

Rethinking Schools

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Looking Past the Spin: Teach for America

Spring 2010



Illustration: Randall Enos

By Barbara Miner

Most Teach for America recruits are idealistic and dedicated. But who is behind the organization, and does its approach bolster or hinder urban education reform?

It is late at night, foggy and misty, and road construction has forced me off the interstate into downtown St. Louis. My Google directions are useless and I follow my nose, heading west on city streets to my hotel. I go past abandoned buildings, lonely gas stations, dimly lit rescue missions. I think of stopping to ask directions, but the neighborhood's desolation gives me pause; it's hard to find an open business, let alone any people walking about.

I am driving from Milwaukee to St. Louis for an article on Teach for America, to get a first-hand take on what is a media star in urban education reform. As I drive past yet another building with flaking paint and boarded-up windows, my cynicism grows. Do people honestly think that sending Ivy League graduates into the St. Louis schools for two years will somehow unlock the academic achievement that is seen as a cornerstone of rebuilding our cities? Can the antidote to educational inequity, urban disinvestment, and neighborhood decay really be so simple?

As my thoughts wander, I try to regain focus: I am writing a story about Teach for America and education reform, not the abandonment of low-income communities of color. They are two separate issues. Or so I keep reminding myself.

Two weeks later, back in Milwaukee after scores of interviews with TFA teachers and staff and with non-TFA educators and policy makers, I am still groping towards an understanding of the organization. I have come to distinguish between the generally hard-working, smart, and idealistic TFA classroom teachers, and a national organization that is as sophisticated, slippery, and media savvy as any group I have ever written about. TFA is perceived as a major player in the education wars over the future of public schools, and a key ally of those who disparage teacher unions and schools of education, and who are enamored of entrepreneurial reforms that bolster the privatization of a once-sacred public responsibility.

But what exactly is TFA's role in these education wars? Who is directing the organization and to what ends? More importantly, what is TFA's role in improving urban education?

Twenty years ago, Princeton University senior Wendy Kopp came up with her solution to low achievement: a Peace-Corps-type initiative called Teach for America. As she writes in her memoir, *One Day, All Children...*, this idea "exploded into a movement." In two decades, the organization's approach to eliminating educational inequality has not changed: Recruit smart, hard-working graduates from Ivy League and other highly competitive universities, and ask them to take a hiatus from their future careers to commit two years to teaching in a low-income urban or rural school.

But leaving aside issues such as poverty and inadequate school funding, it is universally acknowledged that one of the biggest problems in low-performing schools is the revolving door of inadequately prepared teachers. Does TFA's two-years-and-out commitment feed into this problem and thus exacerbate educational inequity?

On the Ground in St. Louis

TFA accounts for a small percentage of the roughly one-quarter of a million public school teachers hired every year but receives significant media coverage. Over the years, it has grown in size and influence, and has developed a market niche with districts that, for a variety of reasons, have significant teacher turnover and hire large numbers of uncertified teachers. In recession-plagued 2009, when teaching became a safe harbor for graduates unsure about the best career path, more than 35,000 people applied to TFA, including 11 percent of Ivy League graduates. TFA placed about 4,000 new members in 2009, bringing its corps to 7,300 teachers in 35 regions.

Some critics have dubbed TFA "Teach for Awhile" and "Teach for a Résumé." At the same time, there's no doubt that TFA has proved inspirational to many recent graduates and has helped make teaching a noble and respectable undertaking. Over the years, thousands of young people have answered the TFA call. People such as Chanel Harris.

Harris, 22, grew up in a small city 30 miles from Ann Arbor, Mich. Until she was in the 11th grade, she and her brother were the only self-identified African American students in the city. "On a daily basis, it was not unusual for me to be denied opportunities, and several teachers made it clear that this was due to my ethnicity, not my academic performance," she recounts.

Since she was 7 years old, Harris has dreamed of being a civil rights attorney. For now, she is pursuing that goal by way of Teach for America.

Harris is one of three corps members that TFA arranged for me to interview in St. Louis, where there are 167 TFA teachers in public schools and 17 in charter schools. I can see why TFA wanted me to interview Harris. She is impressive in many ways: her background, her personality, her work ethic, and her appreciation of being in a good school with a supportive administration. Harris, who, like the others interviewed, is in the second year of her TFA commitment, teaches English and social studies at Compton-Drew Investigative Learning Center, a St. Louis Public Schools magnet middle school partnering with a variety of universities, corporations, and foundations.

