

The Necessity of a Revolution:  
The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Battle for Equality in the Classroom:  
An Examination of the History, Critiques and Effectiveness of Teach For America

Wyatt D. Oroke

California Polytechnic State University,  
San Luis Obispo

Dr. George Cotkin

June 10, 2013

“Try not to have a good time...this is supposed to be educational.”  
-Charles M. Schulz

I had my iPad sitting patiently on my desk as I awaited my professor's conclusion of the days lecture. I knew the email had already been sent out, and was just waiting in my inbox for me to open it. I struggled to keep myself focused on the lecture as the professor led us in a discussion on the consequences of colonization along the eastern coast of Africa. When the words: "well, that is all for today" finally left his lips I quickly selected the Internet icon on my iPad and pulled up my Gmail account. I was only looking for one word; one word which might forever alter my life's journey. As my inbox slowly uploaded onto the screen, it seemed as if all other words on the page grew a haze over them and I was left with just one word clearly standing out in front of me: "Congratulations!"

I had been accepted into the Baltimore Corps for Teach For America, within the first email I received I was praised for my "outstanding accomplishments, leadership, and commitment to expanding educational opportunity for children across the country." Within this sentence rests the underlying purpose of TFA: to improve the educational opportunity for children, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status. The mission is one the whole country can support: ensuring all children have access to an excellent education;<sup>1</sup> however, the implementation of this mission has found itself situated within a controversial debate.

TFA believes it can improve the education of a student by putting recent college graduates, with impressive academic records, into the classroom (following five weeks of summer training) and have them significantly improve the academic capabilities of their students. TFA thus circumvents regular credentialing paths, and tries to alter the academic culture of a school through a quick influx of whom they believe are capable young men and

---

<sup>1</sup> While this mission is posted on anything which Teach For America comes in contact its general premise is explored in greater detail within the following work: Wendy Kopp, *One Day, All Children...* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001).

women into the classroom. But, does it work? The TFA website states how independent studies conducted in Louisiana, Tennessee and North Carolina have all shown that TFA is the most effective source of new teachers in low-income communities.<sup>2</sup> The principals employing TFA corps members have also come in strong support of the program; a survey commissioned by TFA stated how 90% of principals have reported high levels of satisfaction with the corps members.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the program has also been labeled as highly problematic by some who believe TFA fails in several accounts including: putting too little emphasis on teaching as a permanent career choice, destroying teacher unions, undermining schools of education, being too elitist, not promoting cultural diversity in its corps members, and failing to address larger socioeconomic issues which impact learning outcomes, such as poverty.<sup>4</sup>

While the ideals of the TFA mission are commendable and certainly worthy of widespread support, and the program has produced some very successful educators, the collective program falls short in creating a culture which promotes long-term<sup>5</sup> educational improvement. While the academic “achievement gap”<sup>6</sup> between low-income and middle to high-income students is a critical issue in need of shrinking, the steps TFA has taken to shrink the gap

---

<sup>2</sup> “Research,” Teach For America, 2012, <http://www.teachforamerica.org/our-organization/research> (accessed March 1, 2012). These studies have not come without a bit of controversy. Questions have been raised about how the students are being tested and who TFA corps members should be compared (whether it is veteran teachers, new teachers who went through the traditional credentialing path, long-term substitute teachers, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that the website did not provide any hyperlink for the results of this survey, and it was reported in *Lessons to Learn* by Molly Ness that 97% of principals rate corps members as advantageous for the school and its students (p.8). The difference may be a result of Ness’s statistic being out of date since her book was published in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Naison, “Why Teach For America can’t recruit in my classroom,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2013; Andrew Hartman, “Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Do-Gooders,” *Jacobin*, Winter 2012) <http://jacobinmag.com/2011/12/teach-for-america/> (accessed January 10, 2013). Several of these critiques also represent personal issues I have identified in the program, and will be explored later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Granted the program has only been around for just over twenty years and so it is difficult to completely assess the long-term improvements being made, the idea presented here is that it has not created a long lasting core of educators who can have a consistent impact on the communities they work in.

<sup>6</sup> The term “achievement gap” is slowly being phased out of TFA language, and in the 2013 pre-institute work given to all incoming corps members the term was used minimally in the reading materials. The reason for this shift in language will be explored in greater detail within the confines of the actual paper.

have failed to create long lasting and meaningful change.<sup>7</sup> The transformative influence some corps members have had within classrooms is not a collective experience of TFA. In order for TFA to truly create the change it wishes to see in the educational realm it will have to restructure its program in order to create an army of committed teachers and experienced educators, who maintain a presence in the education system for an extended period of time. A key element of the restructuring experience will be to alter the two-year commitment system, and put an added emphasis on seeing teaching as a viable career option within TFA's rhetoric.

When you hear the words "low-performing school," what is the image that comes to mind? Are the grounds well kept or are there broken window and dying plants? Do the windows have bars on them giving the school the appearance of a prison, or can light easily makes its way through? What do the classrooms look like? Do they feature the latest in classroom technology, or slightly broken chalkboards screwed into the front wall? Do the desks appear to be slightly used, or instead look as if they have spent the last twenty years being kicked around on the side of the road? Are there even enough desks to seat all the students in the room, or do students find themselves sitting on counters or standing at the back of the classroom? And what about the students who actually walk the halls, and fill the desks, what do they look like? Are they wearing the latest fashion items from J-Crew and Gap, or does their wardrobe consist of old, worn, clothing? What about the color of the students skin? Are the majority white-Americans or students of color? And what about the general location of the school, is it in a stereotypical suburban community or in the heart of an urban center? It is okay if the school you are picturing is filled with chipped paint and broken desks. It is okay if you are picturing textbooks which

---

<sup>7</sup> Now, I understand I am asking TFA to almost single handedly take on what many scholars identify as the largest or at least most important civil rights issue of our time, but I believe given the size of TFA at this point we should at least see some identifiable changes occurring. Furthermore, if TFA is arguing it is combating the opportunity gap, then I do not believe these expectations of TFA are out of line or too much to ask.

have torn covers. It is okay if you are picturing a classroom filled with low-income students of color who are growing up in the inner city. It is okay because as much as we do not want this to be the truth, the reality of America is that the classroom you are picturing is the primary home of academically low-performing students. But, how did it get that way?

In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled in a unanimous decision that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional.<sup>8</sup> And while the ruling held real symbolic significance, the end all result was not revolutionary change. Schools continue to be racially separated because the communities these schools exist within are traditionally dominated by a single ethnic group. A report from 2012, nearly sixty years after the case ruling, found that 80% of Latinos and 74% of black students attend schools where students of color make up over 50% of the student population.<sup>9</sup> While this statistic may not be highly alarming, a more prominent of statistic is how 43% of Latinos and 38% of blacks attend schools where over 90% of students are students of color. These intensely segregated schools often have a majority of the students in the low-income bracket and had also suffered from low resource allocation. We thus are existing in a system in which students of color are attending disproportionately low-resourced schools. This has all led to what has been popularly identified as the “achievement gap” between white-Americans and students of color. The majority of attention with regards to the achievement gap has been around the “black-white achievement gap.”

