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# Why We Partner with Teach for America: Changing the Conversation

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## Why We Partner with Teach for America: Changing the Conversation

### **Abstract**

We have been invited to respond to Megan Hopkins' article because our schools partner with Teach for America (TFA) to prepare corps members in our graduate programs. Why? Because we maintain a deep commitment to preparing and placing effective, knowledgeable, and caring teachers in every classroom. Thus we seek out viable partners who can help in our efforts to counteract the impact on students of extreme teacher shortages and diminishing confidence in the positive outcomes of teacher education programs. We partner with TFA to provide comprehensive teacher preparation programs — not mere backdoor or emergency approaches. Our programs actively support new teachers.

### **Comments**

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# Why We Partner with Teach for America: Changing The Conversation



Three deans explain why their schools are glad to work with Teach for America and describe how they provide comprehensive teacher preparation programs to TFA corps members.

*By Mari Koerner, Doug Lynch, and Shane Martin*

**W**E HAVE been invited to respond to Megan Hopkins' article because our schools partner with Teach for America (TFA) to prepare corps members in our graduate programs. Why? Because we maintain a deep commitment to preparing and placing effective, knowledgeable, and caring teachers in every classroom. Thus we seek out viable partners who can help in our efforts to counteract the impact on students of extreme teacher shortages and diminishing confidence in the positive outcomes of teacher education programs. We partner with TFA to provide *comprehensive* teacher preparation programs — not mere backdoor or emergency approaches. Our programs actively support new teachers.

There is an urgent need for work of this kind, which raises the question of whether it is wise to wait for our

teacher preparation institutions to arrive at a “more ideal” approach to recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers for our schools. It is likely that there is no “one size fits all” teacher preparation program. Thus, to our minds, *many* of the conversations that float around TFA are distractions. We have these conversations among ourselves in the programs that prepare teachers, while we collectively ignore the larger issue: few in the public schools seem to think our solutions suffice to solve the problem of providing high-quality teachers for the nation's classrooms. Richard Ingersoll points out that in 2003-04, 14% of teachers retired, 33% were over 50 years old, and some 540,000 new

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teachers were hired.<sup>1</sup> That year, Teach for America provided 1,500 of those new teachers — significantly less than 1% — and did not address at all the talent crisis in the existing corps of teachers. Such a program has a role to play, but clearly it cannot be the primary so-

**Full-time, tenure-track faculty members** teach some of the Teach for America sections; others are taught by **outstanding practitioners** whom we invite from the community.

lution to the problem of providing high-quality teachers in the numbers we need.

Given the magnitude of the challenge before us, we believe the most productive strategy for dealing with problems of teacher shortages and teacher quality is to focus on improving schools of education and identifying what needs to be done to ensure that all primary and secondary school children have the kind of teachers they deserve. We must also learn to choose our battles wisely. The words of Paul Sindelar and Michael Rosenberg resonate with us: “Teacher education seems to be out of synch with the needs of public schools. With multiple paths to state licensure and almost immediate employment available in our public schools, it also runs the risk of creating world-class, highly rigorous teacher preparation that no one will want.”<sup>2</sup>

The best partnerships require that both partners learn from each other. They require an openness that allows for serious reflection and discussion of practice, as well as the commitment to improve. Our partnerships with TFA meet these criteria. Each of our programs was co-constructed with TFA to meet the needs of new teachers walking into some of our country’s toughest schools and to ensure that they would receive the ongoing support they need, both as teachers and as our graduate students. We learn from our partnerships, and so our teacher education programs can evolve.

We accept the spirit of Megan Hopkins’ piece, which addresses the need to improve the practice of teacher preparation. However, we are changing the conversation that surrounds Teach for America, which can best be described as schismatic. When it comes to programs like TFA, it seems that one is either “heretical” or “orthodox.” It is time to be “ecumenical.” In any dialectic, there comes a time when synthesis is required in order to evolve. The most productive conversation to have today revolves around exploring how schools of

education might improve programs for all students, including the students in Teach for America.

We fully recognize that it is imperative to bring resources and fresh ideas to the enterprise of teacher preparation; research conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond and other critics of Teach for America has been instrumental in informing us how to create programs that improve upon existing practices.<sup>3</sup> We are already implementing these practices with corps members in our graduate programs in cooperation with TFA. Let us tell you about these programs.

