

TEACH FOR AMERICA:*Do-gooders or
school Rhee-formers?**By Sherry Posnick-Goodwin***Alex Caputo-Pearl,**

new president of United Teachers Los Angeles, is a staunch and “unapologetic” crusader for teacher rights who believes attacks on teachers unions “destabilize” public schools. He sees teachers unions as vehicles for improving teaching and learning — and promoting social justice.

**Michelle Rhee**

is a so-called school reformer who blames the nation’s education woes on “bad teachers” and unions. Due process and job protections for teachers have come under attack from StudentsFirst, an organization Rhee founded to promote charter school expansion, vouchers and evaluations linked to test scores.

Miles apart philosophically, these two individuals shared the same pathway into the teaching profession. They began in Teach For America, a controversial program that many believe is pushing the pro-corporate, union-busting agenda of Rhee rather than the views favoring public education and social justice of Caputo-Pearl.

WHILE CONTROVERSY RAGES regarding TFA’s true mission, there’s no disputing its rising influence in the education world. There are now nearly 30,000 TFA alumni nationwide. Last year TFA sent about 8,000 teachers into the nation’s 14,000 districts, contributing about 3 percent of the nation’s 250,000 new teacher hires. Rhee and TFA founder Wendy Kopp have made *Time*’s “most influential” list, and TFA’s nonprofit organization spends millions of dollars to put TFA alums into elected and appointed leadership positions.

Caputo-Pearl believes it’s important to separate the “do-gooder types” from the corporate leaders who play a “dangerous role” in the school privatization movement.

“My life is about organizing and building things collectively, and as president of UTLA, I want to engage with TFA alums as I do *all* union members. Many wonderful

teachers have gone through the ranks of TFA. But of much larger concern is TFA’s role as an *organization* seeking to privatize public education, support the charter school movement and undermine teachers unions. TFA as an organization creates conditions that are not good for kids — and has turned some schools into teacher turnover factories.”

IS FIVE WEEKS ENOUGH?

TFA was founded 25 years ago as a way to address a national teacher shortage. At that time, says Caputo-Pearl, TFA was a “rag-tag” organization that sent inexperienced college grads to teach at understaffed inner-city schools. He was sent to Compton in 1990 after five weeks of training that left him “completely unprepared.” He “survived” because a kind-hearted teacher next door, who was unaffiliated with TFA, took him under her wing.

“I was eager, but unprepared for the real work of teaching. The program had encouraged us to believe that motivation, goodwill and some weeks of training were all it took to help struggling kids. Of course, green as I was,

I quickly realized I was over my head. But I also recognized that I wanted to make teaching my life.”

TFA’s five-week training program is open to applicants who are college graduates with a GPA of at least 2.5. Typically, most do not have an education background. After five weeks, “graduates” have a two-year commitment to teach in low-income urban schools where they are placed.

“The training was good,” says Clinton Loo, a TFA math teacher at San Jose High School. “It was extremely stressful. I averaged five hours of sleep a night in the dorms.”

His training at Loyola Marymount University in 2010 involved one hour per day of actual teaching to summer school youths, and the rest of the day was spent collaborating with instructors and developing curriculum.

Loo majored in information systems at Carnegie Mellon University. While working as a technology consultant in Washington, D.C., he became involved in a tutoring program and got bitten by the teaching bug.

“I thought, ‘Why not teach?’ It had never occurred to me before then,” says Loo, an executive board member of the San Jose Teachers Association (SJTA).

Loo, who now has a master’s in education, is proud of the “positive impact” he has had during his four years at San Jose High School. While he’s not sure he’ll teach forever, he’s doubled the two-year TFA commitment he made.

“If I had left after my second year, I believe that I could have a positive impact,” says Loo. “No TFA teachers are exactly the same, but those I have encountered are some of the most hardworking, energetic and impactful teachers you will meet.”

Leah Brosio, a teacher at Live Oak Charter School in Petaluma, found TFA training inadequate in 1993.

After five weeks of training, Brosio found herself “shell-shocked” in an inner-city classroom with 32 students. She called her mother in tears every night. She had no idea how to deal with second-graders who brought *Hustler* magazine to school and whose grandparents arrived wearing shirts that said, “If you don’t like my attitude, call 1-800-EAT-****.” Once she asked a student to spit out her gum and found the student was chewing on a condom. Brosio, then 22, was feeling “somewhere between brave and stupid.”

She applied for an emergency permit and took classes to earn her teaching credential, taking advantage of all professional development opportunities.

“Overall, TFA was an overwhelming, frightening



TFA’s five-week training program training was extremely stressful. “I averaged five hours of sleep a night,” says Clinton Loo, here helping Perla Munguia.

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Ben Spielberg

experience,” says Brosio, Live Oak Teachers Association. “The people running the organization didn’t support us. Most of them were our age. But I became a teacher anyway through grit and determination and a great deal of help from my mom, a veteran teacher.”