While a senior at the University of Michigan, Harris was drawn to TFA by what she calls the organization's passion to improve urban education. She also liked that it was a prominent organization and that "they are very on top of things," whether it be the latest in technology or strategies to foster leadership skills. On the down side, she wishes that TFA had a more diverse corps. In 2008 about 10 percent of corps members nationwide were African American, and about 7.5 percent were Latino; overall, almost 29 percent are people of color. Figures for the TFA staff are similar. TFA classrooms, meanwhile, are about 90 percent African American and Latino.

Asked to describe some of TFA's strengths, Harris emphasizes the organization's high expectations and the tools it provides to reach those expectations: "I can honestly say, what I have learned I could use in another profession: the networking, the time management and organizational skills."

It's the type of comment I hear repeatedly from TFA members and alumni. But such comments cut two ways. After visiting the TFA teachers in St. Louis, I wondered why I heard more about what TFA-ers learned about data and time management than I did about the children and their dreams and accomplishments. It bolstered another of the complaints about TFA: that the organization's value accrues mostly to corps members—what they gain from the experience—and not to urban students, who once again see a teacher come and go.

Harris believes it is important to commit to the classroom beyond two years, and hopes to stay at least five. Her five-year plan also includes a master's degree in education, a master's in education administration, and then law school. And TFA will help make Harris' career dreams become reality.

In its early years, TFA recruits often taught without training beyond their summer boot camp. That has changed, largely because states have tightened requirements for provisional licensing. In St. Louis, as in many districts, TFA has a relationship with area universities so that corps members can get an education master's during their TFA stint. The tuition is paid in part by the \$4,725 annual educational award that members get through TFA's affiliation with AmeriCorps, the federally funded national community service program. (TFA members are paid a regular teacher's salary by the district or charter school where they work.) TFA also spends significant money on supporting its corps members. In St. Louis, for instance, TFA had six staff members providing support and training for its TFA teachers.

TFA's partnerships with schools of education have received little publicity, perhaps because they run counter to TFA's much-heralded view that recruiting good people without certification is more important than promoting high quality teacher education programs. As TFA founder Kopp writes in her memoir, from the very beginning she was "baffled" at the idea that "teachers, just like doctors and lawyers, needed to be trained in campus-based graduate programs before entering the classroom. . . . How could Teach for America do anything but raise teaching standards? We were talking about recruiting the most talented graduates in the country to teach. Where was the conflict?"

Harris was, hands down, the most impressive TFA teacher I met in St. Louis. The second seemed smart and hardworking but naive; she wasn't sure of her future plans and was leaning towards grad school in the emerging field of performance studies. The third, who had a quick answer to any question and was supremely confident in his abilities, would ultimately like to run for office, "maybe school board, or start off as a mayor of a small town."

I returned to my hotel that evening, trying to absorb all that I had seen and heard. And knowing I had seen merely a slice, one coordinated and arranged by TFA's well-oiled media operation. All media inquiries are managed by TFA staff at the national level. After requesting copies of articles I had written for *Rethinking Schools*, the media staffer at TFA initially said she would be unable to help me set up interviews in St. Louis. Flabbergasted, I called her up, and complained vociferously. A request went out that night to the Rethinking Schools listserv asking for help getting in touch with TFA members or alumni and noting that "the national TFA media office has been uncooperative in helping set up any interviews."

The next morning, I got a call from Kerri Marcello Stroud, TFA's national communications director. She said there had been a misunderstanding and TFA would be happy to help. Before long, I was receiving almost thrice-daily calls from Marcello Stroud, along with a stream of emails, as part of what I imagine was a strategy of media overkill.

While in St. Louis I interviewed people with a range of perspectives on TFA. Helen Sherman, associate dean of teacher preparation at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, has a number of professional concerns about TFA's model: "It's a pretend band-aid, a quick fix to make it look like they are doing something. But, honest to God, these kids aren't prepared." Sherman adds that she has mixed feelings overall; her own daughter joined TFA after graduating with an English degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Byron Clemens, vice president of the teachers' union, said the union has good working relations with TFA local staff and has been asked to present at local training sessions. At the same time, some union members worry that administrators are using TFA to hand-pick staff and get rid of teachers they may not like, especially higher paid teachers with seniority.

Peter Downs, president of the elected school board, summarizes TFA's role in one word: "privatization." He says that the mayor, not the district, first invited TFA to St. Louis, in line with reforms such as for-profit charters and the privatization of services in curriculum development, teacher recruitment, maintenance, and food service. As part of its contract with TFA, the district pays \$2,000 a year to TFA for each of its recruits. (The elected board has no power because the state took over the St. Louis schools; the mayoral appointee to the new three-person board is a former regional staff person for Teach for America.)