*TFA and ASU.* We at Arizona State University understand that a partnership is a “two-way” relationship that must benefit both parties. In March 2007, the College of Teacher Education and Leadership (CTEL) began to plan an innovative teacher preparation program for more than 180 TFA corps members who had been hired as teachers in classrooms across the West Valley. In the fall of 2007, these corps members entered CTET’s teacher preparation graduate programs. ASU faculty members and TFA program directors collaborated on a new delivery system for our Master and Certificate (InMAC) programs and implemented that redesign in elementary, secondary, and special education so as to meet the needs of the interns and to prepare them to be effective in the classrooms where they teach. More specifically, our InMAC program now provides courses that address teacher preparation as well as the additional requirements needed for a master’s degree in education. Intense clinical supervision in students’ classrooms is the hallmark of this program. As a university committed to working with communities, we recognize that our duty lies in working with — not ignoring — an organization that places hundreds of teachers in Phoenix classrooms.

Extensive professional development for faculty members is also a distinctive program feature. Working with TFA, our coordinators have attended orientations for the corps members in Los Angeles and Atlanta. They meet with the TFA program directors and plan the curriculum as well as communicate the needs of the students. (Each of our corps members signs an agreement that allows us to discuss his or her academic progress with the TFA directors.)

We are learning about the best sequence of courses to meet the needs of new teachers, and this has informed our traditional programs as well. Full-time, tenure-track faculty members teach some of the Teach for America sections; others are taught by outstanding practitioners whom we invite from the community.

As we have prepared for each new group of corps members, we have learned how to make their transition into teaching and university graduate programs both easier and more effective. We have assigned an advisor to these students, and we are working with TFA to design and teach an orientation in summer 2008 that will be offered to all Teach for America corps members. We continue an ongoing dialogue with local TFA staff members in an effort to improve the delivery and content of our programs.

*TFA and Penn.* In Philadelphia, we have had our share of challenges. Management of the Philadelphia school district was taken over by the state in 2001 after many of the schools within the district continued to fail to meet state standards. In 2006, the district had

**Currently, over 200 TFA corps members are enrolled in an elementary, a secondary, or a special education combined master's degree and teaching credential program.**

185,000 students enrolled in 281 schools. Eighty-seven percent of all students belong to minority groups, and about 75% are eligible for federally subsidized lunches. Some 65% of 11th-grade students are less than proficient in English, and 69% are less than proficient in mathematics.<sup>4</sup> With respect to teacher quality, 89% of Philadelphia teachers were certified in 2004, but only 56% of new teachers are certified. The district hires about 1,000 new teachers each year, and roughly 10% of them are corps members. Despite the district's strong efforts, new teacher retention remains a problem, with roughly 20% leaving after their first year and another 15% leaving after their second year.

The University of Pennsylvania entered into a partnership with Teach for America four years ago. The university has a deep commitment to local engagement and in particular to the School District of Philadelphia. While we recognize that some of our own faculty members have philosophical issues with our pragmatic approach, we remain committed to our partnership. The TFA corps members are going into our schools to work with our kids. If we have any possibility of increasing their chances of success, we have an obligation to do what we can. We also value the opportunities to learn that working with local schools provides us, and we have the chance to put innovative ideas (in terms of teacher education) into practice in an urban setting.

We believe the program we offer is unique. We do not populate our regular classrooms with corps members; rather, we have designed a special program modeled on executive MBA programs. The program follows a cohort model and reinforces the corps members' collective experience. The curriculum addresses specific needs with regard to the schools in which corps members will be teaching, the sorts of students they themselves are, and the training they have already received from TFA. Our program mirrors the spirit of the professional development that Linda Darling-Hammond has advocated in that it is more akin to the way a doctor is trained; that is, it is grounded in daily experiences rather than overloaded with academic training. The faculty and the content come from across the university,

not solely from our teacher education program. Rather than "courses," we offer a series of experiences. In addition, a cadre of doctoral students serve as mentors and coaches to our TFA corps members. The Philadelphia Writing Project also supports the program with a group of veteran teachers who work with corps members, and we have brought in external professional development from such

organizations as Facing History and Ourselves. We are also in negotiations with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to offer additional professional development opportunities.

