

# Training The Next Teachers For America:

## A Proposal for Reconceptualizing Teach for America

Ms. Hopkins, who began her career in education as a Teach for America corps member, offers some suggestions she believes will improve the program.

*By Megan Hopkins*

**S**OON AFTER I began my first year as a Teach for America (TFA) corps member, I realized how underprepared I felt teaching first grade. Not only was I unsure how to manage and organize my classroom, but I also lacked the necessary content and pedagogical knowledge to teach my students effectively. Perhaps most important, I did not have deep understandings of or appreciation for the experiences of my students or their community. The five-week training institute I attended during the prior summer had not been enough to develop my educational “toolkit” or to prepare me to provide my students with the type of education that might begin to equalize their chances in the system.

Although I grew as an educator over time and am still committed to working in education, it was an up-

hill battle. And, like most other TFA corps members, I left teaching within the first three years. Since my involvement with Teach for America, the organization has made considerable efforts to refine its preparation model, yet the program continues to draw criticism for teacher underpreparation and low retention rates.

In light of my experience and this continuing criticism, I wish to recommend alterations in the preparation of corps members that would: 1) extend the TFA commitment to three years; 2) convert the first year of teaching to a residency training year, offering classroom training with expert veteran teachers while corps members also complete coursework toward certification; and 3) offer incentives for corps members to teach longer than three years. I recommend these changes with the goal of improving the effectiveness of corps members and motivating TFA teachers to remain in their assignments for longer than two or three years. These changes could help TFA fulfill its mission of creating leaders who will make lasting changes in the field of education, while also enhancing program quality during the time these potential leaders serve in our nation’s most underresourced schools.

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These recommendations could be supported, in part, by the Teaching Residency Act, introduced by Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), and the Preparing Excellent Teachers Act, introduced in the House by Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.). Both bills, introduced last summer, would enable prospective teachers to work under the wing of expert mentor teachers for an academic year while they complete their coursework for certification. The bills aim to expand the reach of highly successful models for urban teacher residencies — programs that provide substantial preparation for carefully selected novice teachers who commit to teaching for a minimum of three to four years in the districts that sponsor them. The passage of this legislation would create an opportunity for Teach for America to embrace promising new strategies for teacher preparation and induction.

### **WHY CHANGE TFA?**

Recent research on corps members' effectiveness suggests the need for a change in TFA's approach. The TFA model assumes that extensive formal teacher training is not essential for its recruits — most of them graduates of top colleges with strong leadership abilities and a desire to improve educational opportunities for the nation's children.

Yet the reality is that Teach for America teachers are initially less successful in supporting student learning than are traditionally prepared teachers who are fully certified when they enter the profession.<sup>1</sup> One study found that TFA recruits had more positive effects on students' math achievement as corps members finished their certification and training; however, they continued to have negative effects on elementary students' reading achievement throughout all the years of the study.<sup>2</sup>

A small study comparing the performance of the students of 41 beginning and experienced TFA teachers with that of the students of other teachers in their schools reported that the TFA-taught students performed as well as the others in reading and better than the others in math. But the teachers of the comparison group were even less likely to be trained or certified than the TFA teachers.<sup>3</sup> The slight increases in mathematics achievement that the more experienced TFA teachers contributed were not substantial.

While the research is limited to comparing student performance on standardized tests, and it is arguable whether these tests accurately measure student achievement, these studies show that TFA corps members are not, in fact, as successful as the organization assumes they will be. Particularly when they begin teaching,

TFA teachers are less successful than their peers who receive more formal training.

In addition to criticism involving the preparation of its teachers, Teach for America is often criticized for its high turnover rates, as studies have found that 80% or more of corps members have left their teaching positions by the end of the third year, just when they are beginning to be more successful. This figure compares to about 30% to 40% of traditionally certified teachers in the same districts who leave by the end of the third year.<sup>4</sup> Districts — and their schools and students — bear the cost of this high level of attrition, and not surprisingly, some district officials have expressed concerns about this turnover rate. For example, Chicago administrators have indicated their desire for TFA corps members to stay longer, noting the longer tenures of other recruits and emphasizing their own responsibility to be “conscientious consumers” when making hiring decisions.<sup>5</sup> These observations suggest that TFA should consider incentives for corps members who are willing to remain longer in the classroom.

### **WHAT APPROACHES MIGHT IMPROVE THE MODEL?**

In comparative international studies of teacher preparation, the U.S. has been shown to undervalue preservice training. In particular, it is much less likely in the U.S. than in other developed nations that prospective teachers will learn to teach under the wing of a master teacher while they are learning about curriculum, instruction, learning, and child development. Most European countries include a full year of closely supervised clinical practice in a school associated with the university as part of universal preservice preparation. Other countries, such as Japan, require extensive on-the-job training for teachers in their initial “apprenticeship,” with coaching and 60 days per year of seminars and classroom visits providing guidance and support that prepare novice teachers to lead their own classrooms.<sup>6</sup> Master teachers supervise beginning teachers by observing, suggesting areas for improvement, and discussing effective instructional strategies.

