

*Edvc - Teaching*

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Teach for America: Learning the Hard Way

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BODY:

Five years after Teach for America began sending recent college graduates to some of the poorest urban and rural schools, the organization finds itself still trying to handle its growing pains with grace.

Teach for America, which sprang from the 1989 senior thesis that its founder, Wendy Kopp, wrote at Princeton University, has placed 3,000 teachers and gained both praise and strong criticism for its methods. Every year, after training 500 recruits -- many of them graduates of Ivy League colleges -- for five weeks, the program assigns them to two-year teaching posts in areas as varied as New York City, the Mississippi Delta and South Central Los Angeles.

Patterned after the Peace Corps, Teach for America has been hard hit by what its director of development, Richard Barth, calls a "belt-tightening crisis." In 1995 the recruiting staff was slashed from seven to two. (Overall, the organization employs about 80 people.) To maintain one of the program's essential components -- the on-site mentors who help new recruits get adjusted to teaching -- Teach for America has begun to seek out partnerships with local universities and community colleges, as well as to rely more heavily on alumni to contribute time and expertise.

"We're stepping back from trying to take on all to the responsibility ourselves," explained Ms. Kopp, 28, as she sat in her organization's headquarters in New York City's financial district.

In addition, Teach for America is struggling to rebut its critics.

In May, responding to several recent studies by educational groups

criticizing its teacher training program. Teach for America released a report it had commissioned. According to the report, the majority of superintendents are happy with the teachers' work. "In some areas we come out looking good," Ms. Kopp said.

Sharon Mitchell, the placement coordinator in the Unified School District of Oakland, Calif., said: "They're climate changers. They think out of the box."

Teach for America is part of a larger trend that has emerged since the early 1980's, when states began to offer alternative licensing or certification programs for teachers. Such programs allow liberal arts graduates and others without education degrees to work as teachers in areas where there are teacher shortages. Most often these schools are found in poor districts. According to data collected by the National Center for Education Information in Washington, 40 states now offer such programs, up from 33 in 1990.

"If the school district provides adequate mentoring and support," said Pat Dingsdale, the education committee chairwoman for the National Parent-Teacher Association, in Chicago, "any alternate certification program can work."

Yet many of Teach for America's critics argue that such support is not forthcoming. In 1991 Melissa McDonald graduated from Tufts University with a degree in American history. She then spent a turbulent nine weeks in a New Orleans school she described as "a trash can" before reluctantly leaving Teach for America. She is now a manager at the Nature Company in Boston.

"I had 10-year-olds who had failed second grade three times," said Ms. McDonald. She blames Teach for America for her quick departure because it placed her in the school and failed to give her support.

"The corps members who finished their two-year commitments had strong mentors -- and their schools wanted them there," she said.

In New York City, first-year Teach for America teachers make about \$28,000, about \$4,000 less than first-year teachers with master's degrees. During their two-year commitment, program participants have the option of working toward their permanent licenses.

Supporters of Teach for America say that over the last five years the program has filled a gap in recruiting hard-to-find bilingual, special education and math and science teachers. According to the organization's statistics, the number of its teachers who finish the two-year commitment has risen from 70 percent in 1990 to 85 percent in 1993. The statistics also indicate that the organization does better than the education profession overall in recruiting

minorities, who now make up 46 percent of all corps members. This figure includes 24 percent African-Americans, 8 percent Hispanics and 8 percent Asians. According to figures from the National Library of Education, 86.5 percent of all teachers nationwide are white and 7 percent are African-American, 4 percent Hispanic and 1 percent Asian.

According to Teach for America statistics on the first group of program teachers, who finished in 1992, some 55 percent are still teaching, although 72 percent remain in education. By contrast, only 7 percent of teachers with master's degrees nationwide have dropped out of teaching after three years.

Teach for America, however, says that in the areas where its teachers are employed, the overall turnover rate tends to be much higher, up to 50 percent. And Ms. Kopp says as much as training teachers, the program seeks to create leaders.

"I'd like people to someday talk about T.F.A. the way they talk about the Rhodes scholarship," she said.

In the summer of 1993, President Clinton approved Teach for America as part of Americorps, his national service initiative. The program now receives about 21 percent of its \$5.2 million budget from Americorps, which also pays off participants' undergraduate loans and offers small grants for future education. The majority of Teach for America's money, however, still comes from corporations and individuals -- among them are the Lilly Endowment Corporation and Philip Morris.