Several scholars and Teach For America founder Wendy Kopp identify this “achievement gap” as the greatest civil rights issue of our time.<sup>10</sup> What it looks like in terms of a

---

<sup>8</sup> This decision was made in the *Brown v. Board of Education*. The actual hearing was a combination of five separate cases being heard by the Supreme Court: *Belton v. Gebhardt* (Delaware), *Bolly v. Sharpe* (District of Columbia), *Brown v. Board of Education* (Kansas), *Briggs v. Elliot* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board* (Virginia).

<sup>9</sup> “American Schools Still Heavily Segregated By Race, Income: Civil Rights Project Report,” *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/20/american-schools-still-he\\_n\\_1901583.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/20/american-schools-still-he_n_1901583.html) (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> C.M. Rubin, “The Global Search for Education: Teach All,” *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-m-rubin/wendy-kopp-teach-for-america\\_b\\_2268518.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-m-rubin/wendy-kopp-teach-for-america_b_2268518.html) (accessed May 6, 2013).

statistical understanding is that an average African-American twelfth grader who is attending public school is performing at the equivalent level of an average white-American eighth grader who is attending public school.<sup>11</sup> This massive separation in academic achievement has created a society which will be unable to create true changes in the polarization and separation of races within America. Educational reformers and activist from across the political spectrum have emerged in an attempt to try and shrink this gap. The modern educational reform has founded itself upon the idea of “excellence for all.”<sup>12</sup> The driving message is that students have the right to an excellent education, regardless of their socio-economic status or background. While TFA is a key element within this mentality, we will hold off on our TFA discussion for a second and instead look to the primary federal means for closing this gap, No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

NCLB was put in place under President George W. Bush as a strategy for closing the academic achievement gap prevalent in our society. NCLB was based around the premise of accountability.<sup>13</sup> President Bush focused his accountability campaign around basing federal education funding on standardized test results. NCLB demanded that schools were consistently increasing the amount of students who were performing at a proficient level in both math and reading.<sup>14</sup> Schools which failed to deliver would initially have their funding cut, and if the trend continued the school would be taken over by a private enterprise (i.e. it would become a charter school). NCLB also demanded that all schools within America feature 100% highly qualified teachers.<sup>15</sup> Part of the premise behind this act seems to stem from the idea that up until this point

---

<sup>11</sup> Rod Paige and Elaine Witty, *The Black-White Achievement Gap* (New York: American Management Association, 2010), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Schneider, *Excellence For All: How a New Breed of Reformers is Transforming America's Public Schools* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Hickok, *Schoolhouse of Cards* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2010), 120.

<sup>14</sup> Schneider, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Rebell and Jessica Wolff, *NCLB at the Crossroads* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 199. This point is particularly interesting within our examination of TFA, because to this point TFA corps members are considered to be “highly qualified.” In fact on resumes for TFA corps members it reads “High Qualified to Teach

he various schools simply were not trying hard enough to ensure the academic successes of their students. Before an all out critique of NCLB gets underway it is first important to acknowledge one clear positive from the act: President Bush turned the focus of the American education system onto student achievement and forced America to pay attention to academic achievement.<sup>16</sup> With that in mind, many educational reformers would agree that NCLB has failed to close the achievement gap and is based around several faulty premises which limits its affectability. Let's attempt to think logically about the issue for a second: if a school struggles to improve the test scores of the student population, wouldn't it seem more practical to provide that school with more resources in order to raise those scores, rather than take away resources? However, NCLB has entered with the opposite understanding and thus believes schools which are unable to meet federal standards should have their funding cut because to increase it would be like throwing money away. Furthermore, while NCLB has been argued to be a means for closing the achievement gap and helping to eradicate socio-economic disparities with regards to academic performance, what this results in is using the education system as an antipoverty program.<sup>17</sup> Rather than put in place a "social safety net" which attempts to provide relief for poverty and thus take away an unnecessary burden on parents and children alike, the federal government has decided the way to deal with poverty is to put the responsibility of creating an equal society into the hands of the education system.<sup>18</sup> Already in existence in America is a history of resource inequalities with regards to public school funding, NCLB does nothing to

---

(fill in subject here). Part of the critique against TFA is that the corps members are not properly trained nor qualified enough to be in the classroom. These critics are thus arguing that those who are "highly qualified" must have gone through a formal school of education and been credentialed.

<sup>16</sup> Hickok, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Rebell and Wollf, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

address this issue, and in many ways NCLB actually increases the discrepancy.<sup>19</sup> Thus if we believed NCLB was going to be our answer to solving the academic “achievement gap” we seem to have been rather far from the truth.

Before we go any further with this exploration it will behoove us to quickly explore a recent change TFA has decided to make with regards to their terminology. The phrase, “achievement gap” which is still widely used by educational reformers across the country, as well as policymakers, is being phased out of TFA vocabulary. The term which appears to be emerging in place of “achievement gap” is “opportunity gap.” This terminological change has occurred for a host of reasons. Some scholars believe the term “achievement” seems to create the notion that there is a causation between racial identity and academic achievement, rather than a correlation. Furthermore, the term “achievement” seems to focus too much on simply academic outcomes and has thus oversimplified the experience of growing up in a low-income community. Lastly, the term seems to imply that African-American success is based off of their ability to be like their white counterpart, thus the white-American student is turned into the pinnacle of academic excellence. I am not trying to suggest here that separate standards should exist between white-American students and African-American students, nor should separate standards exist between low-income students and high-income students; however, what I am attempting to suggest is that our understanding of top students must be based on academic achievement, not racial identity. We currently exist in a system which severely stereotypes African-American students and urges them to “be more like [their] white counterparts” rather than allows them to find their own academic identity for success. One thing which is thus worth mentioning is how

---

<sup>19</sup> Scott F. Abernathy, *No Child Left Behind and the Public Schools* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 19.

academic achievement disparities within any race<sup>20</sup> are greater than the disparities between racial groups.<sup>21</sup> Thus it raises the question of whether cross-racial comparisons are even an appropriate way of exploring the issue of educational success.

So whether or not we decide to use the term “achievement gap” or “opportunity gap,” it was this disparity in the education system which prompted Wendy Kopp in 1989 to write a senior thesis which proposed an organization she believed could eradicate the gap in academic achievement between low-income and high-income students.<sup>22</sup> The program would become known as Teach For America, and the idea behind it is certainly an interesting one: top-graduates from the elite universities in America will set aside two years of their life to teach at a low-income, low-performing school somewhere in America. The overall mission, was, and still is a two-fold approach: first these new teachers will bring energy into the classroom and through hard work will become solid teachers who put their students on a path to academic success; and secondly, after the two-year commitment the TFA alumni will maintain a commitment to educational equality in response to their experience in the classroom.<sup>23</sup> Kopp hopes many of these alumni will move on to high-ranking positions where they can begin to make systematic changes to the system in order to eradicate much of the inequality which is currently in existence.

---

<sup>20</sup> Please keep in mind that I find the use of this term highly problematic, as I view “race” as a social construct which humans have created in an attempt to simplify the world around them. However, it has a historical experience of being used to push forward racist ideology. The reason the term is put in use here is because the majority of statistical information and data collected uses the term “race.” Therefore, I apologize for my use of the term, but our issue exists in the English language currently having a limited range of options which could be used in place of the term.

