

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Teach For America Spinoff Helps Alumni Gain Influence

By **Stephen Sawchuk**

A spinoff of the controversial Teach For America teacher-placement program has expanded rapidly in recent months, pursuing a goal both specific and dizzyingly broad: helping TFA's 32,000 alumni rise to civic-leadership roles.

**Leadership for Educational Equity** has grown from just a handful of staff members a few years ago to nearly 60 today. The Washington-based group, known as LEE, now boasts a \$3.9 million annual budget. In 2011, it launched a series of national workshops for TFA alumni eyeing careers in policy and advocacy, and in 2013 expanded it to include community organizing.

The ambitions of LEE are bolder, though, than to serve as a development center of sorts for those alumni: The group also puts campaign muscle behind members who decide to seek elected office.

TFA founder Wendy Kopp "was prescient to say that if you're going to change education, you've got to change the politics of education and change people in leadership," said Patrick McGuinn, an assistant professor of public policy and education at Drew University, in Madison, N.J., who has studied **new types of advocacy in K-12 education**.

How successful LEE's bid to that end will be remains to be seen, especially given what critics and supporters alike say is a relatively vague mission. Persistent suspicions of a pro-charter school, anti-union bias that have dogged its parent organization have also spilled over to LEE's own work.

"There is skepticism about why they are so private," said Arnold F. Fege, a former director of public engagement and advocacy for the Public Education Network, which represented a coalition of community education funds before shutting down in 2012. "What are they advocating for?"

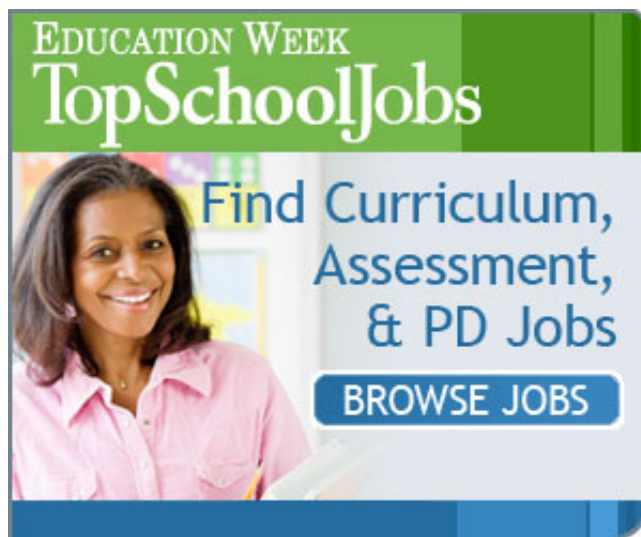
### Offering Pathways

Spun off from Teach For America in 2007, LEE was designed to be more purposeful about developing TFA alumni's leadership goals beyond the classroom or the principal's office.

"The more time I spent talking with Wendy Kopp, I became convinced that [TFA's] leadership [development] wasn't as fully oriented towards advocacy and community organizing," said Michael Buman, a former partner at the global consulting firm McKinsey & Co. who became the executive director of LEE in 2011. "I saw lots of amazing leaders who were passionate about change, but were civically disengaged."

Baltimore LEE member Jennifer Aguirre is a case in point. The Spanish teacher's quiet demeanor belies a core of hard determination that helped her become the first in her family to attend

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college, and once led her to raise \$20,000 to pay for her students to visit Spain. (Leadership for Educational Equity essentially accepts as a member any current or former TFA participant, and it does not charge dues.)

Though deeply troubled by inequities in the Baltimore school system, Ms. Aguirre struggled to articulate her role in addressing them. She didn't want to go into school administration. She considered applying for a job with TFA providing professional development—a common steppingstone for corps members—but felt the program's teaching focus was too narrow.

LEE offered another leadership pathway. Through one of its **fellowship programs**, Ms. Aguirre won an internship at a Baltimore community-organizing group, The Intersection, itself run by a TFA alumnus. There, she says, she got a better understanding of what community members wanted to see from schools, such as stronger links to after-school jobs and programs for students.

That feedback has formed the basis of her subsequent ideas for a career path.

"It's a different set of skills [LEE] gives you—more policy-oriented," Ms. Aguirre said.

"You have people who know something's wrong," she said, "but they need to be given the resources needed and encouragement to step out of their comfort zone and try to tackle a huge problem."

At a national organizing workshop in Chicago hosted by LEE this past summer, Ms. Aguirre and several colleagues took part in a role-playing exercise designed to highlight some of the obstacles to effective community organizing.

