

Performance versus Promises:

An Evaluation of Teach for America's Research Page

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Teach for America is a widely praised program that puts teachers, usually liberal arts graduates from highly selective colleges and universities with minimal pedagogical training, into school classrooms.

After laying off 300 veteran teachers in what was billed as a necessary budgetary move, Huntsville City Schools Board of Education announced a program to add TFA teachers which would cost a minimum of \$700,000. This amount would eventually increase to \$1.7 million. The contract stipulation that at least 170 TFA recruits would be hired in four years makes the possible salary expense close to \$2 million.

About This Study

According to the organization's website, "A large and growing body of independent research shows that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers." This report analyzes the validity of this statement by reviewing the various reports listed on TFA's research web page.

The downloadable PDF titled "What the Research Says³," contains the following wording, which prompted this study: "The most rigorous research over time has shown that corps members' impact on student achievement exceeds that of other teachers in the same high-needs schools. This is true even when corps members are compared with veteran and fully certified teachers."

This review uses three categories to outline and describe TFA's twelve "peer-reviewed" studies on their program:

1. Four out of twelve of the studies are categorized as irrelevant, since they have no bearing on performance.
2. Seven of the twelve studies are categorized as problematic/ mixed, since the results are not conclusive.
3. One of the twelve studies is classified as positive but potentially misleading as no data set is included.

Conclusion

The authors conclude their review of the program's validity by stating, "If powerful interests have enough money, science no longer matters. For more on this ask the scientists trying to address global warming."

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Abstract

On paper, Teach for America (TFA) has all the markings of an excellent program with real potential for social service and change. Given a hard-to-staff school in a poverty stricken city, allowing enthusiastic college graduates with some training to go in and put their hearts and souls into classrooms that would otherwise be staffed with less-prepared or unprepared individuals may seem like a good idea. Upon further examination, TFA becomes more problematic as its claims to success do not stand up to close scrutiny, and as the program has evolved from placing its “corps members” (TFA’s language) in hard-to-staff schools to replacing certified teachers.¹ This white paper analyzes TFA’s claims to “success” through analysis of the organization’s “research” page. While TFA has some data in support of its assertions, analysis of the data and the interpretations drawn from it softens TFA’s assertions considerably, if it does not outright contradict them.

Introduction

Teach for America is a highly publicized program that puts teachers, usually liberal arts graduates from highly selective colleges and universities with minimal pedagogical training, into school classrooms. It is one thing to use these teachers in hard-to-staff classrooms in inner cities and rural areas where certified teachers are difficult to find. It is something else to replace certified, veteran teachers with TFA recruits, as has been done recently in Huntsville, Alabama, where we live and work. After laying off 300 veteran teachers in what was billed as a necessary budgetary move, the Huntsville City Schools Board of Education announced a program to add TFA teachers which would cost a minimum of \$700,000. This amount would eventually increase to \$1.7 million. The contract stipulation that at least 170 TFA recruits would be hired in four years makes the possible salary expense close to \$2 million. As professional educators committed to public education, we knew little about the organization; therefore we committed ourselves to researching the organization, especially its claim on its website that “A large and growing body of independent research shows that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers.”² It is this claim, as it was made and supported on TFA’s research page in late 2012, which is the subject of this analysis.

TFA’s Research Page

This research analysis was conducted in November and December 2011. It is important to note that TFA has since updated their Research Page, adding a PDF download which contains studies not addressed in our initial critique.³ The studies discussed here, however, remain on the organization’s website, which has changed its claim from:

A large and growing body of independent research shows that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers.

to Teach For America corps members help their students achieve academic gains equal to or larger than teachers from other preparation programs, according to the most recent and rigorous studies on teacher effectiveness.⁴

The downloadable PDF titled “What the Research Says,” contains the following wording: “The most rigorous research over time has shown that corps members’ impact on student achievement exceeds that of other teachers in the same high-needs schools. This is true even when corps members are compared with veteran and fully certified teachers.”⁵ While the language has changed over time, the message remains the same; TFA recruits outperform both veteran and fully certified teachers. While there are

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a number of peer reviewed and think tank produced pieces that contradict this claim, we examined its veracity using the research supplied by TFA.⁶ Our evaluations of the studies⁷ presented as documenting TFA effectiveness in November of 2011, involve three categories: A. Irrelevant since they have no bearing on performance; B. Problematic/mixed since the

results are not conclusive and positive; and C. Positive but potentially misleading, as no data set is included.