St. Louis provided a window on many of the complexities of Teach for America at the local level, but didn't answer the question of TFA's national role. So I interviewed others across the country, and also Googled, phoned, and emailed, acquiring reams of studies, reports, and articles on TFA. Which is how I came to find out about two of TFA's newest initiatives: Teach for All and Leadership for Education Equity.

Teach for All is a global network of like-minded organizations, launched in 2007 to replicate TFA in countries ranging from Argentina to Estonia, from Australia to Germany. Leadership for Education Equity (LEE) was founded in 2008 to provide a vehicle for political work and campaigning.

LEE appears to be crucial to another aspect of Teach for America's strategy: TFA's ambitions in shaping the country's education policy agenda and encouraging alumni to run for office. My surprise at the media silence around LEE was outdone only by my amazement at LEE's lack of public transparency.

Spin and Numbers

Barnett Berry, head of the Center for Teaching Quality, based in North Carolina, knows that too many urban kids are taught by ill-prepared substitutes. And it is a problem that TFA, in a finger-in-the-dyke approach, can help solve: "They can provide a teacher that the kids might not have otherwise, because the alternative could be a substitute with barely a college education. It's not a question of whether we shouldn't draw upon a bright, young, energetic group of people. Of course we should." "But," Berry continues, "to suggest that TFA is the solution to the nation's teaching quality gap is misguided at best."

Berry likens the TFA recruits to sprinters—talented athletes, but insufficient if one wants to build a well-rounded track team. "TFA gets its recruits ready for a sprint, not a 10K or a marathon," Berry notes. "They look like they are working harder than the veteran teachers. But the veteran teacher has experience and knows that if you want to make a career of teaching, a sprinting pace will burn you out."

Because TFA recruits aren't expected to stay, they have two other advantages: they cost less and they tend to do what they are told. "By and large, they don't raise questions," Berry notes.

TFA is sensitive to the complaint that its recruits aren't committed to teaching as a career, and tries to counter the critique. On its website, its "Alumni Social Impact Report" states that "more than two-thirds of Teach for America alumni are working or studying full-time in the field of education." The report goes on to note that one-half of those are teachers, with a prominent graph linking a 50 percent bar to K-12 teachers. A closer look reveals a more complicated story. To start, small print notes that the report's information is based on self-reported data in 2007 from 57 percent of the alumni network. Off the top, therefore, 43 percent of the alumni are unaccounted for, which distorts the report's findings.

There are other problems. For instance, TFA alumni are defined as those who have finished the two-year commitment. But only 87.1 percent of members completed their commitment in 2007, and dropout numbers were higher in earlier years. Yet that 13 percent or higher drop-off is not factored in. What's more, the field of education is loosely defined to include everything from working with a nonprofit advocacy group to getting a graduate education degree. Finally, there is no sense of whether those who responded to the survey tended to be recent alumni, perhaps only a year past their initial commitments

and more likely to be in graduate school or teaching for a third year, or older alumni who have moved on to other careers.

Take away the fine-print percentages—the roughly 13 percent who didn't finish their commitment and aren't alumni, the 43 percent who didn't respond to the survey, the fact that the 50 percent who are K-12 teachers are a subset of the 67 percent of alumni working in the loosely defined field of education—and the numbers become a lot less impressive.

A math teacher ran some numbers for me. His conclusion? The only thing one can say with certainty is that in 2007, at least 16.6 percent of those recruited by Teach for America were teaching in a K-12 setting beyond their two-year commitment. —B.J.M.

The Mysterious LEE

Twenty years ago, before TFA had placed a single teacher in a single school, there were glowing articles in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, and a segment on *Good Morning America*. The media love-fest with TFA has never stopped, extending to soft publications always eager for a feel-good story, such as *Reader's Digest* and *Good Housekeeping*. When TFA founder Kopp calls Thomas Friedman at the *New York Times*, he not only answers her call, but also quotes her extensively (see Friedman's April 22, 2009, column).

At the same time, Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, a vocal critic of TFA, has been tarnished as a pro-union anti-reformer in influential media outlets such as *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Republic*. Darling-Hammond's 2005 study found "no instance where uncertified Teach for America teachers performed as well as standard certified teachers of comparable experience levels teaching in similar settings." (see sidebar, p. 31.) Following Obama's election, when Darling-Hammond was head of the education sector of Obama's transition team and mentioned as a possible secretary of education, media attacks increased, with her critique of TFA one of the concerns cited. The attacks became so relentless that the late Gerald Bracey wrote an article for the *Huffington Post* titled "The Hatchet Job on Linda Darling-Hammond."