They had been variously assigned to be organizers who were pushing for the expansion of a pre-K program or to portray a board president, a superintendent, and a union leader who opposed it.

The exercise was surprisingly authentic, resulting in pale faces and sweaty palms. The district officials' excuses about costs, lack of research, and competing priorities came quickly and glibly. The community organizers, with little time to prepare, failed to mount an effective rebuttal.

"I think we share a commitment to helping kids. We should revisit this discussion," said the teacher playing



Spanish teacher Jennifer Aguirre says a community-organizing mentorship through Leadership for Educational Equity, a Teach For America spinoff, has influenced her decision to pursue a job in immigration policy. Ms. Aguirre is finishing her third and final year at Bluford Drew Jemison STEM Academy in Baltimore.  
—Matt Roth for Education Week

## At A Glance: Leadership for Educational Equity

**Year Established** 2007

**Structure** As a “social welfare” organization under section 501(c)4 of the tax code, Leadership for Educational Equity can engage in both educational and political activity.

**Mission** To propel Teach For America alumni who “share a commitment to ending the injustice of educational inequity” into leadership roles.

**Membership** Open to any Teach For America corps member or alumnus who requests it, and does not cost anything. In 2012, the organization had 19,000 members.

the board president, smiling wanly. It was a polite dismissal that deflated almost every argument the organizers tried to advance.

"I was so mad," Ms. Aguirre confessed after the activity ended. "I wanted to throw a chair."

And that's the point, explained LEE's vice president of organizing and advocacy, Joy Silvern. Organizing, she said, is about more than having a good idea. It's about knowing how to pull the levers of power: by having strength in numbers at a board meeting, by having a clear, consistent "ask," and by being prepared to respond to any and all objections.

### Political Wing

Trainings such as the Chicago workshop are largely paid for by Teach For America, whose donations make up a majority of LEE's budget. The rest comes from private foundations and individual donors LEE doesn't disclose, and help to supports another prong of the organization's work: political activity.

Electoral work amounts to less than a third of LEE's budget, its officials say, but it has nevertheless fueled **popular accounts of the organization, mostly critical**. Such accounts accuse the group of supporting candidates who espouse a particular "corporate" brand of education policy focused on expanding charter schools and test-based accountability.

Critics point to prominent TFA alumni and LEE members, such as Bill Ferguson, a state senator in Maryland, who sponsored legislation that included an iteration of the "parent trigger." That policy permits parents to turn over the management of schools to outside operators.

LEE officials contest such depictions.

"We do not exist to propagate policy," said Mr. Buman.

The group's election-related support generally takes the form of in-kind contributions, such as candidate coaching or help in reviewing campaign materials.

Allison Serafin, one of two LEE-backed candidates who won a seat in Nevada's 2012 state school board race, said the organization's director of elected leadership, Mallory Hutchison, helped her avoid jargon in framing her campaign priorities. Among them: having all high school seniors to take a college-entrance exam so they have a credential with some currency after graduation.

"I tend to get really wonky," Ms. Serafin said. "Mallory was helpful in saying: 'What is the headline? What is going to matter to parents? Use language that someone can talk about at the

**Personnel** 57 employees as of 2012. The staff includes a former U.S. Department of Education acting assistant secretary and a former aide to U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., an ally of the Obama administration on K-12 policy.

**Programming** Most training is arranged by eight regional directors and responds to members' local needs. National workshops—which cover the basics of community organizing; policy and advocacy; and running for elected office—are more selective, typically reserved for members with a history of participation. The group also runs several fellowship programs, giving members the chance to intern with school boards, policy shops, communityorganizing groups, and campaigns.

**Budget** By 2012, its budget had grown to \$3.9 million.

**Elections** In 2011, the organization spent \$5,000 on small donations to five candidates' races. It supported about 60 candidates in 2012, spending a total of \$40,000, and estimated spending \$20,000 on 20 candidates in 2013.

**Funding Sources** Since its inception, about 70 percent of the organization's budget has come from Teach For America. In 2012, TFA funding made up 53 percent of revenue. That spending is restricted to educational activities, such as membership outreach and training. Other revenue comes from foundation grants and individual donations.

Source: Leadership for Educational Equity

dinner table; do not drop acronyms.' "

## Electing Candidates

Ms. Serafin received assistance from LEE valued at \$10,646, according to campaign-finance records. (The other LEE-supported candidate in the race, Alexis Gonzales-Black, received assistance valued at \$9,114.)

