

Teach For America: A False Promise

Alternative teacher training program yields costly turnover while doing little to improve student achievement

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BOULDER, Colo., and TEMPE, Ariz., June 9, 2010 -- Teach For America has generated glowing press reports, but evidence about whether the alternative teacher-training program works is far more murky, reports a new [policy brief](#) from the Education and the Public Interest Center and the Education Policy Research Unit (EPIC/EPRU).

The report, *Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence*, is written by professor Julian Vasquez Heilig of the University of Texas at Austin, and professor Su Jin Jez of California State University, Sacramento. It offers a comprehensive overview of research on the Teach For America (TFA) program, which recruits graduates of elite colleges to teach for two years in low-income rural and urban schools. The brief was published today by EPIC, at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and EPRU, at Arizona State University.

Overall, Jez and Heilig argue, the impact of Teach For America on student achievement is decidedly mixed at best.

On the one hand, studies show that TFA teachers perform fairly well compared with one segment of the

teaching population: other teachers in the same hard-to-staff schools, who are less likely to be certified or traditionally prepared. Compared with that specific group of teachers, TFA teachers "perform comparably in raising reading scores and a bit better in raising math scores," the policy brief's authors write.

Comparisons of TFA teachers with credentialed non-TFA teachers are another story. Research on that question finds that "the students of novice TFA teachers perform significantly less well in reading and mathematics than those of credentialed beginning teachers," Heilig and Jez write. And in a large-scale Houston study, in which the researchers controlled for experience and teachers' certification status, standard certified teachers consistently outperformed uncertified TFA teachers of comparable experience levels in similar settings.

In the end, TFA teachers have some advantages and some disadvantages, and these appear to play out as one would expect. Accordingly, the results are consistent with common sense - but it's a common sense often ignored in policy discussions.

The trade-offs are straightforward. TFA teachers are elite college graduates, but they receive a much shorter training process than conventional teacher education programs. They teach in hard-to-staff schools, but they generally do so for only two years. So one would expect that these TFA teachers would show outcomes better than other minimally trained beginning teachers but worse than fully trained teachers or experienced teachers. In fact, the research shows exactly these results, explain Heilig and Jez.

TFA teachers do get better - if they stay long enough to become fully credentialed, the evidence suggests. Those experienced, fully credentialed TFA teachers "appear to do about as well as other, similarly experienced, credentialed teachers in teaching reading ... [and] as well as, and sometimes better than, that comparison group in teaching mathematics," Heilig and Jez write.

There is a catch, however: More than half of TFA teachers leave after two years, and more than 80 percent after three. So it's impossible to know whether those who remain have improved because of additional training and experience - or simply because of "selection bias:" they were more effective than the four out of five TFA teachers who left.

Furthermore, the high turnover of TFA teachers results in significant expenses for recruiting and training replacements.

While TFA advocates see the program as a way to expand the supply of teachers willing to work in the nation's most troubled schools, critics see it as an intense training experience for the teachers but a harmful dalliance into the lives of vulnerable students who most need highly trained and highly skilled teachers. The bottom line from the research is that TFA teacher effectiveness depends on the way the question is asked. "The lack of a consistent impact, however, should indicate to policymakers that TFA is likely not the panacea that will reduce disparities in educational outcomes," Heilig and Jez write.

In the face of such limitations, the authors urge schools and districts instead to devote resources to a number of proven remedies for improving achievement, including mentoring programs that pair novice and expert teachers.

The authors also recommend that schools use TFA teachers only when "the alternative hiring pool consists of uncertified and emergency teachers or substitutes."

Find the report *Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence*, by Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su Jin Jez, on the web at:

<http://epicpolicy.org/publication/teach-for-america>

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