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EFP Takeaways

Does Teach for America Still Improve Student Achievement?

Background

Teach For America (TFA) is a highly selective program that recruits graduating college seniors and other promising candidates, trains them to be teachers, and places them in low-income schools. Since its founding in 1990, TFA has been controversial. Critics argue that TFA does not adequately prepare its teachers and that they leave the profession after only a few years. Proponents of TFA assert that the program provides a valuable source of teachers to disadvantaged schools. In 2010, TFA launched a large-scale expansion, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education. A new study by Melissa Clark and Eric Isenberg examines changes in the composition of TFA corps members and the effectiveness of TFA corps members recruited and trained during the expansion. Their findings are published in vol. 15, issue 4 of *EFP*.

The Study

To understand TFA teachers' effectiveness, the study used a randomized controlled trial to compare the test scores of students taught by TFA teachers and similar students taught by non-TFA teachers. The authors recruited 36 elementary schools to participate. In each school, the study identified at least one TFA teacher and at least one non-TFA teacher teaching the same grade and subject. The study team then randomly assigned students to a class taught by a TFA teacher or a class taught by a non-TFA teacher, to ensure the two sets of teachers taught similar students. Overall, the study examined data for more than 2,000 students and 150 teachers.

Findings

Descriptive analyses showed that the composition of TFA corps members did not shift much following the 2010 expansion. This suggests that TFA was able to maintain the same level of selectivity in recruiting corps members. In general, TFA teachers were younger, less experienced, and more likely to have graduated from a highly selective institution than their non-TFA counterparts.

Overall, TFA teachers and other teachers in the same high-poverty elementary school were similarly effective in teaching both reading and math. However, TFA teachers were more effective than their counterparts when teaching at lower grade levels. In particular, TFA teachers were more effective in teaching reading to prekindergarten through second grade students. There was also some evidence that TFA teachers were more effective at teaching math to students in first and second grades.

These findings suggest that TFA continued to provide effective teachers to disadvantaged schools even during a large-scale expansion of the program.

For more details:

- View the [full issue](#).
- See the full [article](#) in Education Finance and Policy.
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- Summary of:
Clark, M. A., & Isenberg, E. (2020). Do Teach For America corps members still improve student achievement? Evidence from a randomized control trial of Teach For America's scale-up effort. *Education Finance and Policy*, 15(4), 736-760.