<sup>21</sup> Rebell and Wolff, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Hartman, “Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Do-Gooders,” *Jacobin* (Winter 2012) <http://jacobinmag.com/2011/12/teach-for-america/> (accessed January 10, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Donna Foote, *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) 31.

One quick side-note worth mentioning is that TFA was not an entirely new concept when Kopp developed and proposed it. In fact, in 1965, under the Higher Education Act, the National Teacher Corps (NTC) was established.<sup>24</sup> The NTC was created because the federal government believed the students of inner-city public schools were not getting a fair and equal education. The NTC featured top ranking recent college graduates who were sent to work as teachers in inner cities and slums.<sup>25</sup> Another one of the underlying ideas behind the NTC was that the traditional route to teaching through college-level credentialing programs was not adequately preparing teachers to meet the needs of the inner-city student population, and so alternative means to the classroom had to be discovered.<sup>26</sup> While the NTC would eventually be phased out, its legacy would not. NTC was one of the first programs to make a strong push for alternative certification routes to teaching. By laying this groundwork, NTC created a platform for TFA to build off of. One of the primary differences between the two organizations is that NTC was fully funded by the government, while TFA only received some governmental funding and instead relies mainly on private donations.<sup>27</sup> This slight distance from the government seems to have made TFA a more viable option for a teacher certification program, than if it were directly linked to the government. In general, we need to keep in mind that TFA is not a completely new concept or idea, but instead its mission has its own historical past.

In order to make her dream a reality Kopp determined she would need to raise \$2.5 million dollars, and so she set about to do it.<sup>28</sup> Kopp contacted some of the top CEOs in America and pleaded with them to put money towards what she believed was an opportunity to be a part

---

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Anne Exkert, "The National Teacher Corps," *Urban Education* (2011) [http://www.academia.edu/1399599/The\\_National\\_Teacher\\_Corps](http://www.academia.edu/1399599/The_National_Teacher_Corps) (accessed May 6, 2013), 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

of the monumental educational reform of the American school system.<sup>29</sup> After much pandering and many phone calls and in-person visits, Kopp was able to raise the money she needed. Many companies, including the likes of Carbide and Morgan Stanley, saw TFA as an opportunity to increase the academic achievement of the workforce of America, and thus create a more competent workforce.<sup>30</sup> Following this Kopp was able to assemble an initial corps of five-hundred members from one-hundred universities across America.<sup>31</sup> This group of corps-members assembled for a summer training institute in Los Angeles, CA. This first institute has been deemed “disastrous” by nearly everyone involved with it, due to the extreme level of disorganization and disunity.<sup>32</sup> These early missteps did not disappear quickly. In 1994, Linda Darling-Hammond, a well respected educational reformer critiqued the TFA program, and went as far as to say TFA devalued teaching as a profession.<sup>33</sup> This critique was primarily drawn from the reality that TFA corps members did not need to have a teaching credential in order to teach. Instead they were provided a bypass to this system based on their attendance at the TFA summer institute, and their status as a top academic performer in the nation. This did not sit well with many people involved in education and there were moments when it seemed TFA would have to shutdown. On several occasions Kopp has commented on the intense amount of frustration and despair she felt during the initial years of the program. It almost seems as if those initially involved in establishing the program were severely underprepared to take on the type of educational reform they envisioned accomplishing. This seemed to set the program on a problematic course of uncertainty. Fortunately for the many people who had put a large amount of support behind the program, and for those who have continued to benefit from the program’s

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Schneider, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Foote, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

existence, college graduates maintained a strong interest in joining the program and TFA was able to weather this storm. But not before things seemed to hit rock bottom.

In 1995 Wendy Kopp broke down.<sup>34</sup> Kopp was overcome by some of the initial troubles of the organization and was momentarily concerned that TFA would end before it every truly got going. However, Kopp took in all the criticism the program was receiving and decided to restructure it. Kopp reevaluated the budget, the recruitment process, summer institute's structure, and began to make changes which she believed would better the organization in the long run. Sure enough TFA emerged strong and resilient after its momentary scare and began to grow in size and prestige.

The year 2000 marked another key turning point in the organization's history as TFA put in place its first five-year plan.<sup>35</sup> TFA began to receive more national notoriety and it reached such an impressive level that Wendy Kopp was invited by President Clinton to the White House for an opportunity to talk about the program and where she envisioned it going in the future.<sup>36</sup> More importantly the founders of Gap, Don and Doris Fisher, decided to put significant monetary support behind TFA to the sum of a \$8.3 million grant over the course of three years.<sup>37</sup> Donna Foote describes the TFA which emerged as "an organization with the soul of a nonprofit and the brains of a Fortune 500."<sup>38</sup> This organizational image has remained in existence over the past decade. In 2001 Melissa Golden was named the head of TFA marketing and recruitment and decided to completely transform the way TFA was being branded. Golden centralized the

---

<sup>34</sup> Foote, 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 190. I would also like to make a historical side note here. The first time I read about TFA's "five-year plan" I was so overcome with thoughts regarding Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union that I literally laughed out loud. Kopp is clearly not making a push towards creating the ideal communist society, and thus it is upsetting that Stalin could have ruined such a generic term as "five-year plan" so easily.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

recruitment process and created greater uniformity across regions.<sup>39</sup> She produced a recruitment “script” which recruiters across the nation would use at any college or university they entered. She also wanted to do away with the “grass rootsy, do-gooder” identity of TFA and instead transform it into a viable professional option.<sup>40</sup> One question which this alteration has conversely raised is whether or not the “professional” image is the appropriate way of viewing TFA. While it certainly is an attempt to break down the “white savior” image and also sets up teaching as an actual “professional” field, it seems there is other TFA rhetoric which contradicts Golden’s vision. It seems likely that TFA will continue to battle this search for identity debate as it propels itself forward. Yet, there were more changes made to TFA in the year 2000 than those just focusing on branding and image.

During this transformation process a critical change occurred when the notion of “significant gains” was introduced into TFA rhetoric. What this means from a statistical standpoint is: the elementary school class average must jump at least one and half grade levels in math and literacy; at the secondary level, class average must be at least an 80% mastery of all subject matter.<sup>41</sup> TFA established these goals as a way for evaluating whether or not their corps members were truly being successful within the classroom. TFA understood how the role of a corps member was not to maintain the status quo in terms of student academic gains, and would not even settle for simply one year of grade improvement, but instead expected their corps members to have a transformative impact within the classroom. If corps members were able to consistently meet these significant gains standards, then it would seem clear that TFA was a useful and necessary feature of low-performing schools. TFA would be able to not only alter the student achievement within a school, but also alter the academic environment of a school by

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 197.