TFA spends significant organizational time, energy, and money on its alumni, who are arguably the source of the organization's true political power. (The most famous alumni are Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public schools, and Mike Feinberg and David Levin, founders of the KIPP Schools.) LEE is an outgrowth of TFA's Political Leadership Initiative, which the TFA website says is designed to provide "tools, resources, and opportunities to help alumni influence the policies and priorities of local, state, and national government. It also helps prepare them to pursue elected positions."

Some 27 TFA alumni are currently in office, nine more are running for office, and more than 700 are interested in "pursuing political leadership." TFA has a goal of 100 elected officials in 2010. The elected officials, however, present a potential quandary, which is where LEE comes in. As a 501(c)4 nonprofit, LEE can engage in lobbying and political campaigning that is either off-limits or strictly curtailed for a 501(c)3 such as Teach for America.

Jen Bluestein Lamb, vice president of TFA's Political Leadership Initiative, who spends part of her time overseeing LEE, agreed to talk about the new organization. At the same time, Bluestein

Lamb refused to give me even temporary access to the members-only website that is at the heart of the organization's work.

I was hoping that LEE might unlock the door to TFA's political agenda, so imagine my surprise when Bluestein Lamb said in no uncertain terms, "We have absolutely no agenda for LEE. We don't have an agenda, we don't have political goals, we don't have an ideology." In fact, she added, "Our [501](c)4 does not lobby."

I found it hard to believe, but Bluestein Lamb patiently said the same thing in several ways. So then I asked whether there might be any positions deemed out of bounds—say a TFA alumnus wanted to run for office on a platform ending taxpayer support of public education or a total conversion to vouchers. Would LEE have any problem with that?

"No," Bluestein Lam responded, although she hoped such a platform would spark "a pretty brisk dialogue" among other alumni.

Hoping there might be other information to help me understand LEE, I asked if there had been any media articles about the organization. "No, not to my knowledge," she responded. LEE was far out of the realm of any 501(c)4 that I knew, especially one that says its mission involves ending the achievement gap and educational inequity. LEE may not lobby or advocate a political agenda but, I asked, has it ever taken a policy position of any sort? "No, and we never would," she responded.

"But even the Boy Scouts take policy positions," I countered.

Bluestein Lamb laughed and then repeated, "We have never, and never will, take a policy position ourselves."

We were at a standstill. I felt I had entered an alternate reality. All this passion, all this talk of social justice and ending educational inequity—but without any political content or ideology or platform of any sort? It didn't make sense.

If LEE and TFA are as apolitical as they claim, why does the media constantly link Teach for America with "reformers" who attack the unions and schools of education, and reforms such as entrepreneurially motivated charter schools, even for-profit charters, as necessary alternatives to traditional public schools? And if the media is falsely linking TFA to such pro-marketplace reforms, why doesn't TFA set the record straight?



Illustration: Randall Enos

Many local teachers and unions, while irked by the halo that the media has placed around the heads of TFA teachers, haven't spent much time worrying about TFA one way or another. But that may be changing. As the economy slows, districts are laying off veteran teachers—and yet still hiring TFA recruits.

Last summer, Boston Teachers Union President Richard Stutman met with 18 local union presidents, “all of whom said they'd seen teachers laid off to make room for TFA members,” according to an article in *USA Today*. “I don't think you'll find a city that isn't laying off people to accommodate Teach for America,” Stutman said.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, for instance, the superintendent laid off hundreds of veteran teachers but spared 100 TFA-ers. TFA, meanwhile, expanded into Dallas this fall, bringing in nearly 100 new teachers, even though the district had laid off 350 teachers in the 2008-09 school year.

In Boston, where the district planned to lay off 20 veteran teachers and replace them with TFA corps members, the union filed a complaint. The state's Division of Labor Relations determined in early October that “the likelihood existed that the Boston School Committee violated the union contract when signing an agreement” with TFA, according to the *Boston Globe*.

More recently, in Washington, D.C., former TFA corps member and current Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee laid off 229 teachers in October, but only six of the 170 TFA teachers in the system, according to the *Washington Post*.