Similarly, in an attempt to strengthen teacher preparation in the U.S. and to alter experienced teachers' roles in teacher training, some schools and universities across the country are collaborating to create professional development schools. These schools are designed to support the learning of new and experienced teachers and to restructure schools of education.<sup>7</sup> In partnership with universities, veteran teachers serve as mentors for new teachers and work with university faculty

members to develop the preparation curriculum and make decisions about instructional practices. Not only do such schools promote collaboration and provide hands-on training for new teachers, but they also redefine the roles of experienced teachers by giving them an opportunity to take on leadership positions. Studies show that teachers trained in professional development schools feel better prepared, more often apply theory to practice, are more confident and enthusiastic about teaching, and are more highly rated than teachers prepared in other ways.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, shortages of high-quality teachers have led large urban school districts to initiate their own versions of the professional development school approach. For example, the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Plan for Excellence collaborated to create the Boston Teacher Residency; Chicago implemented the Academy for Urban School Leadership through a nonprofit agency chartered by the city schools; and Denver started the Boettcher Teachers Program in two of its schools, with the help of the Boettcher Foundation, the Public Education and Business Coalition, and the University of Denver.<sup>9</sup> Together, these programs form the Coalition of Urban Teacher Residencies. Each program builds on a medical residency approach to train new teachers, very much like the professional development school model. The programs recruit recent college graduates and midlife career changers to complete a year-long paid residency with an expert mentor teacher while they also take coursework toward certification and a master's degree in education. When they have completed a year-end portfolio evaluation and the required coursework, program graduates begin teaching independently within their residency districts the following year. They continue to receive mentoring while they begin to teach. Finally, program participants must commit to teach in the district for at least three or four years. This model of preparation brings committed, well-prepared individuals into high-need urban schools with the hope of keeping them there.

## **A TEACH FOR AMERICA RESIDENCY**

In view of TFA teachers' limited preparation and considering the promise of these innovative approaches, I recommend that Teach for America develop a residency training model with the following features:

1. *Extend the program's current two-year commitment to three years.* Corps members will serve as residents during their first year. Then they will go on to teach on

their own for at least two subsequent years.

2. *Require all first-year corps members to complete a residency year in an experienced teacher's classroom within their placement district and at (or near) their placement grade level.* During this year, corps members will co-teach with a mentor teacher who is deemed highly effective at raising student achievement. The mentor teacher, in collaboration with a TFA program director or university instructor, will scaffold the corps member's training, so that the corps member first observes the mentor teacher and discusses instructional strategies

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and eventually leads the classroom while the mentor assesses and provides feedback on the corps member's performance. During this year of residency, not only will corps members acquire collaborative skills and instructional expertise, but they will also gain an understanding of the community context in which they will teach, and they will complete coursework for certification.

3. *Cluster TFA "residents" at high-performing urban schools.* Each of the programs in the Coalition of Urban Teacher Residencies concentrates its participants at a small number of schools that have a large number of expert teachers and adept administrators. Like prospective teachers who train in professional development schools, residents under this model would collaborate within a school community that provides a positive culture and support.

4. *Offer courses through a university partner for first-year corps members to obtain certification and a master's degree.* During the residency year, corps members will also take courses through a local partner university so that they may complete their teacher certification requirements and have the opportunity to obtain a master's degree. While TFA currently partners with local universities in most of its placement sites, stronger relationships between TFA and these partners — and between coursework and clinical experiences — must be developed if residents are to integrate theory and practice and apply what they are learning.

5. *Provide incentives to teach longer than three years.* A range of incentives could be offered, including opportunities to take on leadership roles, as well as sti-

pend and forgivable loans for accepting additional responsibilities. Teachers who serve for longer than three years could also serve as liaisons among members of the partnership and provide support and professional development to novice teachers. After gaining substantial teaching experience, these longer-term corps members could serve as mentors in one of the residency training schools and partner with university colleagues in offering support and coursework.

## CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Since these strategies would require an overhaul of Teach for America's approach to teacher preparation, there are many issues to address before proceeding.

