are seven times less likely to graduate from college.

Teach For America is a necessary program to address this disparity in education. By teaching for two years in the nation's lowest-income communities, Teach For America corps members strive to address educational inequality in both the short and long term. Ultimately, corps members' classroom experiences influence both their students' academic success and their own long-term work to close the achievement gap.

**Gains in the Classroom**

From the statistics and personal stories generated by corps members, it is evident that Teach For America has already effected important changes. According to a 2004 report from the independent research institution Mathematica Policy Research, Teach For America corps members promote ten percent more annual progress in mathematics education than even veteran teachers. In another independent study by the CREDO Institution at Stanford University, Teach For America teachers in Houston schools performed as well, and in many cases better than, other teachers.

Principals within low-income communities—arguably the individuals best equipped to evaluate the needs of their schools—consistently support the work of Teach For America teachers within their schools. A 2005 national study by Kane, Parsons, and Associates documented that 63% of principals considered Teach For America teachers more effective than their teaching faculty overall. Citing corps members' hard work, dedication to teaching, and ability to learn quickly, these principals confirmed that Teach For America teachers effect great gains in the classroom.

**Training and Professionalism**

As Professor Appleman indicates, a common critique of Teach For America problematizes the short-term impact of Teach For America teachers. Admittedly, no preparation is truly adequate for the immense challenges of teaching, especially within schools that face chronic shortages of funding, support and morale. Ultimately, though, Teach For America fills a great need for high-achieving, effective, and dedicated teachers in needy schools.

First, the model Teach For

America uses to select its corps members demands strength in numerous areas, including academic achievement, critical thinking, motivational ability, respectfulness and conviction to help students and families in low-income communities succeed. Only 17% of last year's applicants were accepted. Of those selected, the common theme is the desire and ability to work relentlessly to help students succeed in school. The program encourages corps members to visit their students' homes, provide before- and after-school tutoring, immerse themselves in cultural activities with their communities, and set high goals for their students and themselves. And they do.

The basis for corps members' training is an increasingly rigorous summer institute and additional pre-institute curriculum designed in part by leading educational researchers Susan Moore Johnson (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and Susan Fuhrman (University of Pennsylvania). Prior to the summer institute, corps members observe classes, interview

*“Teach For America is a necessary program to address disparity in education.”*

teachers, read prepared materials, and complete written work. At the institute, veteran teachers instruct them on child psychology, teaching pedagogy, lesson planning, and multicultural education. Additionally, corps members teach summer school courses and receive ongoing observations and frequent feedback from experienced educators.

This preparation has spurred three out of four principals to rate Teach For America corps members' training better than that of other beginning teachers (Kane, Parsons). Teach For America corps members also receive ongoing, formal support from fellow teachers and seasoned veterans during their school year. Professional development includes learning teams, subject-specific learning communities, and a mentorship with a Teach For America program director.

Finally, Teach For America teachers generally do not assume positions from traditionally licensed teachers; rather they replace long-term substitutes who generally have not completed minimal education coursework. Teach For America corps members teach in placements that often do not attract individuals from traditional teacher education training programs.

**Long-Term Impact**

In order to remove the complex

structural barriers which cause the socioeconomic achievement gap, Teach For America possesses a long-term vision. Our country needs leaders in every sector — from politics to medicine to business to higher education to the arts — who intimately understand the challenges and opportunities present in low-income communities. As Harvard's Kennedy School of Government Professor David Gergen writes of corps members and alumni in a recent Boston Globe editorial, “Instead of retiring into affluent careers, they are trying to bang down an old system that isn't working and replace it with a new one that might.”

Teach For America actively supports its alumni both inside and outside of education. The results are impressive: Teach For America alumni have founded charter schools, shaped local and national policy, and become lawyers, journalists, doctors, and leaders in education. Carleton graduate Sarah Van Orman ('90) is an assistant professor of clinical medicine and pediatrics and medical director of the student care center at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, and also provides health care for community members from Chicago's South Side. She is just one example of the many Teach For America alumni and community leaders.

Currently sixty percent of Teach For America's alumni are working in the field of education. The 2005 National Teacher of the Year was Teach For America alumnus Jason Kamras, who says he would not have entered the profession had it not been for the program. Moreover, Teach For America alumni have assumed leadership roles within schools: over 200 principals are Teach For America alumni. Teach For America alumni have also started over 250 charter schools, including the acclaimed Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools ([www.kipp.org](http://www.kipp.org)).

**Solutions**

Beyond simply placing teachers in the classrooms, Teach For America can contribute to the conversation of how our society addresses issues of persistent inequality. It is time to question what works and what should change within the current system in order to provide the opportunity for each child to obtain an excellent education. As it has in the past, Teach For America is questioning its methods and will continue to improve as an organization to better service students and corps members. Teach For America advertises itself as the movement for educational equality and—I think—is a movement worth joining.

*Molly Klane is a TFA campus campaign manager at Carleton College and a member of the class of 2007.*

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