*TFA and Loyola Marymount.* At Loyola Marymount University we began our partnership with Teach for America in 1999 in response to severe teacher shortages in the inner-city schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District and surrounding districts. Currently, over 200 TFA corps members are enrolled in an elementary, a secondary, or a special education combined master's degree and teaching credential program. One unique feature of our partnership is the extent of collaboration between the faculty and TFA, which begins with the summer institute. Education faculty members from Loyola Marymount collaborate with TFA to develop the curriculum for the institute. The faculty members also offer workshops and maintain a presence during the summer institute.

The two-year program features a rigorous academic curriculum that focuses particularly on teaching English-language learners and offers intensive support through clinical supervision. University supervisors spend considerable time supporting candidates in the field, especially since they are teaching in extremely challenging urban settings. Over the years, we have had third-year retention rates as high as 80%. The partnership

is staffed by a full-time program director and coordinator, assisted by adjunct faculty members and supervisors.

## NEXT STEPS

Megan Hopkins offers some suggestions on how Teach for America might improve its program. We leave it to TFA to assess the viability of those suggestions. For the present, we believe that schools of education need to consider how to support innovative programs that will ultimately benefit the public school students we are all committed to serving. For us, this means working with Teach for America and other groups to seek a solution, rather than sitting back and identifying problems.

To be clear, we recognize that some of our TFA students will elect to leave the profession. Indeed, this is true of non-corps members as well. To serve these members, we include in our programs issues of policy and context so that these corps members don't leave the classroom embittered (always a problem with new teachers, regardless of their path into the profession). Instead, we want them to understand the challenges that our country's schools face.

If we would embrace the spirit of Megan Hopkins'

suggestions and accept collective responsibility as schools of education to be part of the solution, rather than lay it solely at the feet of TFA, we might serve as catalysts for the dialectic evolution of the profession. Those of us who partner with Teach for America recognize that the organization has a good thing going; our collective challenge is to help TFA continue to improve and to find ways to scale up its successes, all the while seeking out eclectic solutions to the critical shortage of qualified teachers our country faces.

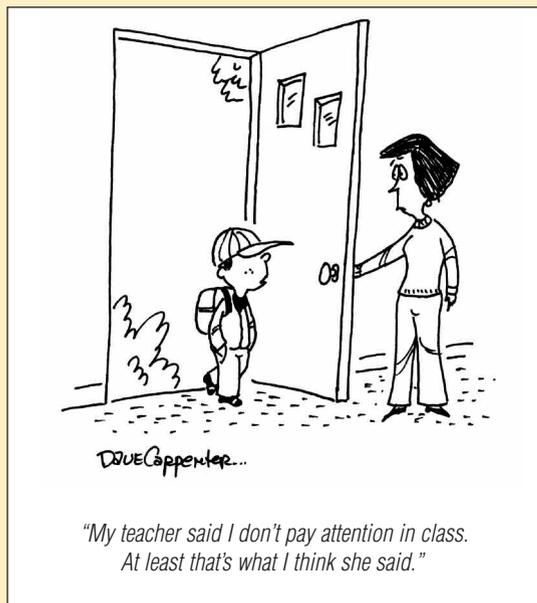
1. Richard Ingersoll, "What the Data Tell Us About Shortages of Mathematics and Science Teachers," paper commissioned for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2006, available at <http://nctaf.org/zeus.silvertech.net/documents/WhattheDataTellUsAboutShortages.pdf>.

2. Paul T. Sindelar and Michael S. Rosenberg, "Serving Too Many Masters: The Proliferation of Ill-Conceived and Contradictory Policies and Practices in Teacher Education," *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 51, 2000, p. 191.

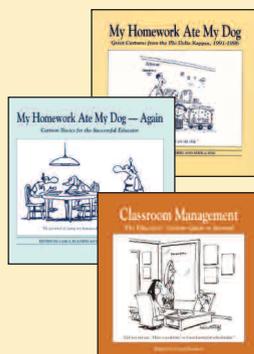
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4. School District of Philadelphia, as of 10 December 2007, [www.phila.k12.pa.us](http://www.phila.k12.pa.us). **✶**

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