

**MEMORANDUM**

**January 28, 2013**

**TO:** The Honorable Chair and Members of The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida

**FROM:** Alberto M. Carvalho, Superintendent of Schools *AMC*

**SUBJECT: TRANSMITTAL OF INFORMATION CAPSULE: *REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH: THE IMPACT OF TEACH FOR AMERICA TEACHERS ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT***

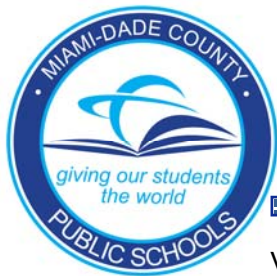
Attached please find a copy of the Information Capsule, *Review of the Research: The Impact of Teach for America Teachers on Students' Academic Achievement*, recently completed by Research Services. This Information Capsule summarized research conducted on Teach for America (TFA) teachers' impact on student performance and found that studies have produced contradictory results. Some studies have found that TFA teachers produce greater student achievement gains than traditionally certified teachers, while others have reported less favorable results. Several studies reported that TFA teachers were more likely to produce greater student achievement gains than traditionally certified teachers on mathematics tests than on reading and language arts tests. This Information Capsule also concluded that research conducted on the impact of TFA teachers on students' academic performance is fraught with methodological difficulties. More research is needed before definitive conclusions regarding TFA teachers' impact on students' academic performance can be drawn.

If you need further information, please call Ms. Milagros R. Fornell, Chief Academic Officer, Office of Academics and Transformation, at 305 995-1451, or Ms. Gisela Feild, Administrative Director, Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis, at 305 995-2943.

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Attachment

cc: School Board Attorney  
Superintendent's Cabinet  
Ms. Deborah Karcher  
Ms. Gisela Feild  
Selected Administrators



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

## Research Services

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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

### **REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH: THE IMPACT OF TEACH FOR AMERICA TEACHERS ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Efforts to expand the pool of candidates to fill teaching vacancies in the nation's low-performing schools have increased in recent years. One way educators are addressing staffing deficits is by adopting policies and programs that allow teachers to hold alternative certification credentials. Teach For America (TFA) is one such program.

TFA is the largest alternative certification program in the U.S. and was founded to eliminate educational inequities facing children in low-income communities. The program actively recruits college graduates and mid-career professionals who commit to teach for a minimum of two years in high-need, low-income schools throughout the country. The vast majority of recruits have no prior teaching experience or university-based courses in education. TFA candidates receive alternative certification by taking coursework during an intensive, five-week summer institute and engaging in practice teaching. Upon completion of training, corps members are placed in high-need schools to complete their two-year service commitment. Once they enter the classroom, TFA teachers are provided with ongoing individual and team coaching and support and have access to TFA's Web portal that allows them to exchange lesson plans, instructional strategies, and assessments. TFA teachers are official faculty at their schools and receive standard salaries and benefits. In addition to their salary, TFA teachers also receive help with student loans and funding for future educational expenses. The TFA program began in 1990 with 500 teachers. Today, there are over 9,000 TFA corps members teaching in high-need school districts across the U.S. (Teach For America, 2012; Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2009).

#### **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

While TFA has significantly increased the pool of candidates in low-performing schools, many questions remain about the ability of TFA teachers to improve students' levels of achievement. A review of the research conducted on TFA teachers' impact on student performance revealed the following:

- Studies comparing the student outcomes of TFA and traditionally certified teachers have produced contradictory results. Some studies have found that TFA teachers produce greater student achievement gains than traditionally certified teachers (Ware et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2010; Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2010; Noell & Gansle, 2009; Nadareishvili, 2008). Others have reported less favorable results (Boyd et al., 2006; Kane et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Kovacs

(cited in Cody, 2011a) stated: “In some cases, in some places, and in some grades, TFA might produce better results on math tests than traditionally certified, novice teachers. The rest is very debatable.”

- Some studies indicate that TFA teachers are more likely to produce greater student achievement gains than traditionally certified teachers on mathematics tests than on reading and language arts tests (Cody, 2011b; Ware et al., 2011; Schoeneberger et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2007; Decker et al., 2004; Raymond et al., 2001).
- Teaching experience has a positive effect on both TFA and traditionally certified teachers. Most studies have found that when TFA teachers remain in the classroom and obtain training and certification, their students generally do as well as those of traditionally certified teachers in reading and language arts and sometimes better in mathematics. The problem is that more than 50% of TFA teachers leave the classroom after two years, and over 80% leave after three years. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if these positive findings are the result of additional training and experience or the attrition of less effective TFA teachers (Heilig & Jez, 2010; American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2009; Center for Urban and Multicultural Education, 2009).
- Several researchers have reported that Hispanic students have lower test score gains when they are assigned to TFA teachers than to traditionally certified teachers (Ware et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2005). Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2005) hypothesized that the specialized knowledge needed to teach English language learners may be more consistently acquired in traditional teacher education programs, where teacher candidates have more time to learn strategies for teaching content to students who have specific language needs.