forcing their non-TFA counterparts to also hold themselves and their students to high expectations. However, this also has the consequence of separating expectations between traditional teachers and corps members. Rather than be unified through the same goal and intended outcomes, there instead exists a distancing of the two groups, the creation of an us-and-them mentality. This is clearly a problematic feature of the program which must be addressed by creating a unifying link between state/national standards and TFA expectations. Now a critical question within all of this is, how many corps members are actually reaching these expectations? TFA published a graph in their 2010 annual report which stated how in 2010 41% of first-year corps members and 53% of second-year corps members accomplished significant gains.<sup>42</sup> Gary Rubinstein delivered a strong critique of this statistical data on the website, Teach For Us.<sup>43</sup> Rubinstein argues how the numbers are “meaningless” because there is no clear measuring system to gage “significant gains” within the student population. He believes it is highly unlikely that such a significant portion of the corps members accomplished such high measures and thus calls the numbers “misleading.”<sup>44</sup> Rubinstein provides us with an important: how can we truly measure “significant gains” within a student population? This issue will be explored in greater detail later. Now, the implementation of “significant gains” coincided with the introduction of “Teaching as Leadership” as the primary teaching strategy taught by TFA to corps members during summer institution.<sup>45</sup> TFA received another boost in confidence with a 2004 study by Mathematic Policy Research identified employing a TFA recruit as a “risk-free hire.” The study

---

<sup>42</sup> “2010 Annual Report, Teach For America: Priorities and Results,” *Teach For America* (2010): 9, accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.teachforamerica.org/assets/documents/2010-annual-report.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> “Teach For Us” is a website established to connect Teach For America corps members with both each other and alumni. It allows for open blogging amongst corps members and is recognized by Teach For America as an effective platform for connection.

<sup>44</sup> Gary Rubinstein, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas City anymore – because we were fired,” *Teach For Us: Gary Rubinstein’s Blog*, May 25, 2012, accessed June 7, 2013, <http://garyrubinstein.teachforus.org/2012/05/25/toto-were-not-in-kansas-city-anymore-because-we-were-fired/>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.; Steven Farr, *Teaching as Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

found that TFA corps members were either performing at an equal level to incoming teachers (who took the traditional credentialing route) or were exceeding those incoming teachers.<sup>46</sup> From 2009 to 2012 studies were conducted in Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee, which all identified TFA corps members as being as effective or more effective than other teachers at the same school.<sup>47</sup> Behind the support of this statistical data and a well founded image of success, TFA seems to be on path for continuous expansion.

TFA's success in recruiting and expanding the organization only seems to be growing. In 2012 over 48,000 students applied to TFA, and the acceptance rate was around 11%.<sup>48</sup> TFA has made a commitment to try and reach 850,000 students by the 2014-2015 school year, this will require the continued expansion of the corps size for each year. TFA's plan currently calls for an incoming corps size of 6,700 in 2013-2014 and 7,500 in 2014-2015.<sup>49</sup> With clear support coming from Capital Hill it seems likely TFA will garner the support (monetary and political) it needs to make this goal a reality. TFA is currently serving in 46 communities and has put 33,000 corps members into the classroom, serving over three million students nationwide.<sup>50</sup> One of the recent developments is the creation of Teach For All, a global connecting force linking TFA style programs around the world and creating the program in particular countries. Currently there are twenty-six countries who have developed a TFA-like system and are working within the confines

---

<sup>46</sup> Foote, 200.

<sup>47</sup> While these studies are based on independent research, it should still be kept in mind that a bias or slant may be in existence within the studies, especially with regards to who they are comparing the corps members to and how they are measuring success and advancements being made.

<sup>48</sup> Lauren Blair Aronson, "Advice to TFA from a former insider," *American Enterprise Institute* (April 23, 2013) <http://www.aei.org/article/education/k-12/advice-to-tfa-from-a-former-insider/> (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Teach For America, "Investing In Innovation (i3) Fund," *The U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement* (May 11, 2010): 7, accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/2010/narratives/u396a100015.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> "Where We Work," *Teach For America* <http://www.teachforamerica.org/where-we-work> (accessed January 20, 2013)

of Teach For All.<sup>51</sup> With regards to Teach For All, in March of 2013 TFA experienced one of its first major leadership changes when Wendy Kopp stepped down as CEO of Teach For America and transferred into the role of CEO of Teach For All.<sup>52</sup> In Kopp's place are Matt Kramer and Elisa Villanueva, taking over as co-CEOs, both have been with TFA for upwards of eight years.<sup>53</sup> Despite TFA's clear commitment to constantly adapting and changing in order to improve, the vocal critiques have clearly stated how TFA has a long way to go if it hopes to be a viable option for educational reform.

Since the foundation of TFA the major premise behind the recruitment of corps members has focused on getting the tops students from the top universities in America. In fact in 2010 12% of all Ivy League graduates applied to join TFA.<sup>54</sup> TFA has both tried to expand its corps size and largely increase the level of applicants for the program. The reasoning behind this is to create a sense of selectivity with TFA. By creating a level of selectivity and prestige it becomes a much more attractive graduate option for many students who are looking to make a name for themselves as they enter the professional world. TFA's selection process has created many strong critiques as the majority of their corps members seem to be high-income individuals who identify as white-Americans. In TFA's 2011 annual report it was stated how 34% of the corps identifies as people of color.<sup>55</sup> What many label as a lack of diversity in the corps has led to constant criticism from outside sources and even amongst corps members and alumni. Many

---

<sup>51</sup> "Teaching Opportunitites," *Teach For All* [http://www.teachforall.org/join\\_teaching.html](http://www.teachforall.org/join_teaching.html) (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> "Teach For America Founder Kopp Departing as CEO," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (February 14, 2013) <http://philanthropy.com/blogs/philanthropytoday/teach-for-america-founder-kopp-departing-as-ceo/62833> (accessed February 15, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Carrie James, "Teach For America Fields Largest Teacher Corps in its 20-Year History," *Teach For America*, May 24, 2010, accessed June 7, 2013, [http://www.teachforamerica.org/newsroom/documents/20100524\\_Teach.For.America.Fields.Largest.Teacher.Corps.In.Its.20.Year.History.htm](http://www.teachforamerica.org/newsroom/documents/20100524_Teach.For.America.Fields.Largest.Teacher.Corps.In.Its.20.Year.History.htm).

<sup>55</sup> "2011 Annual Report," *Teach For America* (2011): 10, accessed June 7, 2013, [https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/Annual.Report.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/Annual.Report.FINAL_.pdf).

educational reformers argue that a teacher who can more easily empathize with the experience of his/her students will be more successful in the long term. Many African American and Latino students are simply seeking out a role model they can relate to, and while a white-American corps member may have the mental knowledge required to teach, if the students are reluctant to accept him/her it will continue to create a troubling classroom environment, and not have the lasting long-term impact the program is seeking. What is currently being created is the re-institution of the “white man’s burden” where you have a number of predominately young, educated white-Americans believing they have to be the saviors of these students of color and must save them from the troubling system of education. This mentality creates an automatic disconnect between the corps member and the students they are teaching which could lead to a hard time making significant academic improvements with the students.