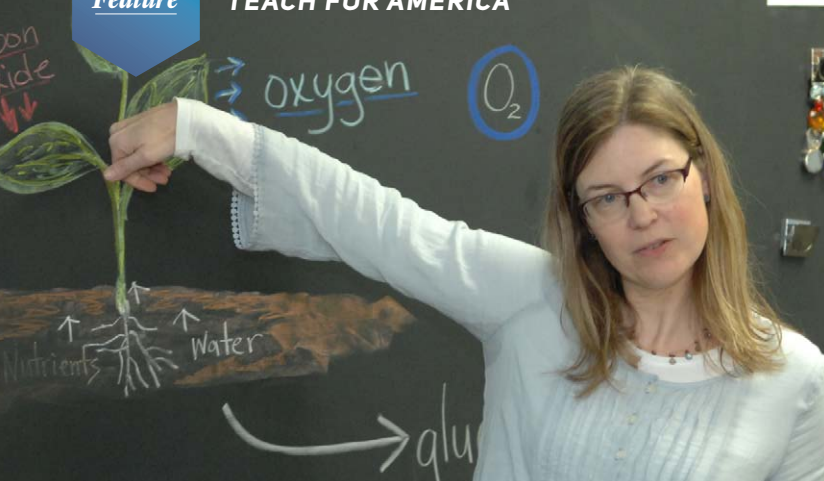
Looking back, she finds the basic premise of TFA to be “insulting and a slap in the face” to veteran teachers: that inexperienced novices can “fix” what’s wrong in education.

TFA alum Ben Spielberg also takes issue with the premise that newbies can fix what others have ruined.

“TFA should explicitly acknowledge that achievement gaps are caused by poverty, not bad schools and teachers,” says Spielberg, a former SJTA executive board member and math coach at two campuses.

With complaints that five weeks of boot camp isn’t enough, TFA recently launched a pilot program to provide a year of training to a subset of teachers in the 2015 cohort that focuses on learning theory, pedagogy and cultural competency, along with increased classroom experience. Another pilot program will support teachers who have made it beyond the two-year TFA commitment.

The California Department of Education created an intern certification program designed specifically for those entering teaching through a nontraditional path, including TFA members. They work toward certification through one of TFA’s “credentialing partners,” which include Loyola Marymount University and a UCLA extension program. Once enrolled, TFA members receive a two-year non-renewable intern teaching



credential. Upon completion of the credentialing program, corps members are eligible to file for a five-year preliminary teaching credential.

JOB TURNOVER AND TAKEOVER

Spielberg, a Stanford grad who by all accounts was an excellent teacher, quit his teaching job this summer after four years and moved to Washington, D.C., where his fiancée attends medical school. He's not sure if he will continue teaching. He's considering some "policy-oriented" positions in the nation's capital.

The high teacher turnover rate caused when TFA teachers like Spielberg leave has been a problem for San Jose Unified School District, says Tony Bontempi, a math teacher at San Jose High School.

"All of the math teachers we've lost have been from TFA," he says. "It hurts our program when we have a lack of consistency."

TFA's California placements are located in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Diego, and fewer than 20 percent of them are still in the teaching profession by year four.

"This small yield comes at substantial cost to the public for recruitment, training and placement," says education expert Linda Darling-Hammond, chair of California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, in an *Education Week* article. "A recent estimate places recurring costs at more than \$70,000 per recruit, enough to have trained numerous effective career teachers."

Districts pay thousands in fees to TFA for each corps member, not counting their salaries. In addition to unnecessary costs, TFA results in the "destabilization" of high-needs schools, says Caputo-Pearl, because poor students are negatively impacted from high turnover.

However, due to the high turnover of TFA teachers, the

a number of corps members at schools that are relatively low-poverty and easy to staff, which seems antithetical to the TFA mission."

More alarming is that TFA alums with just five weeks' training are replacing experienced teachers — so districts can save money by paying lower salary rates for beginning teachers. James Cersonsky reports in the article "Teach For America's Civil War" in the July 2013 issue of *The American Prospect*: "Chicago, for example, is closing 48 schools and laying off 850 teachers and staff while welcoming 350 corps members. After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans cut 7,500 school staff [and] converted the majority of its schools to charters. Over the past five years, TFA expanded its Greater New Orleans corps from 85 teachers to 375."



Ben Spielberg

This concerns some California CTA chapters. For example, the San Diego Education Association recently agreed that TFA members could be employed by the district — but only if the district was unable to find qualified teachers to fill positions.

"Every year we're going to review the process to see if it's necessary," says Scott Mullin, an SDEA board member. "We need to make sure the district isn't overlooking other more qualified people, including subs."

THE REAL AGENDA BEHIND TFA?

Both Loo and Spielberg say that during their TFA training, they were not exposed to anti-union, pro-voucher rhetoric. On TFA's website, there are no overt political views posted. Nonetheless, critics say TFA has a pro-corporate, union-busting agenda.