Yet because of Teach for America's budget cutting, some of its most ambitious initiatives are being dropped, like the costly and time-consuming efforts to get states to accredit its five-week summer training program as an alternative route to teacher certification.

And two education divisions of Teach for America have left to become nonprofit companies. The two divisions are Teach, which focuses on recruiting people in other professions to become teachers, and The Learning Project, which helped design the Houston Summer Institute where Teach for America teachers are trained.

In addition, many educators in traditional graduate teacher-training programs remain skeptical about Teach for America's long-term impact.

"What Teach for America is doing would be more productive if they recruited for the long term instead of as a pit stop," said Linda Darling Hammond, a professor of education at Teachers College at Columbia University in New York.

By putting teachers into the neediest schools, she said, the program is cheating a generation of "high risk" children.

Professor Darling Hammond also accused the program of taking jobs away from teachers who are more qualified.

"Districts can only legally hire us if they have a shortage," Wendy Kopp responded.

But last year in Seattle, which has no teacher shortage, the Board of Education voted to hire 17 Teach for America teachers, even though Washington state certifies 2,500 teachers every year. Of these, half remain unemployed after receiving certification. "The vote was controversial," said Ted Andrews, the state's director of professional education and certification.

Most teacher educators critical of Teach for America say they do not oppose alternative certification as such, but what they characterize as the program's slapdash approach to training.

"The summer institute is a series of one-hour workshops with no curriculum," said Robert Roth, a professor of education at the State University of California at Long Beach, who evaluated Teach for America's summer training institute in Houston for several states in 1993. "The students could choose anything they wanted in any order," he said. "In five weeks you cannot train teachers to step into the classroom. We have difficulty doing that in four years."

Teach for America, however, said the training institute's recruits teach at a summer enrichment program for students in Houston's public elementary schools. In the afternoons and evenings, according to program outlines, the trainees attend curriculum workshops. Veteran teachers and experienced corps members are asked to evaluate the performance of the new recruits on a daily basis.

"It was like educational boot camp," said Catherine Schoeffler, who got a sociology degree at the University of Southwestern Louisiana before teaching at a tiny elementary school in Ruleville, Miss.

Pam Briskman, a Teach for America recruit from Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., said, "I really don't think that anything can prepare you for the first day of class."

Ms. Briskman, who has taught at Bret Harte Middle School in Oakland, Calif., for three years, said she feels that the Teach for America approach is at least as effective as the traditional teacher-training education programs from which her colleagues graduated.

In New York, at P.S. 28 on West 155th Street in Harlem, Gina Laporta, an English major who graduated from Boston College in 1994, said her training was adequate, but her first year of teaching was still an enormous struggle.

"All of a sudden I was going to be responsible for 20 children who wanted to be educated."

For several months she was in shock, she said, overwhelmed by a classroom where many of the students had emotional problems for which she had no training.

She was assigned two mentors -- one from Teach for America and the other a veteran teacher at the school. But even now, Ms. Laporta does not know if she will stay a third year. "I change my mind every day," she said.

David Gunderson had a different experience.

After graduating from Yale University in 1989 with a major in political science, he wanted to teach before medical school.

But because he didn't want to spend a year getting a degree in education, he found that Teach for America presented an ideal opportunity. Mr. Gunderson spent four years teaching life science at Compton High in South Central Los Angeles.

"It's the greatest education you'll ever have," he said.

Now Mr. Gunderson intends to go back to medical school and to earn a master's degree in public health.

"In 10 years, I'd like to be living in a rural area where I can practice medicine half the time and teach the other half," he said.

For Seth Kugel, who finished his two-year stint in the South Bronx in New York last year, academic critics of Teach for America miss the point.

Mr. Kugel, who is now a first-year student at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, said: "If you're a T.F.A. teacher, you don't have to worry about staying, about pension, about red tape, about getting the ideal job in the ideal school -- you don't have to worry about getting out of the South Bronx. You don't have to learn the system. If you're in T.F.A., you can just teach."

GRAPHIC: Photo: Wendy Kopp's Teach for America has put 3,000 recent college graduates into poor schools. (Andrew Lichtenstein for The New York Times)