I N HER response to my proposal for reconceptualizing Teaching for America, Wendy Kopp writes, “We cannot expect every teacher to go above and beyond traditional expectations to the extent necessary to compensate for all the weaknesses of the system.” Although I agree that, without the proper training, support, and resources, teachers cannot be expected to transform classrooms in our nation’s poorest districts, I also believe that the education community should move toward a system that does expect teachers to go above and beyond the status quo and provides the supports necessary to enable them to do so.

The quality of the teacher in the classroom is the most important factor in raising student achievement, as Linda Darling-Hammond noted, and we should offer our students nothing less than well-trained and well-supported teachers. Providing high-quality teachers is of particular importance in low-income communities of color, where the most underprepared teachers are consistently placed and where students continually underperform in comparison to their middle-class white counterparts. Ms. Darling-Hammond describes the detrimental outcomes of the present system, one that continues to fail its students.

STRONG LEADERS FOR A FAILING SYSTEM

Ms. Kopp calls for strong leadership in our school systems to take on these challenges at every level. She contends that, in recruiting promising leaders from the nation’s top universities and exposing them firsthand to the issues plaguing public schools, a “force of leaders” will emerge that can work across sectors to create
change. Certainly my own experience as a TFA corps member in South Phoenix informs my current work and shapes my passion to strive toward educational equity.

What TFA is doing for the system should be acknowledged: the organization gives talented individuals who probably would not have chosen a career in education the inspiration to dedicate their lives to the pursuit of educational equality. Generally, this happens through their work after teaching, in positions outside of classrooms. Given that TFA has nearly doubled the size of its corps in the past five years, from 1,500 incoming corps members in 2003-04 to 2,900 in 2008-09, this “force of leaders” may eventually have an important impact on the system.

A BOTTOMLESS BUCKET

With its current approach, however, Teach for America is not patching the “hole in the bucket” of our nation’s teaching supply:1 When almost one-third of new entrants to the teaching profession leave within three years and nearly half leave within five years,2 TFA’s two-year approach may do little more than offer a temporary plug. Of course, these attrition rates apply to all new teachers, not just to TFA teachers (although TFA attrition rates tend to be higher)3 — which indicates a fundamental systemwide problem related to teacher training and support in addition to adequate working conditions in our public schools.

Teacher turnover costs the nation over $7.3 billion per year.4 This figure, which is based on the cost of teachers leaving their schools or districts during a given school year, does not include what is possibly “the largest cost of teacher turnover: lost teaching quality and effectiveness.”5 Teacher quality improves with experience, and rapid teacher turnover in the early years means that school systems lose nearly half their teachers before they become most effective. With a series of inexperienced teachers rotating through their classrooms, students are deprived of good opportunities to learn and achieve.

In order to maintain a teaching force, particularly in our nation’s most underserved communities, and to ensure this force is of the highest quality, a “systemic solution” — as Linda Darling-Hammond calls it — must be put forward. Such a systemic solution, she argues, includes recruiting, preparing, and retaining excellent teachers for all students. Although TFA does its work on the recruitment end, bringing in high-caliber candidates from the nation’s top universities with stellar grade-point averages — an average GPA of 3.6 for the incoming corps members — it does not sufficiently address the preparation or retention of these talented individuals. As a TFA corps member, I was vastly underprepared throughout my first years as a teacher and left after only my third year because of the lack of support. This sentiment is still common among current TFA corps members and alumni. They find the current TFA support structure, in which program directors are assigned to large groups of corps members, simply not sufficient to address their lack of preparation; thus many feel inadequate and alone with few options but to leave their assignments after a few years.

TFA teachers make up a small share of the teaching force, so altering the organization’s approach will not fix the system as a whole. However, the TFA model cannot be a part of a systemic solution until it addresses all aspects of the teacher turnover problem. I believe this is a problem that TFA, along with all teacher preparation and support programs, including schools of education, should take on.

WHAT APPROACHES WILL WORK BEST?

Deans Mari Koerner, Doug Lynch, and Shane Martin outline ways in which their schools of education are teaming up with programs like TFA to offer comprehensive teacher preparation. Their position is that improvement within schools of education is necessary in order to address issues of teacher shortages and teacher quality. These improved university programs, they contend, should be offered to all novice teachers. In supporting innovative programs like TFA, schools of education can build partnerships and take collective action with such organizations.

The deans suggest that, by “seeking out eclectic solutions,” they are beginning to address the shortage of
high-quality teachers. Because there is currently no “one size fits all” approach to teacher preparation or any single way to enter the profession, they argue for the importance of supporting existing programs and offering preparation to all teachers regardless of their entry pathway. Though building partnerships across programs and working collectively can certainly be part of developing a systemic solution, it is not clear how these eclectic approaches can build capacity for systemic change. Offering eclectic solutions seems to be a reaction to the current climate and a way to work within the existing paradigm, rather than a means to build solutions for the entire system.

One approach to teacher preparation and support that “holds particular promise,” according to Linda Darling-Hammond, is the teaching residency. Because this model addresses several problems related to the shortage of high-quality teachers — recruitment, preparation, and retention — it may move us closer to a systemic solution, particularly in high-needs districts. As she describes in detail, these emerging residency programs recruit high-caliber candidates — as does TFA — and offer them locally based training so that they acquire pedagogical knowledge under the supervision of a veteran teacher, even as they come to understand the community and social context in which they will teach. Residency programs also offer continued support into the teacher’s first few years of teaching. These components make the residency approach a promising model for “upgrading the quality of education for the system as a whole,” according to Ms. Darling-Hammond.