There is also growing tension between schools of education and TFA over jobs for new teachers. The College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, for example, graduates about 300 certified teachers a year. The graduates, especially elementary teachers, are increasingly having difficulty finding jobs in the Chicago schools. “One reason is the number of jobs committed to Teach for America and similar programs, which have arrangements with the Chicago public schools,” notes Victoria Chou, dean of the College of Education.—B.J.M

TFA's “Theory of Change”

My interview with Kevin Huffman, TFA's vice-president in charge of public affairs, was equally frustrating. I asked where TFA saw itself and its priorities in five years. Huffman explained how TFA has consistently improved over the years, from training and support to growing in scale and diversity. “Every year we learn new things that we should be doing better, and I think this is going to continue,” he said.

The same could be applied to classroom teaching, I noted. Might TFA consider changing its mission, and ask teachers to commit to, say, five years in the classroom?

No, Huffman made clear. Sticking to the two-year commitment “is critical to our theory of change.”

I struggled to remember media references to this “theory of change.” What was this theory? “That we will bring in great people who will have a tremendous impact on the kids they are teaching and who will go on for the rest of their careers to have an impact on root causes that cause the gap in educational outcomes in this country,” Huffman explained.

I noted that TFA’s theory of change sounded top-down and that it left out the voices and perspectives of the communities who were supposed to benefit. I could sense Huffman’s frustration. “I think that misapprehends our theory of change,” he said. This wasn’t just an educational policy initiative, he noted, because TFA hoped that alumni would enter other fields such as medicine and law and make equally important contributions. “We are decidedly nonpartisan and apolitical about what our alumni are pursuing or pushing,” he said. “We have a belief that our alumni have had an experience that will help them make better decisions.” The explanations were vague and ephemeral, making it seem that TFA has as much political heft as a Kiwanis Club selling corn on the cob at county fairs to raise money for needy kids around the world.

A few days later, I was talking to Mike Rose, best known as the author of education books that raise big-picture questions about the intellectual, social, civic, ethical, and aesthetic purposes of public education. Rose was also perplexed by Huffman’s perspective.

“Everybody who has anything to do with education in any way, from the most conservative to the most radical, is going to say they want to make a change. But the kind of change is what matters,” he said. “They’re making a big claim about Teach for America and social change, so it’s fair to ask for an independent empirical study that demonstrates the validity of that claim. Otherwise there’s no way of knowing if and how their theory of change works in the real world.” I also talked to someone who, as much as anyone in this country, understands social movements for change. Shortly before his death, I emailed Howard Zinn, author of *A People’s History of the United States*, and relayed my experience with Teach for America and Huffman’s explanation of its “theory of change.” In response, Zinn emailed that he found the theory “remarkably orthodox.”

“The idea of bringing in ‘great’ people, ‘important’ people, is counter to the idea of a democratic education,” he wrote. “And all the insistence on not taking policy stands, not having an ‘ideology,’ is simply naïve. Not taking policy stands is itself an ideology, and an ideology which reinforces the status quo in education and in society.”

In early 2010, meanwhile, a study out of Stanford University found that TFA alumni actually had lower rates of civic involvement than those who were accepted by TFA but declined, and also had lower rates than those who dropped out before their two years were completed, according to a summary in the *New York Times*. Although Kopp herself had recommended the study, she disagreed with its findings; her comments in the *Times* suggested that the study did not adequately understand TFA’s “theory of change.”

Journalism 101: Follow the Money

To further investigate TFA, I decided to go back to Journalism 101: Follow the money. Which leads, among other places, to the story of Barbara Torre Veltri's mother.

Torre Veltri is an assistant professor at Northern Arizona University. Last summer, her mother received a letter from Wachovia Securities/Wells Fargo Advisors, dated June 12, 2009, requesting input on a customer service questionnaire. In exchange for her time, the letter promised, "We will make a donation to your choice of one of the following charities: American Red Cross, Teach for America, or the National Council on Aging."

Torre Veltri's mother was puzzled. "Why would donations be solicited by [Wachovia Securities/]Wells Fargo for Teach for America?" she asked her daughter. "Since when is teaching some kind of charity?"(1)

Good questions without easy answers. Wachovia Securities/Wells Fargo was undoubtedly in need of an image makeover in early June. A few days before the letter to Torre Veltri's mother, affidavits in a federal lawsuit recounted how Wells Fargo deliberately steered working-class African Americans into high-interest subprime mortgages, with the lending referred to as "ghetto loans."

TFA's 2008 annual report lists Wachovia as one of five corporations donating more than \$1 million at the national level. The others are Goldman Sachs, Visa, the biotechnology firm Amgen, and the golfing tournament Quail Hollow Championship.

