



Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Teach For America (TFA) aims to address teacher shortages by sending graduates from elite colleges, most of whom do not have a background in education, to teach in low-income rural and urban schools for a two-year commitment. The impact of these graduates is hotly debated by those who, on the one hand, see this as a way to improve the supply of teachers by enticing some of America's top students into teaching and those who, on the other hand, see the program as a harmful dalliance into the lives of low-income students who most need highly trained and highly skilled teachers.

Research on the impact of TFA teachers produces a mixed picture, with results affected by the experience level of the TFA teachers and the group of teachers with whom they are compared. Studies have found that, when the comparison group is other teachers in the same schools who are less likely to be certified or traditionally prepared, novice TFA teachers perform equivalently, and experienced TFA teachers perform comparably in raising reading scores and a bit better in raising math scores.

The question for most districts, however, is whether TFA teachers do as well as or better than credentialed non-TFA teachers with whom school districts aim to staff their schools. On this question, studies indicate that the students of novice TFA teachers perform significantly less well in reading and mathematics than those of credentialed beginning teachers.

Experience has a positive effect for both TFA and non-TFA teachers. Most 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 credentialed teachers in teaching reading; they do as well as, and sometimes better than, that 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 recruits result from additional training and experience or from attrition of TFA teachers who may be less effective.

From a school-wide perspective, the high turnover of TFA teachers is costly. Recruiting and training replacements for teachers who leave involves financial costs,

and the higher achievement gains associated with experienced teachers and lower turnover may be lost as well.

Thus, a simple answer to the question of TFA teachers' relative effectiveness cannot be conclusively drawn from the research; many factors are involved in any comparison. The lack of a consistent impact, however, should indicate to policymakers that TFA is likely not the panacea that will reduce disparities in educational outcomes.

The evidence suggests that districts may benefit from using TFA personnel to fill teacher shortages when the available labor pool consists of temporary or substitute teachers or other novice alternatively and provisionally certified teachers likely to leave in a few years. Nevertheless, if educational leaders plan to use TFA teachers as a solution to the problem of shortages, they should be prepared for constant attrition and the associated costs of ongoing recruitment and training.

A district whose primary goal is to improve achievement should explore and fund other educational reform that may have more promise such as universal pre-school, mentoring programs pairing novice and expert teachers, elimination of tracking, and reduction in early grade class size.

It is therefore recommended that policymakers and districts:

- Support TFA staffing only when the alternative hiring pool consists of uncertified and emergency teachers or substitutes.
- Consider the significant recurring costs of TFA, estimated at over \$70,000 per recruit, and press for a five-year commitment to improve achievement and reduce re-staffing.
- Invest strategically in evidence-based educational reform options that build long-term capacity in schools.