While both of these teachers have been involved in SJTA, many TFA alums are placed in non-union charters and do not become active union members because they consider themselves short-timers in the profession, says Caputo-Pearl. Some alums banded together to denounce TFA and held an event called Organizing Resistance to Teach For America and its Role in Privatization, which took place during the Free Minds, Free People conference in Chicago in July 2013.

Pro-privatization and charter school foundations — including the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation of Walmart — have given millions to TFA. Alums

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RESEARCH IS MIXED ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACH FOR AMERICA'S TEACHERS.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS TFA?

STUDIES SHOW there are better outcomes for TFA teachers in high school — especially in math — and

less successful outcomes when compared with fully credentialed teachers in elementary grades, especially with English learners. A study by the U.S. Education Department's Institute of Education Sciences found TFA alums just as effective — and sometimes more effective — than other high school math teachers.

“Research indicates that if you could get a TFA teacher to commit to more than two years of teaching, they would be excellent,” says Su Jin Gatlin Jez, an assistant professor of public policy and administration, California Faculty Association, CSU Sacramento. “But the problem is that usually during your first two years of teaching, you may be at your worst.”

Jez and Julian Vasquez Heilig of the University of Texas (soon to be the new director of CSU Sacramento's education doctorate program) co-authored the education brief “Teach For America: A Return to the Evidence” published by the National Education Policy Center, which is funded by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. They concluded that TFA is “less effective than other well-studied reforms” and should not be considered a “panacea” or a major factor in improving teacher quality in hard-to-staff schools.

“If it were so good, you'd see wealthy districts clamoring for TFA teachers,” says Jez. “But these districts don't want new teachers with little training in their schools for just two years.”

Policymakers and stakeholders should consider TFA alums for what they are — a slightly better alternative if the hiring pool is comprised primarily of uncertified and emergency-permit teachers, she concludes.

Education expert Linda Darling-Hammond says there are things to admire about TFA, especially its recruitment of students from prestigious universities to become teachers, and the fact that TFA allows people to enter the profession without taking out loans and going into debt. She notes that unlike other developed countries, there is no effective “national policy” in the U.S. to recruit, train and distribute well-prepared teachers.

“Creating systems that address these needs, as the federal government has done in medicine, is the key to our children's future,” she says in an *Education Week* article. “We should be building on what works for TFA and marrying it to what works for dozens of strong preparation programs to produce the highly qualified, effective teachers we need for the 21st century.”

who were guest speakers at TFA's 20th anniversary included Rhee, Harlem Children's Zone CEO Geoffrey Canada (a charter booster featured prominently in the movie *Waiting for Superman*), and administrators from non-union KIPP charter schools.

Raising the most eyebrows on the political spectrum is TFA's spinoff nonprofit, Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE), which TFA claims is nonpartisan. LEE has a reported \$3.9 million annual budget and a goal of helping TFA alums get elected to public office, including school boards, judgeships, state legislatures and city councils — as well as placement in school leadership positions. By 2015, it hopes to have 250 members in elected office, 300 in policy or advocacy leadership roles, and 1,000 in “active” pipelines for public leadership.

“LEE puts campaign muscle behind members who decide to seek elected office,” reports *Education Week*.

Among those who have benefited from such “muscle” are Bill Ferguson, a Maryland state senator who sponsored “parent trigger” legislation allowing parents to turn schools over to for-profit charter operations, and Michael Johnston of Mississippi, who wrote a victorious bill that weakened teacher tenure and increased the role of student test scores in teacher evaluations to 50 percent.

Spielberg, however, asserts LEE demonstrated its nonpartisanship by supporting his work as an SJTA board member and even asked him to host an event for corps members and alums called “Unions Matter.”

However, TFA's goal isn't just producing long-term, highly-skilled teachers; it's also to produce policymakers and leaders who can use their inner-city teaching experience as a stepping stone to political office, with candidates presenting themselves as “education experts” when they are not, says Caputo-Pearl.

“TFA people in leadership positions are predisposed to quick-fix measures because they haven't spent enough time in schools to understand that real school improvement plans take five or more years. Basically, LEE promotes people who think things would be fine if we only had more charter schools or if all teachers were evaluated on their test scores.”

Spielberg also has concerns about TFA's political bent.

“The organization produces a large number of influential alumni who support the expansion of charter schools, changes to teacher employment law, and making student standardized test scores increasingly more important in teacher and school evaluations. And there is very little evidence these reforms help poor students.”

The big question: Is the organization's goal to strengthen troubled schools? Or is it to feed a perception that public education is in ruins, and only “reformers” can save the children?

Spielberg believes the answer lies somewhere in the middle of the two extremes.

“In the end, most people within Teach For America — and most other people working in education — have very similar goals. To use the words of the San Jose Teachers Association, most of us want to ‘educate, inspire and change lives’ through public education. The biggest shame about the TFA debate is that people who care about kids are arguing with each other about teacher and school quality instead of working together to address the root causes of inequity in society.” ■



Su Jin Gatlin Jez