Of course, the residency model is just one way systemic change might come about. In reality, relatively little is known about what characteristics of teacher preparation have the greatest impact on pedagogical skills and, consequently, on student achievement. In reality, relatively little is known about what characteristics of teacher preparation have the greatest impact on pedagogical skills and, consequently, on student achievement.

In reality, relatively little is known about what characteristics of teacher preparation have the greatest impact on pedagogical skills and, consequently, on student achievement. This dearth of knowledge about how best to prepare our teachers might be the reason behind what Deans Koerner, Lynch, and Martin call the “schismatic” conversation that surrounds Teach for America. As Donald Boyd and his colleagues point out, “Although policy debates about the relative value of teacher education and the benefits of different pathways into teaching are replete with opinion, they are lean on data.” Thus conversations related to what works in preparing and supporting teachers revolve around beliefs about the best approaches without sufficient evidence to support these beliefs.

A CALL FOR RESEARCH ON TEACHER PREPARATION

Research in the area of teacher preparation tends to focus on case studies of particular programs. Such studies examine, for instance, the components of teachers’ field experiences or describe how best to prepare teachers for subject-matter instruction or for teaching diverse learners. Though much can be learned from such research, studies that compare the effects of programs are in short supply. A few studies that were cited throughout this exchange have begun to address this shortage by comparing teachers from different pathways, yet there is still not enough research in the field to tell us how best to structure and align teacher preparation programs or how to create policies that support these programs.

Teach for America continually cites a study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research to demonstrate the program’s effectiveness. Even though Wendy Kopp notes that this study follows the current “gold standard” in research by using a randomized experimental design, it estimates the effectiveness of only seven to 12 TFA teachers in the six regions it examines. These numbers do in fact make it a “small study” and so limit its generalizability to all TFA teachers in all regions. Based on this study, Ms. Kopp asserts, “In math, the impact of hiring a Teach for America teacher over another new teacher was the equivalent of reducing class size by eight students.” In actuality, the Mathematica report states, “When compared with the effect of reduction in class size, the magnitude of the TFA impact on math scores — an effect size of 0.15 — is about 65 percent of the effect of a reduction in class size of eight students.” In other words, the impact on math scores of hiring a TFA teacher is the equivalent of reducing class size by about five students. This impact of TFA teachers is arrived at by a comparison with “control” teachers and is not a new/new teacher comparison as Kopp suggests. In fact, new/new comparisons in this study were not reliable because of the small number of non-TFA novice teachers included in the study.
As Ms. Kopp notes, the Mathematica study does show that students of TFA teachers performed better in math than students of non-TFA teachers, but having a TFA teacher had no effect on students’ reading performance. There were similarly no impacts on other student outcomes, such as grade promotion or absenteeism. Thus, even though the Mathematica study finds, “There is little risk that hiring TFA teachers will reduce achievement,”10 it does not demonstrate TFA teacher effectiveness.

My intent in discussing this study is not to criticize Wendy Kopp or TFA for citing it, but to encourage the teacher education community to 1) produce more rigorous research that includes reliable comparison groups and that compares student outcomes across multiple measures and 2) use this research to inform program and policy decisions. In generating this much-needed research and using it to enlighten current approaches, the community of teacher educators can foster a dialogue that allows for critique and reflection and enables the development of common understandings.

DEFINING SUCCESS

Researchers and policy makers alike must clarify the term “success.” Deans Koerner, Lynch, and Martin discuss ways to scale up the “successes” of the TFA program, but they do not define the term. Is success defined in terms of student outcomes? If so, which ones? Programmatic research tends to rely on student achievement scores to measure success, placing less emphasis on other student outcomes such as grade promotion, absenteeism, or dropout rates.11 Moreover, program success can mean the ability to recruit high-caliber candidates or the capacity to sustain a high-quality teaching force. Then again, should the definition of success include both of these aspects?

Currently, TFA cites its successes in generating a “force of leaders,” some of whom stay in the classroom. But the majority leave to pursue related endeavors. Is TFA flourishing as a leadership development program rather than a teacher preparation program? To move forward together, we need to outline common definitions of success so that we share the same goals.

CLOSING REMARKS

Our nation is facing a crisis in terms of recruiting, preparing, and retaining high-quality teachers in its public schools. Yet, as Pam Grossman puts it, “in crisis lies opportunity.”14 Our opportunity today is to work together in researching and developing systemic solutions to one of our nation’s most pressing issues. This effort requires participation from the research community and schools of education, as well as from program developers and policy makers.

I have appreciated the opportunity to engage in this conversation and hope that such exchanges will continue beyond this issue of the Kappan and involve the larger education community. With a collaborative, “ecumenical” effort — to borrow the words of Deans Koerner, Lynch, and Martin — we can begin to generate the leverage necessary for systemic change in our field so that, one day, all teachers in this nation will have the opportunity to receive an excellent education. Once we have a force of well-qualified teachers who are trained to serve in the poorest districts and are supported throughout their careers, then we will have moved one step closer to providing all students the opportunities they deserve.

4. “The High Cost of Teacher Turnover.”
5. Ibid., p. 4.
9. Ibid., p. 16.
12. Ibid., p. 48.
13. The Mathematica study attempted to measure other student outcomes, such as grade promotion, summer school attendance, and discipline. But it found no difference attributable to teacher impact.