The organization is, without a doubt, a fundraising mega-star. In one day in June 2008, for instance, TFA raised \$5.5 million. The event, TFA's annual dinner, "brought so many corporate executives to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York that stretch limousines jammed Park Avenue for blocks," the *New York Times* reported.

To my knowledge, there has been no in-depth analysis of who funds TFA and why. Clearly, one of the unanswered questions is how TFA has been able to garner such amazing corporate support—especially since some of these same companies, in their business practices, have preyed on low-income people or have exacerbated this country's growing inequality of wealth. Are the donations to TFA "guilt money"? Is TFA just smarter than other education groups in wooing corporate support? Is it that corporations believe it is no more politically risky to support TFA than to support the American Red Cross or the Council on Aging?

Or is there a confluence of views between TFA and its leading corporate and foundation funders? TFA has no public criticism of pro-market reforms such as privatization and for-profit charters. Nor does it ask hard questions about the relationship between the achievement gap and problems of segregation, poverty, and an unemployment rate among African American men that hovers around 50 percent in some urban communities.

Wendy Puriefoy is president of the Public Education Network, a national association focused on public school reform in low-income communities, and was on the board of Teach for America in the early 1990s. She believes the organization has expanded its agenda in recent years and

chooses her words carefully in analyzing its current role because, she says, “it is going to sound harsh.”

Likening market-oriented reforms in public education to the deregulation of the financial industry that culminated in a recession, she says that the very same people who promoted economic deregulation are influential supporters of organizations such as Teach for America. They want to sidestep professional teachers, unions, and schools of education “and let loose the forces of the market,” Puriefoy says. “The marketplace of education is a big market. There is a lot of money to be made.”

Are TFA Recruits Better Teachers?

The Mathematica Study

One of the controversies swirling around TFA is the teaching quality of its recruits. To answer this question, Kerci Marcello Stroud, TFA’s communications director, pointed me to a 2004 Mathematica study on Teach for America. She specifically noted that the conservative education policy journal *Education Next* gave the report an “A” for methodology and that three other studies, including a 2005 study by Linda Darling Hammond and others from Stanford University, received a “C” or lower.

I went to the Mathematica study and, quite frankly, wondered why TFA was promoting it. I imagined how the *Onion* might summarize the study: “Teach for America goes up against the worst teachers in the country—they’re both awful!”

The Mathematica study involved 17 schools across the country, 100 classrooms, and nearly 2,000 students, and thus could be considered a representative, one-year snapshot. The study’s executive summary notes that the control group for the TFA teachers consisted of other teachers in the same schools and at the same grades—teachers with “substantially lower rates of certification and formal education training” than a nationally representative sample of teachers. In addition, the study said that many of the control group teachers had no student teaching experience at all and were less prepared than the TFA recruits.

The Mathematica study, using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, found that there were statistically insignificant differences in reading achievement for students in the TFA and control classrooms. In math, students in the TFA classrooms fared slightly better—equal to one month’s extra teaching.

The Mathematica study also found, however, that TFA teachers “had no substantial impact on the probability that students were retained in grade or assigned to summer school.”

A closer look at the math and reading results shows that neither the TFA group nor the control group was even beginning to close the achievement gap. In math, the TFA teachers bumped their student math scores from the 14th to the 17th percentile. The control group stayed flat at the 15th percentile. In reading, both the TFA and control group teachers marginally raised reading scores, from the 13th to the 14th percentile for the control group, and from the 14th to the 15th percentile for the TFA recruits. This, as Center for Teaching Quality head Barnett Berry notes, “is essentially virtually no gain at all. These [TFA] students were still reading more poorly than 85 percent of their peers nationwide, and well below grade level.” Teach for America boasts about its impact, noting on its webpage: “[O]ur corps members and alumni work relentlessly to increase academic achievement.” Yet in a study touted by TFA, the students of corps teachers remained far below their national peers and made only marginal gains.

Darling-Hammond’s Houston Study

"Does Teacher Preparation Matter?" is a peer-reviewed, scholarly evaluation of the effectiveness of the TFA approach, published by Linda Darling-Hammond and three other Stanford University colleagues in 2005. Reading through the study, one can see why TFA doesn't like the results.

The study is a longitudinal, six-year look at data from Houston representing more than 132,000 students and 4,400 teachers, on six different math and reading achievement tests. (TFA has sent recruits to Houston since 1991, and this year has more than 450 corps members teaching there.)

"Although some have suggested that perhaps bright college graduates like those who join TFA may not require professional preparation for teaching, we found no instance where uncertified Teach for America teachers performed as well as standard certified teachers of comparable experience levels teaching in similar settings," the study states.

