

Lessons from the TFA Evaluation

One of the nation's leading research firms recently released a study showing that elementary school students taught by Teach for America participants achieved higher math scores than students taught by other teachers in these same schools. The report attracted considerable media attention because TFA brings to public school teaching academically talented graduates from highly competitive colleges and universities, many of whom would not have gone through lengthy conventional teacher certification programs. The program is controversial because TFA participants' formal training is restricted to an intensive 5-week summer program, because the majority of TFA participants leave their assigned classrooms after fulfilling their two-year commitment, and because TFA participants teach in schools serving some of the nation's neediest children. Critics argue that five weeks is not enough training to teach adequately and that it takes several years on the job to become highly effective.

A close reading of the evaluation reveals several patterns that are critical to understanding what programs like TFA can and cannot accomplish. The first is that a large percentage of the teachers in the schools to which TFA participants are assigned are remarkably ill prepared to educate children and especially children needing the nation's best teachers. Less than four percent had graduated from a college or university classified as at least very competitive – compared to 22 percent of the national teaching force and 70 percent of TFA participants. Almost 30 percent of the non-TFA teachers in these schools had no student teaching experience. The weakness

in the preparation of these teachers helps to explain why the average reading score of the students in these schools was in the 13th percentile of the national distribution. It was to these teachers that the TFA participants were compared.

The poor preparation of the teachers in the schools serving high concentrations of poor children is no surprise to anyone who follows American public education. Teaching in these schools is extremely difficult work. Almost no school districts provide extra pay or other inducements to attract talented teachers to these schools. As a result all too often these schools are left with the teachers other schools don't want. And the teachers who do have options exercise seniority rights to leave these schools as soon as they can, leaving them to search yet again for new teachers.

TFA participants bring academic skills and high energy levels to these schools. However, for two reasons they cannot be major contributors to providing a high quality education to disadvantaged children. First, as newcomers they have a great deal to learn. They become more effective as they gain experience, but their second year is typically their last in that school. Second, the teaching philosophies of TFA participants tend to be quite different from those of the other teachers in these schools. For example, TFA teachers are much less likely to believe that a child needs to be able to verbalize the rules of phonics, to believe that being able to label words according to grammatical functions is important, or that it is important for students to memorize facts, rules, and steps for solving math problems. The problem with the short stays and the differing philosophies is that they reduce the likelihood that the TFA participants and the other teachers will successfully work together to create a coherent instructional program, the essential component of a successful school.

Providing disadvantaged children with the high quality education they will need to prosper in a rapidly changing economy requires a stable staff of well educated, experienced teachers who work together over an extended period of time. This is what it takes to implement a coherent school-wide instructional program that provides students with the same message grade by grade year after year about what is important to learn and why. Initiatives like TFA do not diminish this necessity.

TFA has shown that it is possible to attract extremely talented, well educated college graduates to try teaching. This is an important accomplishment. However, placing these talented young people in dysfunctional schools staffed primarily by poorly prepared colleagues is not the way to convince them to devote many years to teaching. Nor is it an effective way of providing the nation's neediest children with a high quality education. The recently completed evaluation shows that TFA teachers leave children no worse off in reading than they otherwise would have been and a little better off in math. The constitutions of almost every state guarantee more than that. The young people who enter TFA deserve more than that.