### **METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS OF STUDIES CONDUCTED ON TFA TEACHERS**

Research conducted on the impact of TFA teachers on students' academic performance is fraught with methodological difficulties. Some studies fail to control for students' prior levels of academic achievement; others are conducted on behalf of organizations that have an interest in the outcome of the studies. The most common flaw involves the selection of a comparable group of teachers to which TFA teachers can be compared. The lack of suitable control groups has left researchers unable to definitively determine the effectiveness of TFA teachers. The following examples illustrate how some studies have not used the strongest methodological techniques to select their control groups.

- Nadareishvili (2008) conducted a study funded by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation that compared TFA and traditionally certified teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The Broad Foundation has funded the TFA program since 2002. Nadareishvili reported that LAUSD TFA teachers produced student achievement gains on the reading and mathematics portions of the California Standards Test that were three scale score points higher than non-TFA teachers and four scale score points higher than novice non-TFA teachers. However, all of the teachers in the TFA sample had at least one year of teaching experience. In contrast, control group teachers included all first year teachers in the school district. Study results may be biased in TFA teachers' favor because they had more teaching experience than control group teachers (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2009).

- Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. conducted a national evaluation of the TFA program in six regions: Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Delta (Decker et al., 2004). The evaluation found that TFA teachers had a positive impact on the mathematics, but not reading achievement of their students. As was the case with the Nadareishvili study, however, the Mathematica study did not have a comparable control group: 100% of the TFA teachers had some teaching experience prior to entering the classroom, while only 47% of novice teachers in the control group and 71% of the overall control group had teaching experience (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2009).
- The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (2010) reported that TFA teachers' students made greater gains on reading and mathematics tests than students taught by traditionally certified teachers. The problem with this study is that it compared TFA teachers (who were placed at the lowest-performing schools) to all teachers in the state (who were teaching at the full range of low- to high-performing schools). Since greater test score gains tend to occur among lower-scoring students, this study may have overestimated TFA teachers' impact on student achievement. TFA teachers may have been found to have a greater impact on achievement than traditionally certified teachers simply because they were more likely to be working with lower performing students who were capable of making larger test score gains (Kovacs, as cited in Cody, 2011b).
- The Center for Research and Evaluation at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) conducted an evaluation of the TFA program within the CMS school district (Schoeneberger et al., 2009). The evaluation found that students of TFA teachers made greater gains on end-of-grade mathematics, but not reading tests than students of traditionally certified teachers. However, the sample of traditionally certified teachers was about five times as large as the sample of TFA teachers. The comparison of test score gains by TFA and traditionally certified teachers may have been biased by the discrepancy in the sample sizes of the two groups of teachers (Kovacs, as cited in Cody, 2011b).
- Xu and colleagues (2007) studied the TFA program in the state of North Carolina for the National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER). The researchers found that students of TFA teachers made greater test score gains on standardized end-of-course tests in mathematics and science than students of traditionally certified teachers. Xu and colleagues reported that TFA students were about one month ahead of students taught by traditionally certified teachers. However, the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (2008) reported that it had reservations about the results of this study because students were not linked directly to the teacher who taught their course, but instead matched to teachers based on test proctor and classroom demographics.

## **CONCLUSION**

Educators and policymakers disagree over the role that TFA teachers should play in schools. This lack of agreement has continued over the years, fueled by contradictory study results. Supporters of the TFA program cite studies with favorable results, while detractors point to studies reporting that traditionally certified teachers have a greater effect on student achievement than TFA teachers.

One education blog (Eduwonk, 2004) took issue with criticisms regarding weak control groups in TFA studies. The blog's writers noted that although some control groups may not have been

methodologically robust, they represented the actual pool of teachers available in high-need communities at the time. The blog noted: “TFA has never claimed to be a replacement for larger efforts to improve teacher preparation. Instead, it’s an effort to get disadvantaged kids good teachers now.”

Some researchers believe that TFA teachers may provide a modest degree of stability to classrooms in low-performing schools that might otherwise hire less qualified substitute teachers or other novice alternatively certified teachers who would be likely to leave in a year or two (Heilig & Jez, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2005). In contrast, the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education at Indiana University (2009) concluded that hiring TFA teachers does not address the persistent challenges facing low-performing students and schools. The Center noted that school districts spend significant amounts of money on the cyclical hiring and replacement of TFA teachers who are more likely to leave the school after two years than their traditionally certified counterparts. Clearly, more research is needed on the impact of TFA teachers on students’ academic performance before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

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