TFA’s response to this on going critique has been twofold. TFA has recognized the need for a diverse group of corps members, and thus set the goal in 2010 to try and recruit individuals who share a common ethnic identity with many or the students they will be serving. Much of this decision was based on around the issue of having a role model in the lives of these students who the students could easily and readily relate to. While this move has quieted down the critique of some, others have still held their ground and stated that simply pulling in individuals with a similar racial identity is not enough, what also must be taken into consideration is socioeconomic status, in that the real link to academic achievement is based upon socioeconomic status, which is also correlated to race, but clearly not a causation. The secondary response by TFA is to maintain its stance that the idea behind choosing the “elites” from the college-student population is to ensure the students going into the classroom are those students who appear to be the most qualified to do so directly after graduating. TFA sees choosing these college students as one of

their biggest strengths and the primary reason why so many corps members see academic gains with their students. There is currently no data supporting the notion that a student requires an individual of the same or similar race and socioeconomic status in order to succeed, what they do need is someone who can convey the material well.

Not all outside organizations have been as critical with regards to the diversity in the corps. In fact, the Center of American Progress published a report in 2011 regarding increasing teacher diversity where they actually praise TFA for its ability to attract such a large amount of people of color.<sup>56</sup> The report identifies how TFA currently recruits at around 400 of the nation's most selective universities. Amongst these universities around 5% of the student population are African Americans.<sup>57</sup> However, 12% of the 2011 TFA corps identify as African Americans.<sup>58</sup> Thus demonstrating how TFA has been able to focus its efforts on students of color during its recruitment period. The report also commented on a recent study which found that African-American and Latino corps members on average have longer teaching careers than white-American or Asian-American corps members.<sup>59</sup> Which seems to suggest African-American and Latino corps members not only are getting the support they need from TFA, but are also having positive experiences inside the classroom which is encouraging them to remain on as teachers. Thus it seems the critique of TFA as not promoting cultural diversity a significant enough level is not as well founded as some have argued. Obviously TFA still needs to make significant gains within this area, but it is at least on a trajectory to continue to diversify. However, by still

---

<sup>56</sup> Saba Bireda and Robin Chait, "Increasing Teacher Diversity: Strategies to Improve the Teacher Workforce," *Center for American Progress* (November 2011): 10, accessed June 7, 2013, [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/pdf/chait\\_diversity.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/pdf/chait_diversity.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. The study referenced here was done by Morgaen Lindsay Donaldson, a doctorate student at Harvard University, and was entitled: "Teach For America Teachers' Careers: Whether, When, and Why They Leave Low-Income Schools and the Teaching Profession."

drawing from an elite pool it begs the question of what is the intent of those who join TFA, regardless of ethnic identity?

Critiques have labeled TFA as nothing more than a resume builder used by the already well-off members of American society. And with such notoriety and respect around most of TFA, it creates a system where the rich get richer when pursuing jobs. In my own person experience I have hear consistent comments about how TFA will “look good” on my resume when I go out pursue a “real job.” This rhetoric is immensely troubling for a variety of reasons. First off, it suggests that TFA represents more of an act of charity than an act of professional work. And secondly, it makes clear that I will be leaving whatever school I teach at after the two-year time commitment. Corps members are created into these valiant warriors going to the frontline of the educational battle to fight for equality. Corps members become champions of not just educational reform but also social justice. While this commentary does serve as motivation for new corps members to go out and breakdown the opportunity gap, what does it say about the students in low-income communities? I would argue it belittles them and almost reaches the point of dehumanization. We fail to remember to perceive these students to be American students who have fallen into the unfortunate predicament of growing up in a low-income household, and instead distance ourselves from them. Corps members cannot enter into this profession simply to earn themselves a resume booster, their intention has to be focused on being an effective teacher for students who rightfully deserve a competent and knowledgeable teacher. However, for TFA it seems teaching is no longer a career path, it is an experience to prepare you to transfer into another job. In fact the TFA website repeatedly uses this idea of the two years spent in the classroom as being a part of an “experience” which will get the corps member ready to try and continue the fight for educational equality. While I understand the TFA goal is to

create a group of alumni who will be able to penetrate key leadership positions and thus be in a more prominent position to seek out educational equality. However, my thinking is this if the 33,000 TFA current corps members and alumni remained on as teachers, and continued to make academic gains with their students, wouldn't this function as a fairly effective means for transforming the opportunity gap within our country. Instead you see less than 30% of TFA alumni still in the classroom today.<sup>60</sup> TFA needs to substantially alter its rhetoric so it makes clear that the way to have the most profound impact on creating educational equality is through serving as a teacher. Serving as a teacher is not some act of charity for a community, it is instead an act of doing what is right. And, in order to be an effective teacher proper training most done, questions are abundant about whether or not TFA truly prepares its corps members for the classroom.

Five weeks. That is how long TFA trains its corps members for. Students who more often than not have absolutely zero experience within education are given five weeks of intensive training and are then expected to enter into a classroom and function as a highly effective teacher. The premise sounds rather absurd, and unrealistic, yet TFA believes it is the most effective model it currently has with regards to creating an alternative route into the classroom which is clearly much faster than going through a traditional school of education credentialing program. After these five weeks of training the corps members have spend the equivalent of three full schools days teaching.<sup>61</sup> Granted this five week training experience is repeatedly compared to "boot camp" during which days begin at 5:45am and end at midnight.<sup>62</sup> However, it still begs the questions as to whether or not these corps members are legitimately prepared to take on the challenges they will face inside a low-performing classroom. Linda Darling-

---

<sup>60</sup> Teach For America, "2011 Annual Letter," 17.

<sup>61</sup> Foote, 43.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Hammond has also continued her strong opposition to putting uncertified teachers into classrooms. She has identified how “uncertified TFA teachers had a significant negative effect on student gains relative to certified teachers.”<sup>63</sup> However, the somewhat contradictory reviews with regards to TFA’s effectiveness will make it difficult to judge whether or not these corps members are prepared as teachers. The more important issue surrounding the issue of instant entrance into the classroom after summer institute is surrounding what this implies regarding the effectiveness of schools of education and credentialed teachers. TFA is clearly presenting a model which looks down upon schools of education and seems to suggest that they are unnecessary to the creation of an effective teacher corps. Furthermore, TFA implies that teachers currently within low-performing schools are the cause of the failure and thus should be phased out in favor of TFA corps members. Whether TFA is willing to admit it or not, it is making an attack on traditional routes to teaching, and in many ways breaking down the legitimacy of teaching as a career path. TFA received much criticism during the 2011-2012 school year when 200 experienced teachers in the Kansas City school district were promptly fired in order to make room for a new group of TFA corps members.<sup>64</sup> The superintendent, John Covington, left office shortly after this decision, in order to become Detroit’s superintendent.<sup>65</sup> This move was taken extremely poorly by the teaching community in Kansas City as TFA corps members were transformed into an invading force who were literally taking over their jobs. What TFA needs to find a way of doing is working as a complimentary factor in the school system with regards to traditionally certified teachers. Each group of teachers certainly has something to bring to the

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 200. The original report was produced in 2005 under the title of: “Deso Teacher

<sup>64</sup> Rubinstein, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Original report was produced in: *The Kansas City Star* on January 12, 2011 by Joe Robertson in his article entitled “Feeling under siege, non-returning KC district teachers get defensive.” It should be noted that Covington was only intending on hiring around 150 TFA candidates, and in actuality hired on 141. The teachers who were let go of were non-tenured teachers at a variety of grade levels.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

classroom: TFA candidates are focused on leadership skills and mastery of subject matter, traditionally certified teachers have focused on classroom management techniques and lesson plan creation. Clearly these key features are not inseparable from one another and so TFA needs to find a way to reconstruct its image so it is not an invading force but as a supporting surge. TFA corps members will certainly bring a distinct mindset to the classroom based around the “Teaching as Leadership” model TFA presents to its corps members.