But at no time did the organization try to steer Ms. Serafin in certain policy directions, she said.

To an extent, her candidacy remains something of an outlier. A majority of LEE-backed candidates have run for local, rather than state, offices and have received far smaller levels of support. They have won seats on neighborhood councils in Los Angeles and the District of Columbia, school-based councils in Chicago, and school board positions in several cities.

Jason Esteves, an Atlanta lawyer and a TFA alumnus, was one of four LEE-supported candidates to win a seat on that city's school board in the fall elections. He, too, said that LEE never vetted his policy positions. But he said that critics sought to use his affiliation with TFA, and by association LEE, as a wedge issue.

"There was a common thread of accusations of a privatization movement, which really annoyed me, because I emphasized that I believe that our public school system can thrive," Mr. Esteves said. "We can focus on our traditional schools and improve them."

LEE support for the Atlanta candidates totaled some \$6,500 in in-kind contributions, records show.

## A 'Strong Network'

The connection to TFA also appears to have given LEE-backed candidates access to an informal network that can fuel spending. Campaign-finance records from the Nevada state board races, for instance, turn up some of the same donors **who have contributed to other endeavors** affiliated with so-called "reform" priorities, including charter school expansion and teacher evaluations linked to student test scores.

Those contributors include Alan Fournier, who helps finance the **New Jersey chapter of StudentsFirst**, the advocacy group founded by former District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee, and Charles Ledley, a donor to Democrats for Education Reform, a political action committee.

"There's a strong network of people who are supportive of TFA alums, regardless of what their policy or visions are for the respective school systems," Mr. Esteves said.

In essence, the issue boils down to one of self-selection: Even if LEE itself is politically neutral, it supports candidates who by definition must take policy stands. And those who reach out for its help may well favor a certain approach after being immersed in TFA's philosophy, Mr. McGuinn of Drew University said.

"At some point, this spinoff organization and TFA have to decide, 'Well, are we just about nurturing TFA leaders whatever their policy agenda is—or are we going to only support those who embrace the principles we do?' " he said.

LEE's proponents, meanwhile, wonder whether the group's electoral work could jeopardize the bipartisan support that its parent organization has enjoyed on Capitol Hill and in statehouses.

"Teach For America alums lean Democratic, ... so it becomes a political problem," said Andrew J.



Rotherham, an education consultant at Bellwether Education Partners and a policy analyst who served as an education aide in the Clinton administration.

"I think the theory of leadership development is really smart, and calibrated to have a lot of impact," he said, "but all anyone talks about is the electoral part."

It's partly a testament to the breadth of LEE's work that such debates seem irrelevant to many of the Baltimore teachers who participated in the organizing workshop in Chicago last summer. Reginald Benbow, a Baltimore teacher, has attended LEE's organizing workshop and another LEE program that helps develop African-American elected leaders.

"I tend to think LEE tries hard to be nonpartisan," he said. "A lot of the people who have presented have been elected Democrats or in the school reform movement, but the overall message has been very general and open."

Mr. Benbow, now in his third year of teaching, is one of the LEE members helping push forward the Baltimore chapter's organizing work. In the six months since the Chicago workshop, he and colleagues have hosted 13 house meetings—an organizing tool designed to gather information from local constituents and hone an agenda for change.

### Action Plans

A consensus on pushing for more community schools in Baltimore has emerged from the meetings. Such schools knit together health and support services for students alongside academics, and there's an opening for them now as Baltimore prepares to spend \$1 billion in bond revenue to renovate schools.

"My school was built in 1918, we're having these facility problems," Mr. Benbow said—including a flood and two fires last week —"so, I had a house meeting for teachers at my school. ... Basically, people wanted to see lots of technology in the new building, they wanted it to have space to integrate the community, to still have a green space, because it is a green school."

Members' next step is to conduct research on community schools, and to develop an action plan to promote the idea to the district and other city offices, said Taylor Stewart, the LEE regional organizing director for Baltimore.

"We've seen [the teachers] really understand the process that organizing is founded in relationships. It can be slower work, but they are seeing that what they want to do is possible," she said.

As for Ms. Aguirre, who leaves teaching this year, she's leaning towards taking a position in immigration policy. But she doesn't rule out the possibility of one day running for public office.

"I've always told myself that seeing the supports I would have and the insights I've gained about the education system, I would love to go back to Houston and run for city council or state senator," she said. "I would love to represent the Latino community in that position."

If so, she's certain to have LEE backing her.

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