What follows is a closer analysis of each of the twelve studies, grouped into our three categories: Irrelevant, Problematic or Mixed, and Positive. Four studies are included in the first classification (Irrelevant), seven in the second (Problematic or Mixed), and one in the final classification (Positive). We discuss the Problematic and Mixed studies in extended detail below our initial discussion of the irrelevant studies. We then discuss the one positive study in some detail.

Irrelevant

Four of the 12 “studies” are irrelevant to the TFA argument that teachers from its program “make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers.” Of these four: One, “Creating a Corps of Change Agents,” is a promotional piece from *Education Next* that discusses the high rate of entrepreneurs who come from TFA. It does not discuss the effectiveness of TFA teachers at all.⁸

The second is a peer-reviewed piece, “The Price of Misassignment: The Role of Teaching Assignments in Teach For America Teachers’ Exit from Low Income Schools and the Teaching Profession,” which discusses improving TFA retention.⁹ This one also fails to discuss TFA teacher effectiveness. These two studies are obviously irrelevant to the claim since they fail to address it at all.

The third, “Teacher Characteristics and Student

Achievement: Evidence from 'Teach For America,' discusses predicting outcomes at the time of TFA hire.¹⁰ This study could have gone under "problematic" as the front page contains the disclaimer "PRELIMINARY AND INCOMPLETE" in all caps lettering. Regardless, it does not offer a strict comparison between veteran teachers and TFA graduates. The fourth study is another peer reviewed article, "Assessing the Effects of Voluntary Youth Service: The Case of Teach for America," but it astonishingly presents evidence against TFA's claim that its recruits go on to "pro social" jobs.¹¹ From the abstract, we quote the following:

Specifically, TFA graduates lag behind non-matriculants in current service activity and generally trail both non-matriculants and drop-outs in self-reported participation in five other forms of civic/ political activity measured in the study. Graduates also vote at lower rates than the other two groups. Finally, fewer graduates report employment in 'pro-social' jobs than either non-matriculants or drop-outs.

While this study could have gone into "problematic," we leave it under irrelevant, though we find it interesting to note that it is an argument against the organization's own claims. It is crystal clear, then, that none of these four studies supports the claim TFA makes about the relationship between its teachers and experienced teachers.

Problematic or Mixed

Seven of the 12 studies we judge to be "problematic" or "mixed." They either have methodological flaws making the findings problematic or have, at best, mixed results. Indeed two of the seven acknowledge such flaws and warn readers against making definitive judgments based on their data. The "mixed" category indicates the results were, by no means, definitive. For example a study may show TFA recruits are better at math than some teachers in some cases but are not better in other subjects; or they are better than novice teachers but not better than those with experience, etc. It should be noted here that these mixed results are not without their own methodological problems, many of which we address below.

Importantly, six of the seven studies that show mixed or problematic results are based on the use of Value Added Measurement (VAM). While this is not the space to discuss the highly debated use of VAM to measure teacher effectiveness, we offer a brief critique with links for the reader interested in learning more. One early peer reviewed critique of the method, "Teacher Effects and Teacher Effectiveness, a Validity Investigation of the Tennessee Value Added System," argues that there are "several logical and empirical weaknesses of the system."¹² This particular system, with this particular test, is in use in Tennessee, and TFA cites it, with no critical discussion of the system, as justification for success.¹³

A more recent critique of VAM comes from Diane Ravitch who analyzed the methodology via a report

from the Annenberg Institute, an organization that can hardly be called partisan or pro-status quo.¹⁴ Ravitch, in discussing the Annenberg report, asks an important question:

[The report] describes a margin of error so large that a teacher at the 43rd percentile (average) might actually be at the 15th percentile (below average) or the 71 percentile (above average). What is the value of such a measure? Why should it be used at all?¹⁵

Extending Ravitch's critique, a teacher raising student scores from the 15th to 25th percentile is going to look, to bean counters, much more effective than a teacher who raises student scores from the 85th to the 90th. Which teacher is more effective? That's debatable, but it is the type of debate that happens when people go to football games and stare at the scoreboard for two hours. Both teachers might be equally effective. The teacher with the smaller gain might be more effective, but to really know, you'd have to know something about the teams and you would have to watch the game.¹⁶ We now turn to a discussion of each of the seven problematic studies.

