

In at the deep end

How well does Teach for America work in the schools?

It sounds as uncontroversial as apple pie. Teach for America (TFA), a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1990, places young “corps members” at schools in poor areas to teach for two years. Recruits work in 35 states, most come fresh from college, and they learn mainly on the job. Fair enough; but TFA has many critics, particularly among teachers who have spent years becoming qualified and whose jobs are now contested.

Minnesota’s Board of Teaching caused a furore this summer when it refused to give a band of TFA members group permission to teach in the state. It had done so every year since the organisation first arrived there, in 2009. The state assessed 35 applicants individually instead—eventually granting licences to all of them.

Ryan Vernoush, a board member and a former Minnesota teacher of the year, believes placing inexperienced young people in front of “marginalised students” only serves “to perpetuate the status quo of inequity”. Elisa Villanueva Beard, the co-chief executive officer of TFA, counters that her organisation is just “one source” of teachers among others. She wants principals to have a choice when looking for employees.

Such drama in the North Star State illustrates how TFA can polarise opinion. Some celebrities and philanthropists are right behind it: John Legend, a popular singer, serves on TFA’s national board, and the Walton Foundation, funded by members of the family behind Walmart, has given it more than \$100m. TFA is an influential voice in debates about school reform and privatisation, particularly as many of its 32,000 alumni now hold lofty positions in education and elsewhere. One, Cami Anderson, is the superintendent for Newark’s schools; another, Mike Johnston, is a state senator in Colorado.

Unlike some other teacher-training programmes, TFA chooses its recruits with care. The 5,900 who have started for the current academic year represent only 14% of all those who applied. (In 2009-10, applicants included 18% of Harvard’s senior class.) TFA tries to choose young people who are organised and motivated enough to take control of difficult classrooms, right from the start.

A new report for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), released on September 10th, suggests that TFA’s members excel at teaching maths (although older studies suggest they do no better than their traditionally qualified peers at teaching children to read). The report, which looked at TFA members teaching maths in middle and high schools, found that the improved test scores of pupils were equivalent, on average, to an extra 2.6 months of school.

The TFA teachers were more likely to be white, male and graduates of “more selective” colleges than the teachers they were measured against. The data on TFA’s newcomers, however, show that the organisation is more diverse than the study’s sample: 39% of the latest recruits are minorities, according to Ms Beard. That is “important given the communities in which we work”, most of them heavily minority.

The study’s findings also rebut criticisms that TFA’s two-year teaching scheme is too short. Members were more effective than other “novice” teachers (those with less than three years’ experience), and better even than those who had been teaching for an average of ten years, despite the fact that they were also less likely to have a degree in maths.

One Californian recruit thinks TFA’s model is revolutionary because normally “the best teachers are striving to get into the best-paying schools”. But she feels members can still be “emotionally underprepared” for the challenges of inner-city teaching. After their two years, only a third of TFA alumni continue in the classroom. Many more, however, emerge energised to campaign for better schools.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 408, n. 8853, p. 35, 14 a 20 Set. 2013.