

TFA Teachers: How Long Do They Teach? Why Do They Leave?

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Few observers doubt that Teach For America (TFA) has high aspirations. Established in 1990, TFA strives to close persistent racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in U.S. public education by recruiting high-achieving college graduates to teach for two years in low-income urban and rural schools. In recent years, applications to TFA have soared, especially at highly selective colleges. In 2009-10, for example, 18% of Harvard University's seniors applied to the program. Proposing to expand its teaching corps from 7,300 to 13,000 over the next five years, TFA recently won \$50 million in the federal i3 (Investing in Innovation) competition and succeeded in raising \$10 million in matching funds.

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TFA's rapid growth and success in garnering financial support from public and private sources exhilarates some — and angers others. Proponents vigorously cite the program's merits, contending that TFA attracts academically strong and motivated young people who would otherwise not consider teaching, especially in high-poverty schools. Its detractors, with equal passion, argue that by requiring only a two-year commitment from corps members who have received only five weeks of formal preparation, TFA undermines efforts to stabilize and improve staffing in the very schools most overwhelmed by teacher turnover and most in need of consistency in the classroom. Moreover, critics argue that TFA compromises teaching as a profession by minimizing the importance of preservice preparation and casting teaching as a prelude to the higher-status careers that many corps members enter after their TFA experience. Some cynically assert that the program functions primarily as a résumé booster for ambitious upper-middle-class college graduates, intent on fashioning the most compelling application to the nation's top law or medical schools.

Debates about whether TFA can revive chronically failing schools or will further aggravate the problems facing these schools often turn on competing claims about how long TFA teachers stay on the job. Critics conclude that corps members routinely leave their school after their two-year commitment, if not before. For their part, TFA relies on internal surveys, which show that 60% of corps members remain in education, holding various roles at various levels of the system.

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