1. Report Card on the Effectiveness of Teacher Training Programs¹⁷

This report is a collection of analyses done on teacher effect estimates based on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAS). This report is specifically intended to compare various teacher preparation programs therefore only teachers in their first 3 years of teaching are included. The TVAS system uses the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment System (TCAP), which includes the Tennessee Achievement Test (grades 3-8), the Writing Test, the Competency Test, the Gateway Tests and the End of Course Tests.

It is crystal clear, then, that none of these four studies supports the claim TFA makes about the relationship between its teachers and experienced teachers.

Each teacher preparation program is analyzed based on 3 different comparisons. The mean t-value effects for beginning teachers from each program are compared to 1) State distribution of teacher t-value effects, 2) the mean of means for other Tennessee teacher training programs, and 3) the mean for veteran teachers.

The report makes at least three comparisons involving TFA and non-TFA teachers. The first comparison seeks to identify the percentage of teachers from each teacher preparation program in the top and bottom quintiles of the state distribution of t-value effects. In this comparison, 8 programs were identified as having a statistically significant negative difference (meaning that a higher than expected percentage of teachers from the program scored in the lowest quintile) and 2 were identified as having a statistically significant positive difference (meaning that a higher than expected percentage of teachers from the program scored in the highest quintile). The Teach for America program was one of these two.

The second comparison focuses on comparing means for novice teachers from individual programs with the mean of means for all novice teachers across all programs. Here, 5 programs were identified as having a statistically significant negative difference (the mean

teacher effect for this program was significantly lower than the mean of means) and 6 programs were identified as having a statistically significant positive difference (the mean teacher effect for this program was significantly higher than the mean of means). Here again, the Teach for America program is noted as having a statistically significant positive difference.

The third comparison is an analysis of the teacher effects of the novice teachers from the various teacher preparation programs compared with the statewide average of teacher effects of veteran teachers (those with more than 3 years experience). Not surprisingly, there were numerous programs (14 to be exact) with statistically significant negative differences (the mean teacher effect for novice teachers from these programs was significantly lower than state averages for veteran teachers). Two programs did show statistically significant positive results (the mean teacher effect for novice teachers from these programs was significantly higher than state averages for veteran teachers); once again, Teach for America was one of the two.

In general, the analyses yielded relatively few statistically significant results especially considering the great number of comparisons conducted. This is in large part due to one of the major limitations of this study; namely, the small numbers of teachers in each comparison group and those small comparison groups being measured against state averages. In instances such as these, the statistical power of the analysis is greatly reduced. Also, with small numbers of subjects in the comparison group, extreme cases have a larger impact on the group means. Additionally, the comparison measures appear to be based off of the teachers' Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) gain scores. These are normalized scores that work a lot like percentiles where, by definition, 50% of the scores are "at or below average." With a forced normalized scale, there is no real measure of how "good" the top performers are nor how "bad" the lowest performers are. This limitation calls into question any claim to TFA effectiveness and renders the report problematic at best.

2. Portal Report: Teacher Preparation and Student Test scores in North Carolina¹⁸

This study focuses on novice teachers (in their first 5 years of teaching) in North Carolina. The authors identify twelve different modes of entry or "portals" into teaching in North Carolina public schools and compare each of these using value added measures based on student test scores on the End of Grade test (EOG) and End of Course test (EOC). The primary comparison group is the set of teachers who graduated from undergraduate teacher preparation programs at one of 15 public universities in the UNC system. This portal provided approximately 32 percent of the teachers in this study. In comparison, the Teach for America portal provided approximately 0.3

percent of the teachers in this study.