While away at school I was notified by my mother that two books had come in the mail for me from Teach For America: *A Chance to Make History* by Wendy Kopp and *Teaching as Leadership* by Steven Farr. The front cover of the *Teaching as Leadership* proclaimed itself to be “The Highly Effective Teacher’s Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap.”<sup>66</sup> I assumed that within the confines of this 336 page book would be everything I needed as a new teacher who would be attempting to close the “achievement gap.” I was then presented with the six key things I needed to do in order to make this a reality: set big goals, invest students and their families, plan purposefully, execute effectively, continuously increase effectiveness, and work relentlessly. I sat momentarily perplexed: was that really all I needed to know in order to change the achievement outcomes of my students? If it was that easy why didn’t everyone who wanted to become a teacher simply read through this book and put it into action? The book presented a variety of examples of teachers who had used this model to gain success within their classroom. The back cover of the book was filled with praise from a variety of educators for the “Teaching as Leadership” model. What I failed to find buried within the confines of these pages was how to deal with a classroom which does not have enough desks for my students. I was unable to find the chapter which told me about how I could combat the issue of students come to school hungry and thus having a harder time focus. I must have missed the paragraph which properly told me

---

<sup>66</sup> Steven Farr, *Teaching as Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

about how to aid a student who was homeless or whose parents were never home because they were too busy working three jobs just to put a bit of food on the table.<sup>67</sup> With so much focus on academic outcomes and constantly pushing students to their utmost level of academic achievement, TFA has lost sight of one fundamental thing: there is more to working within low-income environment than simply setting big goals and working really hard. TFA can clearly see we have a disparity in our country in terms of academic achievement between low-income and high-income students but it seems to think the reason for this difference is simply the teacher standing in front of the room.

TFA has not set itself up to address the large issue of poverty within America. And while we certainly cannot expect TFA to somehow have the capacity to do such a thing, at the same time, if TFA wants to create the revolutionary change it has set itself up to make then it will need to find a way to get involved with the eradication of poverty. The opportunity gap exists as a result of the socioeconomic gap which is highly prevalent within this country. While certainly not all individuals who grow up in a low-income community will also perform at a low academic achievement level, there is still too strong of a link between these two things to try and separate them in a conversation. The experience of poverty plays a monumental role in a student's ability to perform effectively in an academic setting. There are a host of intersecting factors which may result in lower academic outcomes: hunger or food insecurity, limited access to technology, uncertain transportation, no parental support due to parents working multiple jobs, primary childcare responsibility for younger siblings, potential impact from the drug or gang scene, and the list could go on and on. And yet TFA somehow exists on a premise with the assumption that

---

<sup>67</sup> Now to briefly elaborate on this point and in some ways to suggest that this lack of discussion on the impact of societal factors on learning outcomes is not simply an issue with TFA alone, but instead with the larger discussion of teaching preparation. It seems schools of education may also need to review these societal factors which will significantly impact their experience within the classroom. Teachers are put into a position which allows them to see the complexity of the society they exist in and thus need to be trained as much as possible to take on this complexity.

simply putting a young, new face in front of the classroom will begin to eradicate this gap.<sup>68</sup>

While I obviously see it as an issue that the education sector of this country is more often than not used as a tool for eradicating poverty, and thus bares a heavy burden, I cannot help but wonder how we will go forward unless we can begin to address economic discrepancies.

This issue of economic inequality presents a new problem which TFA has also proven itself unable as of yet to address: early childhood development. The upbringing of a child in a low-income community looks drastically different than that of a child in a high-income community. The most obvious example can be presented by examining roughly how many hours of reading a child has with a parental figure before entering kindergarten. Children living in high socioeconomic status have been read to for around 1,000 hours before entering kindergarten.<sup>69</sup> Children living in low socioeconomic status have been read to for around 25 hours before entering kindergarten.<sup>70</sup> Thus low-income students are entering the classroom at an academic disadvantage to their peers. Furthermore, TFA looks at how the majority of the students they teach are performing well below grade level in their particular subject area. Thus, what we see occurring is TFA constantly having to play catch-up. This puts a high amount of pressure on the corps members to try and bring the students up to a level which is equal to grade level expectations and thus put the students on a trajectory towards academic success and eventual graduation. Questions also remain about whether or not students who have made substantial gains within under a TFA corps member can maintain those gains when they switch back to a non-corps member as a teacher. Yet, a further complication is whether or not TFA's data

---

<sup>68</sup> Where TFA does allow its corps members to explore the variety of issues which will impact students of color within their classrooms is with the pre-institute readings which all corps members are required to do before arriving at induction. Topics covered within this reading alter on a yearly basis, and in fact the most recent edition removed classroom management from its required reading. The focus instead has been on racism within America and how it impacts certain individuals, families, and communities.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Neuman, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Program That Break the Cycle of Poverty* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

regarding measuring teacher effectiveness and student achievement is even an appropriate means for measuring these outcomes.

TFA relies heavily on standardized testing in order to measure teacher and student performance. Simply by pursuing through a variety of TFA regional websites they will make clear the academic gains their students have made with regards to “standardized tests.” Andrew Hartman pointed out within his critique of TFA how TFA supports the idea that “standardized tests are the best means by which to quantify accountability.”<sup>71</sup> Monumental questions remain as to whether or not this even constitutes the most effective way of measuring academic achievement. Greg Anrig points out how pressure to perform well on these standardized tests has led to a host of test-cheating scandals in areas such as Atlanta and Washington D.C.<sup>72</sup> While there are a host of problematic elements regarding standardized testing I will try to unpack a few to expand upon the point. First, judging individuals within a “percentile” system should never be used, especially by TFA. For example, by stating a group of students moved from the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile within the states fails to acknowledge that another group of students still exists within the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile. Thus, advancements are not necessarily collective advancements and a gap will continue to exist, even if the caliber of the collective improves. However, most focus is now on “proficiency” levels and getting students up to either a proficient or very proficient level. Yet the question remains as to what success on these standardized tests truly says about the academic success of a student. There are a host of external factors which impact a student’s performance on a standardized test including: hunger, feeling unsafe, emotional distress, lack of sleep, etc. And these influences disproportionately impact low-income

---

<sup>71</sup> Hartman, “Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Do-Gooders.”