*Funding.* School districts currently provide full salaries to TFA corps members. A different funding structure would need to be developed to support first-year corps members during their residency year, as many districts could not afford to support two teachers for a single classroom. Additional funds would also be needed to compensate mentor teachers and longer-term TFA teachers who took on leadership roles, although these roles already exist in a number of districts. Some possibilities follow:

- As the Chicago teacher residency does, TFA and the districts could adopt a graduated pay scale that would pay first-year corps members less than the normal first-year teacher salary, while longer-term corps members would receive a stipend in addition to their regular salary for fulfilling a mentor or leadership role. In addition, teachers who decided to remain at their placement sites for longer than their commitments could be granted forgivable student loans, with a specific percentage of the balance forgiven for each additional year teaching at the site. Federal funds are available to help underwrite such programs to keep teachers in high-need schools.

- Model first-year funding on the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR) model. This program offers a small stipend (\$10,000) to first-year residents. In addition, residents must pay tuition of \$10,000 for their university coursework, but BTR offers them a no-interest loan to cover this cost, which is reduced and ultimately eliminated if residents remain as teachers in the district for three years. Teach for America could use a similar approach.

- If Teach for America alters its approach to include a year of residency, it may be able to reduce its summer institute training or even replace it with training administered within the cities or school districts where corps members are placed, thereby greatly reducing the

costs. Corps members may be better served by completing an intensive training in their placement district under the guidance of an expert mentor teacher from that district so that they can acquire knowledge about the specific context in which they will teach.

- Instead of devoting funding to recruitment and to expanding the corps at the current rapid rate, Teach for America could use this funding to implement the preparation model proposed. While this may hinder TFA from meeting its expansion goals, the model would produce a number of high-quality teachers who would be likely to remain for more than two or three years at their placement sites. This would reduce the demand for new teachers and provide greater benefit to districts, schools, and students.

*Capacity.* If Teach for America desires to initiate these changes, it will need to consider its capacity to do so. One issue will be recruiting enough mentor teachers to match the number of first-year corps members. TFA currently recruits veteran teachers for its summer institute, and these people are certainly candidates for mentoring positions during the school year. Furthermore, because TFA has been placing teachers in some cities for over 10 years, there are some sites that have a reasonable number of alumni still in teaching, and they would be an excellent pool of mentors and could also provide connections to other experienced teachers.

In addition, the organization would need to form partnerships with local universities and with local school districts. Thus far, Teach for America has been successful at securing such partnerships within each placement city, but none has thus far been as involved as this new strategy would require. New models of coursework may need to be developed, and instructors may need to be hired. The Boston Teacher Residency



has a curriculum coordinator who works to develop the coursework and to seek university faculty members to help design and to teach each of the required courses. The Chicago Residency works with National-Louis University and the University of Illinois at Chicago to design and offer coursework that is linked to the clinical experience.

*Existing structures.* Teach for America would have to make some decisions about the existing structures of the organization. For example, it would have to consider making changes to or eliminating the summer institute to supply funding for a new system. It would also have to consider the current support systems within each placement city. For example, the roles and responsibilities of program directors would change within this model, as they not only would work with corps members but also would collaborate with mentor teachers, school principals, and university faculty members.


*Possible objections.* If the Teach for America commitment is extended to three years, some applicants may be reluctant to apply, thus limiting the pool of highly qualified candidates. However, better training and support should encourage other recruits, and the incentives offered in the third year and beyond should overcome some resistance. Surveying and conducting focus groups with current corps members regarding the use of a residency model would help TFA determine which kinds of recruits would be interested in participating in a longer-term alternative track. Furthermore, some school districts will prefer the model, as it provides better-prepared entrants who have a better chance of staying in teaching longer. This improvement may encourage districts to contribute funds, just as a growing number are creating residency and intern programs of their own.

*Next steps.* Before implementing a programwide change, Teach for America would be wise to pilot the new strategy in one placement site and assess its effectiveness. Such a site should be chosen after assessing such resources as the availability of mentor teachers, the number of effective schools to serve as residency sites, and the potential for district and university support. New strategies should be implemented for no less than three years before evaluating results, as this would provide enough time for at least one cohort of corps members to complete their service under the new model.

## CONCLUSION

While these proposals would require substantial redesign of the TFA model, the results are likely to be worth the investment. Teach for America has the po-

tential to effect large-scale change in the field of education. It recruits highly qualified, motivated corps members who appreciate the importance of equal educational opportunities, and many go on to devote their lives to this mission. However, these bright individuals are not as effective in the classroom as they could be, and their students do not perform as well as students in classrooms where teachers have more formal training. Corps members who are given a full year to learn effective instructional practices and to fully prepare to work within the context of their placement site will be better prepared to enter their classrooms as skilled teachers. If TFA can prepare its recruits to be more successful in their classrooms from the beginning of their service, it may be able to achieve its vision more effectively, so that, as the TFA mission states, "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

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