The study analyzed student outcome data linked to approximately 20,000 teachers over the 4 year time period using impact models (value added assessment models) with extensive control variables factored in. All analyses were done at the teacher level rather than the school or district levels. At the elementary level, analyses were performed on two assessments: EOG scores in reading and math. At the middle school level, they used EOG and EOC scores in reading, math, Algebra I and science. At the high school level, analyses were conducted on EOC assessments in English I, math, science, and social studies. At each level, the UNC prepared teachers were compared with the teachers from the other 11 portals. Overall, 97 comparisons were made. Of these, the UNC

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prepared teachers performed significantly better in 14, significantly worse in nine and not significantly different in 74. Of the nine comparisons where they did significantly worse, five were in comparison to teachers from the TFA portal. Specifically, the TFA teachers' scores were significantly higher

than the UNC prepared teachers in the areas of high school math, English, science and overall high school gains, and middle school math.

In several instances, the authors point out the fact that the TFA portal only accounts for 0.3 percent of the teaching force in the state and urge caution for broad policy decisions made based on the comparison of this group with the much larger population of UNC prepared teachers. This is a limitation of this study. The main comparison group is nearly 100 times larger than the TFA group. Also, the main comparison group makes up a large portion of the total population being studied. Therefore, extreme values are more likely to get "washed out" in the averages. The two groups lack homogeneity of variance most likely due to the discrepancies in their sizes. Comparisons under such conditions should be carefully interpreted.

This study is also problematic for those who claim TFA has a long-term positive effect on school districts because of the documented high turnover of TFA recruits: 85% are gone after four years. And this makes the "Portal Report" not just problematic, but damning. In the reports own words:

The final and in some ways most important finding of this study is that first year teachers perform worse than those with four years of experience in 10 out of 11 comparisons, and in their second year as teachers perform worse in 6 out of 11 comparisons. To provide perspective, we estimated that elementary students taught math by a first year teacher lose the equivalent of 21 days of schooling when compared to similar students taught by teachers with four years of experience.¹⁹

3. Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America on Student Performance in High School²⁰

This report focuses on comparisons between TFA teachers and traditionally trained secondary teachers in North Carolina. The primary sources of data are the student scores from the End of Course (EOC) tests across multiple subjects for academic years 2000-01 through 2006-07. The data came from the 23 Local Education Agencies (LEA) across the state that hired TFA teachers during those years. The student outcome data for the TFA teachers were compared with the data from both novice teachers and teachers with more than 3 years of experience.

The authors used a fixed effects model to examine the within-student variation across multiple subjects. Because, in the case of the North Carolina EOC examinations, no initial test data exists for a particular subject, the authors were not able to use a value added approach. Instead they used the students' scores from their 8th grade math and reading tests to control for prior knowledge. Overall, the authors state that the TFA teachers show a statistically significant positive difference in improvement in student performance when looking at averages of scores across all subjects as well as when looking at averages of math scores and science scores separately. No data is presented for analysis of student performance on the English EOC.

There are a few limitations to this study. In North Carolina, student test scores are linked to the proctor for a particular test. The proctor may or may not be the actual classroom teacher. Because of this, matching teachers with their students' test scores poses more of a challenge. A fit statistic is used to match teachers to scores, however some margin of error still exists. Additionally, the sizes of the comparison groups are vastly different: there are 441 TFA teachers in the study, but there are over 60,000 traditional teachers included. The authors used multiple statistical methods in order to account for the differences between the groups, but the fact remains that statistical analyses under these circumstances should be carefully interpreted.

Finally and importantly, the report's authors caution against their own findings, noting that "When both teacher quality and student performance are systematically related to student ability and motivation, the relationship between teacher and student performance cannot be reliably estimated."²¹ The phrase "cannot be reliably estimated" undermines TFA's claim that "rigorous" studies show "Teach For America corps members help their students achieve academic gains equal to or larger than teachers from other preparation programs."²²

4. Evaluation of Teach for America in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools²³

This evaluation report was conducted on Teach for America teachers and non-TFA teachers in the Charlotte-

Mecklenburg school district (CMS) in North Carolina, one of the largest districts in the state, during the academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09. The student-level data for the report came from End of Grade (EOG) and End of Course (EOC) exam scores and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction ABC Growth Model scores (which are based on EOG and EOC assessments); therefore the only teachers included in the study were those teaching in EOG/EOC tested grades and subjects. This includes EOGs for grades 3-8 reading and math, and EOCs for Algebra I, Algebra II, Biology, Civics and Economics, Chemistry, English I, Geometry, and Physical Science. Furthermore, in order to help control for non-random assignment of students to classes, the comparison groups of non-TFA teachers were limited to only those who were teaching the same subjects, in the same schools as the TFA teachers. Unlike the other studies reported here, this one also included a qualitative component. Qualitative data collected for analysis included principal interviews (for TFA and non-TFA teachers), TFA teacher interviews, and classroom observations (of TFA and non-TFA teachers).

