

Teach For America—Second Things First

By Michael J. Salmonowicz

Of the scores of undergraduate students who took part in commencement exercises last spring, about 2,500 are entering K-12 classrooms this fall as members of Teach For America. If last year is any indicator, media outlets soon will be flooded with stories on the program's mission (ending educational inequity), competitive admissions process (fewer than 20 percent of applicants are accepted), and size (it is one of the country's largest employers of new college graduates).

In response to these stories, critics will contend that Teach For America's teachers, known as "corps members," should not be assigned to our nation's toughest schools and classrooms because of their lack of experience. They will point to evidence that shows traditionally trained teachers can do a better job. They will explain that schools can be hurt by employing corps members, since many of them leave upon completing their two-year commitment, forcing schools to search for replacements.

Teach For America will counter this criticism with independent research reports showing achievement gains in corps members' classrooms. The organization will present survey results showing that principals are highly satisfied with corps members, year after year. It will reference the high number of teachers who stay in the classroom beyond their two-year commitments, including Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year.

What will be missing from the description, criticism, and even the defense of Teach For America is a thorough explanation of how those TFA alumni who leave the classroom are making an impact in the fight against social inequity in general, and educational inequity in particular. Teach For America has two stated goals, in the following order: (1) reduce the achievement gap between low-income and more affluent students by providing schools in depressed areas with teachers who are motivated, high-achieving recent college graduates; and (2) create systemic change in all parts of society through the program's alumni, many of whom will leave teaching after two years to pursue careers in fields such as law, medicine, and public policy.

It has long been my contention that Teach For America's primary mission is the second goal, but that it would not be politically expedient to promote it as such. The organization hints at this, however. When I was a corps member, for example, recruiters gave away bookmarks that said something like, "Ninety-six percent of our nation's senators have law degrees. Imagine if 96 percent of them had taught for two years in an underresourced school." Partnerships with nearly 150 graduate schools in a variety of fields are heavily

advertised in campus recruitment sessions. And, at least in the experiences of my colleagues and me in Chicago, there was no push from the organization to stay in the classroom beyond two years.

Perhaps because the oldest Teach For America alums are just now approaching the age of 40, we have not yet seen the effects of their work outside the program. But over the next 20 years, as thousands of these former corps members—people once considered the “best and brightest” in top universities across the country—grow in number and gain traction in their careers, I believe the value of the second half of Teach For America’s mission will become increasingly evident. I also believe that the impact of alumni outside of education will more than counter any criticism of the program and its effects on students and schools.

Why do I believe this? Because taking the lessons learned from a Teach For America school, as we used to call them, can change a person’s perspective more than almost anything else one could do upon graduating from college. And taking those perspectives into the worlds of business, medicine, law, and other places where they traditionally have not been can have tremendous impact on social issues related to children and schools.

I often run into people who disagree with my position. “Everyone knows about injustice and inequity,” they say. “We see it every day on TV and in the papers.” I take issue with this argument: There is a difference between being aware of something and knowing about it.

When a student tells you that he saw a friend murdered from 10 feet away, it’s different. You can’t close the newspaper and move on to something else. You see that student every day in class, you remember what he said, and you think about why it happened and how it must have affected his life. How would you have reacted to such a traumatic event?

When you hear a student tell you she is hungry because she didn’t have breakfast (or dinner the previous night), it’s different. You can’t sigh, lament how bad things are, and change the channel. You see that student in your 7th period class, an hour before you go food shopping. As you leave the grocery store, you realize that you bought everything you wanted, without looking at prices or clipping coupons or scouring the receipt for mistakes. What would your student think if she were there with you?

When you confront a student about being behind in reading the Dickens novel you are teaching, only to find that she doesn’t have her own room or even a quiet place to read in her family’s apartment, it’s different. It isn’t a scene in a movie that will be resolved if you just stay tuned for an hour more. You wonder what you would have done without your own room, without a quiet place to study. Could you have coped, much less excelled?

Now imagine if thousands and thousands of people *not* in education grappled with these thoughts and questions on a daily basis—if those doctors, lawyers, politicians, and businesspeople not only were aware of, but *knew* about the problems so many in our country face each day. If this were the case, I think we not only might have more of a sense of urgency to address the problems, but might offer more creative and comprehensive solutions as well.

As a future school leader, I have described my dream. Because when students receive proper nutrition and health care, they are more eager and focused learners. When parents have access to quality housing and earn fair wages, they are better able to support their children's academic pursuits. When education policy is practical and flexible, faculty members can teach more effectively. We need capable people to stay in the classroom, but having former teachers in influential positions in other fields can be just as important to the success of our schools.

As the debate over Teach For America's impact on students and schools continues, I hope that more attention is paid to the impact the program's alumni are having outside of education. If these talented people mix the lessons of their two-year experiences with their own potential for greatness, both our society and our schools can look forward to a lot of good things.

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