

An Inconsistent Truth: The Efficacy of TFA Corps Members

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Who would not answer the challenge to *Teach for America*? That is similar to asking who would not contribute to the cure for cancer. Or, in the instance when one challenges the premise of No Child Left Behind, one is met with the question, “Which child *would* you leave behind?” For the past twenty-five years, Teach For America (TFA) has promised idealistic college graduates from any field of study an opportunity to contribute positively to society by teaching in underserved communities. Making this even more attractive, they require only a short time commitment--five weeks of training--before being placed as a teacher of record for two years. As teachers, TFA corps members receive a teacher salary, up to \$20,000 in loan forgiveness or graduate tuition, and [access to an elite network of interconnected organizations and opportunities](#).

While the whole of the TFA corps constitutes less than 0.2% of all classroom teachers in the nation, their influence extends beyond the classroom walls. In part, this is because of TFA’s [two-tiered mission](#) to a) fill the national teaching shortage and b) build a movement to end education inequity. Both parts of this mission have significant influence on students, teachers, and the state of public education in North Carolina where there are currently 1,150 current first and second year TFA corps members.

TFA originally set out to fill the national teacher shortage, yet since the recession, there is [no longer a need for](#) new teachers in many districts where corps members are placed, such as

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and TFA must now prove their worth and validate their presence. As a result, there have been multiple studies comparing the students of TFA teachers with teachers prepared by other programs. Most recently, we have seen the release of a study conducted by [Mathematica](#), an organization that has [reported on TFA previously](#). This time, Mathematica was tasked with fulfilling the evaluation requirements for the [\\$50 million federal grant](#) TFA received in 2010. To address the effectiveness of TFA teachers, the study compared test scores (EOG scores for 3-5 graders and the Woodcock Johnson III scores for K-2) of students randomly assigned to 59 TFA participants and 76 comparison teachers, many of whom were traditionally licensed and had more than five years of teaching experience. In summary, Mathematica reported that “first-and second-year TFA teachers in our sample were equally as effective as other teachers in the same high-poverty schools in both reading and math. On average, students assigned to TFA teachers scored slightly above students assigned to non-TFA teachers; however, these differences were small and were not statistically significant” (p. xvi). Like [many studies of teacher efficacy](#), the findings are complicated.

Despite the nuances of these findings, and the acknowledgment that any differences in performance are not statistically significant, TFA has presented on their website the uncomplicated claim that students of TFA teachers “[learned 2.6 months more mathematics in a year.](#)” This is not the first time that TFA has [over-simplified and skewed reporting of studies of this nature](#).

In addition, there are a number of questions that are left unanswered by the Mathematica report and other studies, not the least of which is whether TFA corps members are actually more effective in the classroom. First of all, the group of teachers with whom TFA

was compared was decidedly heterogeneous, and the findings were not disaggregated. For example, of the 76 comparison teachers, 12 entered teaching through alternative programs, and yet the results did not compare students from TFA corps members' classrooms with like sub-groups. It has been documented that students in TFA corps members' classrooms tend to outperform students in the classrooms of other alternative-credentialed programs. What is not clear in this study, or elsewhere, is how students in the classrooms of TFA corps members perform compared to students in classrooms of teachers who have graduated from high-quality teacher education programs.

As is the case with many studies of TFA teacher effectiveness, this study is limited by a myopic focus on students' scores on standardized assessments as the sole proxy for teacher success. While test scores are important, even [value added models](#) simply cannot stand in as proxy for a teacher's efficacy. This is particularly problematic given the increasing number of reports from TFA corps members and researchers that TFA trains corps members to develop test-centric teaching practices--practices which rely heavily on direct instruction and teaching students the material that will be tested at *the expense of all other content*.

Additionally, the report makes note of the fragile commitment TFA participants have to teaching—fifty-one of the fifty-nine TFA respondents in the Mathematica study indicated that they would not spend the rest of their careers in teaching, and a large majority of TFA participants (80%) are no longer in the classroom after 5 years. While maintaining a revolving door of teachers in schools may save a district from paying a veteran teacher salary or a pension, it also costs the district significant funds in recruitment and hiring and undoubtedly

has negative effects on students who see teacher after teacher leave their school and community.

Beyond its direct affect in the classroom, TFA finds itself at the intersection of powerful social and political crossroads as they seek not only to prepare teachers, but to start a movement to end education inequity. In North Carolina, we have seen a recent slash in public funding to education and an increased reliance on market-based reforms such as vouchers, merit-based pay, and charter schools. At the national level, [TFA has been a proponent](#) of these education reforms. There is [empirical evidence](#) that alumni from TFA tend to understand educational change through managerial terms; believing that inequity is a result of resource mismanagement and a lack of accountability, and that solutions lie in merit pay for teachers, increased autonomy for leadership, standardization, and an end to collective bargaining. Many TFA alumni like Wendy Kopp, Cami Anderson, and the education advisor to Governor McCrory, Eric Guckian, have [played an important role](#) in promoting market-based reforms at the local, state, and federal level. To this end, TFA has promoted of the expansion of charter schools. Over 50% of the largest charter management organizations in the nation were founded by TFA alumni, are heavily staffed by TFA in leadership positions, or have formal partnerships with the organization. It is not surprising that foundational support of market-based reforms, like [Walton, Broad and Gates](#), has invested millions of dollars in TFA. It is because of this philanthropic funding, in addition to federal funding and state support (like the [\\$12 million NC gave TFA last year](#)), that TFA is able to spend [over \\$50,000](#) for the recruitment, training, and support of each corps member.

To be sure, we need more teachers to meet the needs of our growing school-aged population in North Carolina. This is especially the case given the increase in attrition and decrease in enrollment in teacher education programs. But teaching is a complex undertaking, and we need teachers with a complex understanding of how to meet the needs of all students. We need state-wide policies that incentivize joining and staying in the teaching force. There is no silver bullet solution to this problem, but as long as we continue to look for one, programs like TFA will gain too much attention, too much public investment, and too much support as the magic potion that will cure all ills. While there are, undoubtedly, individual TFA corps members who have impacted the lives of children in profoundly important and powerful ways, we need more systemic reforms to attract and retain teachers who are committed to educate students beyond that which can be measured by tests and who will stay in the classroom long enough to have a lasting affect.

References

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