There were six research questions the authors addressed in this study, that are summarized here: 1. How well does teacher type (TFA vs. non-TFA, experienced vs. novice) predict student achievement? 2. How well does teacher type predict student growth? 3. Are there differences in variation of student achievement between TFA and non-TFA teachers? 4. What are the principals' perceptions of TFA teachers regarding student achievement? 5. How do first and second year TFA teachers view the Teach for America program? and 6. What are the differences in instructional practices between TFA and non-TFA teachers? Questions 1-3 are addressed using quantitative measures on student-level assessments and questions 4-6 are addressed using the qualitative measures listed above.

Because the data set was limited to only TFA teachers in CMS and the non-TFA teachers teaching the same subjects in the same schools, the sample sizes were small. To compensate for this, the authors collapsed the EOC data into one measure. Even then, there were only 45 teachers total (32 TFA and 13 non-TFA) in 2007-08 and 82 teachers total (57 TFA and 25 non-TFA) in 2008-09 included in the EOC data. Such a small sample greatly reduces the power of the statistical analyses conducted. EOG data was based on higher *n* values (close to 1000 total teachers in 2007-08 and nearly 2000 total teachers in 2008-09) and therefore is not subject to the same degree of error.

Overall, the study found that there were no statistically significant differences between TFA and all non-TFA teachers on the EOG assessments in grades 3-8. Statistically significant differences, favoring the TFA teachers, were found when examining the merged EOC data both in the raw scores comparisons and the student

"When both teacher quality and student performance are systematically related to student ability and motivation, the relationship between teacher and student performance cannot be reliably estimated."

growth model comparisons. These differences are statistically significant, but are still relatively small. The authors themselves state that this difference represents only a “minor advantage for TFA-taught students.”²⁴ When the authors matched TFA teachers with non-TFA teachers with similar years of experience, they found similar results with one notable exception: a statistically significant difference favoring non-TFA teachers in the Growth Model for EOG Reading.

The qualitative data was based on data from three sources: interviews with CMS principals, interviews with current TFA teachers and observations of TFA and non-TFA classes. A total of eight CMS principals were selected for interviews, each one from a different school type: high, average and low achieving schools as well as elementary, middle and high school. No low achieving, high school principal participated. In general, the comments from the principals were favorable regarding TFA teachers' abilities in the classroom. Not all comments were positive; however overall the authors classified the principal satisfaction level to be high.

The eight principals in the study each selected 2 TFA and 2 non-TFA teachers at their schools for participation in the classroom observations and (for the TFA teachers) the individual interviews. The principals were asked to select two TFA teachers from different subject areas/grade levels and to identify a “matching” non-TFA teacher with similar teaching assignments and levels of experience. The interviews with the TFA teachers themselves showed that the TFA teachers were, for the most part, satisfied with the program; however, some noted a few issues such as tensions between the TFA and non-TFA teachers at their particular schools. No interviews were conducted with the non-TFA teachers, which is problematic for making conclusions based on interview data.

Data from the 32 classroom observations (16 TFA classes and 16 non-TFA classes observed 1 time each) showed both similarities and differences. Similarities included comparable levels of confidence and evidence of preplanned activities. The authors note several differences in classroom climate and execution of lessons. The authors state that there were observed differences in the types of questions the teachers asked. The TFA teachers were more likely to ask open-ended questions and placed a greater emphasis on real-world applications than their non-TFA counterparts. Also, the non-TFA teachers were more likely to use lecture-based teaching strategies. The authors also noted noticeable differences in classroom management strategies employed with the TFA teachers utilizing a greater variety of techniques.

It should be noted that these data points were based on one classroom observation per teacher. The question should be asked, “Is the observation of one class period a good measure of the common practice in a teacher's classroom?”