<sup>72</sup> Greg Anrig, “How to Turn an Urban School District Around-Without Cheating,” *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2013, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/how-to-turn-an-urban-school-district-around-without-cheating/275681/>.

students. Therefore, it becomes difficult for us to evaluate whether a student's performance is more a result of their actual comprehension of the material or the collective force of conflict occurring in their life. To illustrate my final point I will present you with two student profiles: Student A and Student B. Student A scored in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile on his<sup>73</sup> most recent standardized test, and was labeled as very proficient. Student A comes from a high-income family. Both of his parents have stable jobs which they got by having college degrees and are able to get off of work around 5pm every day. Student A drives home from school every day in his car which was purchased for him by his parents. He also has complete access to an iPhone, iPad and laptop, all of which were gifts from family members for various celebrations. When he returns home from school he makes himself a snack of his choosing, watches television on the families large flat screen and then does a bit of homework before eating dinner. His multi-course dinner was prepared by his parents. He finishes up all his homework after getting a bit of help on a math problem from his mother and then goes to bed. Student B scored in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on his most recent standardized test. Student B comes from a low-income family. His single mother is currently on welfare and food stamps. He lives in an apartment complex which is slightly subsidized by the government. His lunch at school is his only guaranteed meal of the day. He takes public transportation back to his complex. Before entering his own apartment he first goes next door to pick up his little sister who was being watched by a neighbor for the majority of the day. He enters an empty apartment. Chances are he will not see his mother because she is working two jobs, one of which she does not get off until around 11pm. He attempts to make dinner with the small amount of food remaining in the refrigerator, yet he will give most of the

---

<sup>73</sup> The use of the male pronoun for both Student A and Student B is intentional. It is a commentary on our current society's stereotypical understanding that highly successful students are males and girls cannot exist within a system of poverty. We have gotten into a habit of believing only men can exist in poverty because to suggest a girl does as well would look to poorly on our country's ability to provide for its citizens.

food to his little sister to ensure she does not cry tonight as a result of an empty stomach. He needs a computer in order to complete his homework but was unable to make it over to the public library because he had to watch his sister and so his homework will go undone tonight. He is expecting to get scolded by his teacher when he gets to class tomorrow. He puts his sister to bed, triple checks that the apartment door is locked and then lies down on the couch hoping to not be woken up by the sirens and yelling coming from the streets below. What has these two students' performance on a standardized test really taught us? Which one of these students is truly more prepared to take on the challenges of the "real world?" Which one of these students deserves to go on to college and pursue a high paying job? If you struggled to answer any of these questions, you are not alone. Sadly there exist very few alternatives to measuring student academic achievement and so we are forced to exist within this rather limiting and hierarchical confines. However, there have been schools in urban areas which have been highly effective, and so we should not get into the mindset that all hope is lost.

There have been a few methods which have proven to be fairly effective in creating long lasting and substantial change.<sup>74</sup> One of the keys has been creating a system of stability, especially with regards to the teachers. By creating a school of veteran teachers who have proven success in the classroom and entire environment of the school can be transformed. TFA's two-year commitment creates complications in trying to achieve this level of stability and I believe is one of the biggest issues TFA faces in achieving long lasting systematic change and shrinking the opportunity gap. Educational reformer Geoffrey Canada has repeatedly discussed how the first year a teacher is in the classroom they are going to face a host of complications and will

---

<sup>74</sup> Anrig, How to Turn an Urban School District..."; Frederick M. Hess, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).; Kathryn Neckerman, *Schools Betrayed: Roots of Failure in Inner-City Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).; Beatriz Clewell and Patricia Campbell, *Good Schools in Poor Neighborhoods: Defying Demographics, Achieving Success* (Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2007).

most likely struggle. In fact it seems more teachers do not reach a level of effectiveness until around two to five years inside the classroom. However, by the end of corps members' third year of teaching, 88% had left the profession.<sup>75</sup> And so what we are seeing is rapid teaching turnover every year within these low performing schools. This only furthers the notion of corps members only interested in the "experience" and viewing teaching as an act of charity. TFA is bringing teachers into low-performing who have the potential to be highly effective, yet they have proven unable to actually keep the teachers there. And so while TFA has certainly opened up the field of teaching to a host of individuals who may have never conceived of it before, the two-year commitment is making it so teaching remains negatively viewed in terms of a permanent career amongst the American elite.

If TFA continues on the path it is currently on it will maintain a prominent position in the eyes of many, but in the end, it will simply be another program which spins the wheels in low-income educational reform and will prove unable to actually shrink the achievement gap. However, TFA remains in a position where it has the capacity to make meaningful and effective changes within its program structure which could lead to the overall effectiveness of the program improving. To begin, TFA must create multiple commitment paths available to incoming corps members. First, they should be able to keep the traditional two-year commitment path which also has an option of picking up a master's degree.<sup>76</sup> TFA should next introduce a three-year commitment which will alter the graduate school program so that it is extended over three years. This reduced academic load on the student will allow for the corps member to maintain a more

---

<sup>75</sup> Schneider, *Excellence For All*, 98. Granted there is a portion of the corps which maintains itself in the field of education. However, one area of confusion is that TFA has not defined exactly what it means by "educational field" and so there is some complications about where many of these alumni are actually serving.

<sup>76</sup> TFA candidates are given access to a graduate school which is specific to the region they are apart of. Within this graduate school program TFA corps members can enter into two different paths. One path will allow them to achieve a masters degree, while the other path will have the corps member be taking courses towards the next level of certification or licensure.

effective balance between coursework and working within the classroom as a new teacher. Next TFA should explore the introduction of a five to six year commitment with the added benefit of loan forgiveness for up to a specified amount and the opportunity to join a doctorate program (if the corps member is able to get accepted into the program). Lastly, TFA would benefit from introducing a one-year commitment path where individuals would work in a variety of other fields pertaining to educational reform rather than serving as fulltime teacher. Potential job opportunities within this field would include: teacher assistants, community outreach partners, health and dietary advisors, counseling assistants, nurse assistants, physical education assistants, etc. This group of corps members would be given an optional second year and would go to a separate summer institute which will focus primarily on how poverty and racial identity can influence academic performance. By extending the commitment possibility of corps members it will allow for a more far reaching impact and will aid in diversifying the corps in terms of interests, aspirations, and goals. However, commitment changes can not be the only changes made if TFA truly wants to restructure its image.

Curriculum and school structure have a profound impact on a student's ability to retrain information and their academic performance. Therefore summer institute must strongly focus on curriculum implementation and achieving state standards in terms of curriculum. TFA must also be at the forefront in ensuring positive and effective curriculum changes are being made at both the state and national level. A more coherent feel must be created between education from kindergarten through high school. Furthermore, TFA needs to continue to increase the amount of locations it holds summer institutes at. This will ensure corps members are training in closer proximity to their assigned region and will thus be more in touch with the community they are entering to teach in. Lastly, TFA should create a new division with focuses on pre-kindergarten

education and childcare support. Primary focus will be centered around community outreach and ensuring families in low-income communities are educated on the ways they can increase the academic success of their students before they even show up to their first day of school.

Educational topics can include healthy dietary choices, reading to children (and other educational elements children should be familiar with before even entering school), the importance of physical activity, and how to a parent can be a support for their child as they go through school. TFA may also want to explore the creation of free childcare centers which will allow them to educate children on shapes, colors, problem solving, and word recognition. Now obviously many of these suggestions are far reaching and seem somewhat unrealistic. But if TFA is truly committed to eradicating the opportunity gap than it is essential TFA look at ways for improvement and appropriate expansion.