The study also found, however, that teachers who gained certification, including TFA teachers who became certified by their second or third year of teaching, increased in effectiveness.

At the same time, few of the TFA teachers stayed in the Houston schools for long. Based on district data, the study notes that "generally, rates of attrition for TFA teachers were about twice as high as for non-TFA teachers." For instance, of those who entered in the 1998 school year, 85 percent had left the Houston public schools after three years, compared to about 55 percent of non-TFA teachers. —B.J.M.

Doing Good and Doing Well

In a cover story last fall, *Business Week* put TFA at the number seven spot in its top 10 listing of "The Best Places to Launch a Career," just after Goldman Sachs and just before Target. TFA, meanwhile, actively promotes the value of joining its teaching corps, especially for those thinking of graduate school or immediately transitioning to a corporate job. Its website boasts of TFA's partnership with over 150 graduate schools offering TFA alumni benefits such as two-year deferrals, fellowships, course credits, and waived application fees. The most popular schools for TFA alumni are Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Northwestern, and the University of California-Berkeley—with Harvard the overall top choice.

Its employer partners, which actively recruit TFA alumni, are equally prestigious and include Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, KPMG, Credit Suisse, McKinsey and Company, and Google. TFA partners in its School Leadership Initiative for alumni, meanwhile, include the for-profit Edison Schools. (TFA founder Kopp has nothing but praise for Edison in her memoir. She is also open to the idea of vouchers.)

Anecdotally, and from conversations with various TFA staffers, it's clear that the pay for TFA staffers is significantly higher than for similarly qualified classroom teachers. But it is not something the organization likes to talk about. Marcello Stroud, for her part, wrote in response to an email request about TFA salaries, "We consider compensation information to be confidential." I knew there was no point pressing the matter but muttered to myself, "Thank God for the 990."

The term "990" refers to the IRS forms that tax-exempt organizations must file and that by law are available to the public. Included on a 990 is not just essential information on total revenue

and total expenses, but a breakdown that includes the compensation of the highest paid employees.

Marcello Stroud sent me TFA's 990 for fiscal 2008. It shows that TFA had revenues of \$159 million in fiscal year 2008 and expenses of \$124.5 million. CEO and founder Wendy Kopp made \$265,585, with an additional \$17,027 in benefits and deferred compensation. She also made an additional \$71,021 in compensation and benefits through the TFA-related organization Teach for All. Seven other TFA staffers are listed as making more than \$200,000 in pay and benefits, with another four approaching that amount.

It's also interesting to look at the 990 for the KIPP Foundation, the charter school chain led by Richard Barth, a former Edison vice president and TFA staffer who also happens to be Kopp's husband. Barth made more than \$300,000 in pay and benefits, bringing the Kopp/Barth household income to almost \$600,000 for their work with TFA and KIPP. (In a 2008 article, the *New York Times* dubbed Kopp and Barth as "a power couple in the world of education, emblematic of a new class of young social entrepreneurs seeking to reshape the United States' educational landscape.")

TFA's 990 lists its major contributors—some of the biggest names and players in the privatization of public education.

Take, for example, the Walton Family Foundation, based on the philanthropic beliefs of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton. Its \$9 million in contributions made it the single largest contributor to Teach for America. Within the world of education foundations, Walton is synonymous with privatization and the promotion of vouchers for private schools.

The Doris and Donald Fisher Fund is listed as contributing \$2.5 million to TFA. The late Donald Fisher founded the Gap clothing store chain and made headlines in the San Francisco Bay area for decades for his conservative Republican politics and his various deregulation and privatization plans—including a pledge of \$25 million in the late 1990s to expand the for-profit Edison Schools into California.

Teach for America also relies on local and regional funders. In St. Louis, for instance, contributions included a \$1 million four-year grant from the Monsanto Fund, the philanthropic arm of the agribusiness giant Monsanto.

The 990 also broke down the \$523,475 that TFA spent on political lobbying in 2008, within the allowable limit for a 501(c)3. On a state level, TFA worked to pass alternative certification requirements. On a federal level, its lobbying included support for appropriations for Teach for America and for unspecified education programs in the stimulus package.

Leadership for Educational Equity, meanwhile, has been less than cooperative in providing IRS documents that, by law, are to be made publicly available within 30 days of a request. In mid-January, after more than two months of LEE's refusal to provide these documents, Rethinking Schools filed a formal complaint against LEE with the IRS; as of press-time in mid-March, LEE had still not responded.