This report is well designed in that the authors use both quantitative and qualitative measures to answer their research questions. They pay particular attention to finding matched samples for both types of data. This, of course, leads to a limited sample size for their quantitative analyses, which could account for the lack of statistically significant results. Conducting more than one classroom observation per teacher, as well as adding in a non-TFA teacher interview component could strengthen the qualitative data.

Setting the lack of statistically significant results aside, the authors of this report come close to acknowledging issues with their own data, as they conclude with

“A more focused approach in observing differences between math and reading classrooms by TFA and non-TFA-led classrooms might generate insight into why TFA teachers may show positive results with respect to math achievement and why non-TFA teachers may show similar results to TFA teachers for reading achievement.” The words “may show” are problematic in a report being used to justify replacing traditionally certified teachers with TFA recruits.

words that are hardly an endorsement. On page 46 they note, “A more focused approach in observing differences between math and reading classrooms by TFA and non-TFA-led classrooms might generate insight into why TFA teachers **may show** positive results with respect to math achievement and why non-TFA teachers **may show** similar results to TFA teachers for reading achievement.” The words “may show” are problematic in a report being used to justify replacing traditionally certified teachers with TFA recruits.

5. Teacher Preparation Programs and Teach for America Research Study²⁵

This research study analyzes the performance of Teach for America versus non-Teach for America novice teachers for two cohorts, in four school districts in Texas. The four research objectives for this study are: 1. Compare student achievement gains on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) at all grade levels and across all subjects, 2. Determine the cost effectiveness of various teacher preparation programs, 3. Compare retention rates of teachers in high-poverty schools, and 4. Compare the degree to which teachers are closing the achievement gaps. Because only four school districts participated in the study, the sample sizes for the different comparison groups are small. In order to adjust for this, the study merges the data for grades 3-8 into one measure and the data for grades 9-11 into another rather than analyzing each grade separately. Also, in order to maintain similar demographics of students taught by Teach for America versus non-teach for America teachers, no data from White students or students not eligible for free or reduced lunch are included.

The authors state that at the time of the report an actual cost analysis of the teacher preparation programs was not feasible, so they focus the discussion of their results on the other three research objectives. The retention rate data is as to be expected considering the TFA program involves a two-year commitment. The retention rate for non-TFA teachers declines steadily over the course of the first three years of teaching (around 85% after 1 year, and 79% after year 2 while the retention rate for the TFA teachers is relatively high after the first year (around 95%) but drops off drastically after year 2 (around 50%).

Regarding student achievement gains, overall the study finds that TFA teachers had statistically significant greater gains in student achievement than the non-TFA teachers in grades 3-8 English Language Arts/Reading (ELA/R) and in grades 9-11 both ELA/R and Math. Regarding the achievement gap that exists for African American students, Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students, the results are mixed. For economically disadvantaged students, TFA teachers show statistically significant positive gains in student achievement for only grades 9-11 Math, but show statistically significant negative gains in grades 3-8 ELA/R and Math as well as grades 9-11 ELA/R. For African American students, TFA teachers show statistically significant positive gains in student achievement for grades 3-8 ELA/R as well as grades 9-11 ELA/R and Math. For Hispanic students, TFA teachers show statistically significant positive gains in student achievement only in grades 9-11 Math, but show statistically significant negative gains in grades 3-8 ELA/R and Math as well as grades 9-11 ELA/R. There are several issues with the data collected for this study. First, as stated earlier, the relative numbers of students, teachers and schools included are small which significantly limits the power of the study. Further, the authors self-report problems in accurately matching student scores with teachers therefore making it difficult, if not impossible, to make valid inferences about the true teacher impact on student test scores. As the authors themselves note (emphasis ours):

“Given data limitations and the requirements of the rider, the analyses were limited to descriptive and inferential statistics. As such readers are encouraged to interpret the findings related to student achievement with caution.”²⁶

Returning to TFA's claim that research “shows,” this addendum is particularly problematic. Arguably, “with caution” is a substantial qualifier to any claims using the word “shows.”