“Every American has the right to a free and quality education from the grades of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.” These are the words which belong in the United States Constitution. That is why my final recommendation, now not simply to TFA, but instead America, is a constitutional amendment. If we are truly serious about educational reform and creating a system of academic success for our students than we need to be held accountable for making this goal a reality. TFA is certainly a problematic program, but behind it is a mission which must resonate inside the American consciousness of every citizen: every child deserves a quality education. We can no longer be beaten back by all of those individuals who will tell us it cannot be done. We must no longer allow a system of racism and classism be able to dominate our education system. We must no longer sit back and accept the status quo. We must all be advocates in the creation of revolutionary and fundamental changes within our education system. We can no longer find acceptable to live in a country where a student’s academic success and

opportunity is predetermined by their zip code. The school must become the epitome of equality in America. We need leaders. We need teachers. We need advocates. We need a revolution. We need you.

## Bibliography

- “2010 Annual Report, Teach For America: Priorities and Results.” *Teach For America* (2010). Accessed June 7, 2013. <http://www.teachforamerica.org/assets/documents/2010-annual-report.pdf>.
- “2011 Annual Letter.” *Teach For America* (2011). Accessed June 7, 2013. [https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/Annual.Report.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/Annual.Report.FINAL_.pdf).
- Abernathy, Scott Franklin. *No Child Left Behind and the Public Schools*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Alonso, Gaston, Noel S. Anderson, Celina Su, and Jeanne Theoharis. *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Anrig, Greg. “How to Turn an Urban School District Around – Without Cheating.” *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2013. Accessed May 10, 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/05/how-to-turn-an-urban-school-district-around-without-cheating/275681/>.
- Bierda, Saba and Robin Chait. “Increasing Teacher Diversity: Strategies to Improve the Teacher Workforce.” *Center for American Progress: Progress 2050* (November 2011). Accessed June 7, 2013. [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/pdf/chait\\_diversity.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/pdf/chait_diversity.pdf).
- Clewell, Beatriz Chu and Patricia B. Campbell. *Good Schools in Poor Neighborhoods: Defying Demographics, Achieving Success*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2007.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, *The Right to Learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San

Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Darling-Hammond, Linda, Deborah J. Holtzman, Su Jin Gatlin, Julian Vasquez Heilig. “Does Teacher Preparation Matter? Evidence about Teacher Certification, Teach for America, And Teacher Effectiveness.” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 13, no. 42 (2005): 1-48.

Dobbie, Will. “Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement: Evidence from Teach for America.” Harvard University (July 2011)

[http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~dobbie/research/TeacherCharacteristics\\_July2011.pdf](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~dobbie/research/TeacherCharacteristics_July2011.pdf)

(Accessed January 25, 2013).

Donaldson, Morgaen L., and Susan Moore Johnson. “The Price of Misassignment: The Role of Teaching Assignments in Teach For America Teachers’ Exit From Low-Income Schools and the Teaching Profession.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 32, no.

2 (June 2010) <http://epa.sagepub.com/content/32/2/299> (accessed January 25, 2013).

Farr, Steven. *Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher’s Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Foote, Donna. *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Glazerman, Steven, Daniel Mayer, and Paul Decker. “Alternative Routes to Teaching: The Impacts of Teach for America on Student Achievement and Other Outcomes.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 25, no. 1. (2006)

[www.interscience.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.20157](http://www.interscience.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.20157) (accessed January 30, 2013).

Hartman, Andrew. “Teach for America: The Hidden Curriculum of Liberal Do-Gooders.”

*Jacobin*. (Winter 2012) <http://jacobinmag.com/2011/12/teach-for-america/> (accessed January 10, 2013).

- Henig, Jeffrey, Richard Hula, Marion Orr, Desiree Pedescleaux. *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Hess, Frederick M. *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999.
- Hickock, Eugene. *Schoolhouse of Cards: An Inside Story of No Child Left Behind and Why America Needs a Real Education Revolution*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.
- James, Carrie. "Teach For America Fields Largest Teacher Corps in its 20-Year History." *Teach For America* (May 24, 2010). Accessed June 7, 2013.  
[http://www.teachforamerica.org/newsroom/documents/20100524\\_Teach.For.America.Fields.Largest.Teacher.Corps.In.Its.20.Year.History.htm](http://www.teachforamerica.org/newsroom/documents/20100524_Teach.For.America.Fields.Largest.Teacher.Corps.In.Its.20.Year.History.htm)
- Kopp, Wendy. *A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education for All*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2012.
- Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children...* New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.
- Lanier, Heather Kirn. *Teaching in the Terrordome: Two Years in West Baltimore with Teach for America*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2012.
- The Last Word: The Best Commentary and Controversy in American Education*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2007.
- Mathews, Jay. *Work Hard. Be Nice.: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2009.
- McMillen, Emily. "The Case for Teach For America." *The Flat Hat: College of William and Mary*, February 7, 2013. Guest Column.

- Naison, Mark. "Professor: Why Teach For America Can't Recruit in my Classroom." *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2013.
- Neckerman, Kathryn M. *Schools Betrayed: Roots of Failure in Inner-City Education*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Ness, Molly. *Lessons to Learn: Voices from the Front Lines of Teach for America*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Neuman, Susan B. *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Program That Break the Cycle of Poverty*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009.
- Paige, Rod and Elaine Witty. *The Black-White Achievement Gap: Why Closing It Is the Greatest Civil Rights Issue of Our Time*. New York: American Management Association, 2010.
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Rebell, Michael A., Jessica R Wolff. *NCLB at the Crossroads: Reexamining the Federal Effort To Close the Achievement Gap*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009.
- Rotherman, Andrew. "Teach for America: 5 Myths that Persist 20 Years On." *Times*, February 10, 2011.
- Rubin, C.M. "The Global Search For Education: Teach All." *The Huffington Post* (December 10, 2012). Accessed May 10, 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-m-rubin/wendy-kopp-teach-for-america\\_b\\_2268518.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-m-rubin/wendy-kopp-teach-for-america_b_2268518.html).
- Rubinstein, Gary. "Toto, we're not in Kansas City anymore – because we were fired." *Teach For Us: Gary Rubinstein's Blog* (May 25, 2012). Accessed June 7, 2013. <http://garyrubinstein.teachforus.org/2012/05/25/toto-were-not-in-kansas-city-anymore->

because-we-were-fired/.

Schmidt, William H. and Curtis C. McKnight. *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2012.

Schneider, Jack. *Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers is Transforming America's Public Schools*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011.

Segal, Lydia G. *Battling Corruption in America's Public Schools*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004.

Swail, Watson Scott, ed. *Finding Superman: Debating the Future of Public Education in America*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2012.

Teach For America. "Investing in Innovation (i3) Fund: Scaling Teach For America: Growing the Talent Force Working to Ensure All Our Nation's Students Have Access to Quality Education." *U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement* (May 11, 2010). Accessed June 7, 2013.

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/innovation/2010/narratives/u396a100015.pdf>.

"Teach For America Founder Kopp Departing as CEO." *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 14, 2013.

Weber, Karl, ed. *Waiting for "Superman": How We Can Save America's Failing Public Schools*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2010.

Whitmire, Richard. *The Bee Eater*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Xu, Zeyu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor. "Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 30, no. 3 (2011) [wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/pam](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/pam) (accessed January 25, 2013).

Zavadsky, Heather. *Bringing School Reform to Scale*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education

Press, 2009.