Is This MLK's Legacy?

One constant in TFA's 20-year history has been founder Wendy Kopp, whose vision remains at the core of TFA.

It's useful to read Kopp's book *One Day, All Children . . . The Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned Along the Way*. Many of TFA's hallmarks—the language of educational equity, the emphasis on social entrepreneurship, the reliance on corporate funding, Kopp's messianic aura, and the missionary approach to closing the achievement gap—have been there from the beginning.

Equally interesting, however, is what is missing from Kopp's memoir. For example, children. The first and only time a child is mentioned by name is 20 pages from the book's end, when Kopp talks briefly about visiting the home of a 4th grader named Zakia. Most of the section is actually about KIPP, because Zakia is thinking of attending a KIPP school. We don't hear anything from Zakia herself or her mother. We do hear KIPP described as "a program designed to prepare students for success in high school and success in college." But we don't know if Zakia ever attends KIPP, or what happens to her in subsequent years. This is in keeping with the rest of the book, however. Purportedly about education, the book is essentially an impressive fundraising and media relations manual.

As I assess the book, I return to a single word: hubris. And that hubris has existed ever since Kopp started TFA as the answer to urban education reform, apparently without visiting a single urban classroom.

Kopp crystallized her plan while a senior at Princeton, when she needed to write a thesis on mandatory national service. She focused on a teacher corps for low-income areas, wrote her thesis, and applied for jobs. If she hadn't been turned down by her final prospect, Morgan Stanley, TFA might not exist. Unemployed after graduation, she decided to found TFA. She focused on corporate funding—IBM, Xerox, AT&T, and Mobil. One of her overtures worked out and Union Carbide donated office space in mid-town Manhattan. TFA moved from idea to reality.

In the book, Kopp claims that she is carrying on the struggle for civil rights, asserting that "through Teach for America, my generation is insisting upon educational opportunity for all Americans. To us, this is a civil rights issue." The title of Kopp's memoir, *One Day, All Children . . .*, is a not-so-subtle reference to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and rests on the assumption that Kopp has taken up King's mantle and is carrying on his legacy.

Much of the rhetoric takes the high road, especially in the beginning chapters when Kopp is wooing the reader. Later in the book, Darling-Hammond comes in for almost four pages of criticism, and her peer-reviewed studies of TFA are called "diatribes." Nor did Kopp's attacks on Darling-Hammond end with the memoir. In March 2006, for instance, Kopp wrote a strongly worded personal letter to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger opposing Darling-Hammond's potential appointment to the state's Teacher Credentialing Commission. (Darling-Hammond was not appointed.) Kopp's letter not only portrays Kopp's ongoing enmity toward Darling-Hammond, but also calls into question the organization's alleged uninvolvedness in political and policy controversies.

As for broader reform efforts, Kopp's memoir dismisses initiatives such as smaller class sizes in favor of "clear outcome goals." Similarly, she belittles efforts to improve schools of education, saying that she would instead "do what every successful organization does" and focus on recruiting talented people. (Kopp practices what she preaches when it comes to recruitment; she interviewed 30 people before choosing the nanny for her children.)

Kopp's Parting Words

There are any number of concerns that swirl around Teach for America: that the organization is part of a global network promoting ideologies of privatization, individualism, and elitism; that TFA rests on the dubious supposition that elite graduates of elite colleges are inherently better teachers than people from local or regional schools who come from the communities where they teach; that the media and foundation attention lavished on TFA sucks away energy and money from other important reforms.

But what if one accepts TFA's assumptions—that its purpose is purely to address educational inequity by recruiting the best and the brightest, training them briefly, and having them teach for two years in a low-income school? And that its model trumps the value of recruiting accredited teachers who view teaching as a career?

Given that the revolving door of unqualified teachers is a key factor in the poor performance of many low-income schools, what are the repercussions of those assumptions? Is TFA aggravating a problem that it claims to be solving?

It is Kopp herself who perhaps best answers that question. Speaking in a 2007 commencement speech at Mt. Holyoke College, Kopp said:

What I have come to appreciate is that things that matter take time. We live in an era when it is rare to meet people in their 20s and 30s who have stayed with something for more than a few years. And certainly, in some cases the right thing is to experiment and move on. But in many cases, the right thing is to stay with something, internalize tough lessons, and push yourself to new levels of knowledge and responsibility. Deep and widespread change comes from sticking with things.

Endnote:

1 This vignette is adapted from the forthcoming book: Torre Veltri, Barbara. *Learning on Other People's Kids: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
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