6. Recruiting Effective Math Teachers, How Do Math Immersion Teachers Compare²⁷

This report ultimately undermines TFA's claim regarding veteran teachers. From page 31 of the report

(emphasis ours):

“TFA teachers produce student achievement gains in middle school math that exceed those of teachers from other pathways **with comparable experience.**” Not, contra TFA's claim, veteran teachers.²⁸

Furthermore and importantly, from pages 23-24 of the report (emphasis ours):

“However, this [gains on middle school math tests] is **largely eliminated** once the much higher attrition of TFA teachers is taken into account.”²⁹

Said differently, when you start to consider how quickly TFA recruits leave their jobs, the gain is negated. This is the same conclusion reached by the authors of the “Portal Report” and therefore renders this report problematic at best.

7. Teach for America Teachers' Contribution to Student Achievement in Louisiana in Grades 4-9: 2004-2005 to 2006-2007³⁰

This report argues: “In all areas except for social studies, TFA corps members were statistically significantly more effective than other new teachers.” The key phrase here is “new teachers.” The authors do not reveal whether or not the “new teachers” contained unlicensed, uncertified teachers teaching out-of-field, as is common in poor, hard to staff schools.

Of the studies listed on TFA's research page, two are peer-reviewed. As we showed above, both are irrelevant to TFA's claim “that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers.”

When compared to experienced teachers, the authors report that there was “no significant difference” between the test data for TFA recruits and traditionally trained, experienced, teachers. Furthermore, the authors do not define what “experienced” means. Does that body of

“experienced” teachers contain only teachers with three years of experience? After all, they are, by the reports own admission, more experienced than most TFA recruits because most TFA recruits leave after year two. Arguably, if the authors had used only teachers with five years of experience in the control, the results would have been significantly different.

With these caveats in place, this is the only report, out of the 7 “problematic” and “mixed” reports that even remotely supports TFA's claim that “Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers.”

Positive

One “study” is overwhelmingly positive, but that “study” is actually a one-page summary from a survey of principals.³¹ The questions and data are not available, but the one page summary is overwhelmingly positive. The missing data may render this one-page summary problematic. For example, if the principals interviewed were from KIPP charter schools, owned by TFA founder Wendy Kopp's husband, they may have felt compelled to praise the TFA recruits frequently hired by KIPP schools. We can't know because the data is not available.

Conclusion

It is fitting to close this analysis with a discussion on the topic of peer review and its importance. Scholars and scientists have the mechanism in place to make sure research is sound and people aren't simply making things up and convincing others that they have found the cure for cancer, created a miracle drug like Vioxx, cloned a sheep, or narrowed the achievement gap. If "studies" are misleading, cherry picked, based on flawed instruments, and avoids the topic at hand, is it research or is it marketing?

Of the studies listed on TFA's research page, two are peer-reviewed. As we showed above, both are irrelevant to TFA's claim "that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers." Given that they have no connection to TFA's claim, these two studies are arguably included to pad TFA's resume. What is troublesome here is that we now live in a world where foundations and organizations have millions of dollars to spend lobbying (TFA has spent well over 2 million on lobbyists over the past decade) and at the same time can bypass peer-review in order to make a case for whatever they are selling.³² If powerful interests have enough money, science no longer matters. For more on this ask the scientists trying to address global warming.³³

What can be done to slow the spread of TFA is perhaps more troubling than the flawed "science" it uses to sell its wares. Despite cutbacks in funding for schools across the nation, states continue to earmark funds for Teach for America. We'd like to believe we live in a world where rational actors make decisions based on rigorous science, but experience has led us to believe this is a rare case when it comes to educational policy at federal and state levels. Doing something about the influence of money in shaping policy is beyond the scope of this paper.³⁴

References

- 1 Philip Kovacs, "Philip Kovacs Takes on TFA in Huntsville," Education Week: Living in Dialogue (November 19, 2011). Accessed 1/27/13 from <http://tinyurl.com/7jnb2gz>.
- 2 After the conclusion of our analysis, TFA changed the wording of the statement to "The most rigorous research over time has shown that corps members' impact on student achievement exceeds that of other teachers in the same high-needs schools. This is true even when corps members are compared with veteran and fully certified teachers." For this emendation, see footnote 3.
- 3 See https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/Research_on_Teach_For_America_2012_1.pdf. Accessed 1/23/13.
- 4 This claim is leveled on the website itself. See <http://www.teachforamerica.org/our-organization/research>. Accessed 1/23/13.
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