

How Teach for America Evolved Into an Arm of the Charter School Movement — ProPublica

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When the Walton Family Foundation announced in 2013 that it was donating \$20 million to Teach For America to recruit and train nearly 4,000 teachers for low-income schools, its [press release](#) did not reveal the unusual terms for the grant.

Documents obtained by ProPublica show that the foundation, a staunch [supporter](#) of school choice and Teach For America's [largest](#) private funder, was paying \$4,000 for every teacher placed in a traditional public school — and \$6,000 for every one placed in a charter school. The two-year [grant](#) was directed at nine cities where charter schools were sprouting up, including New Orleans; Memphis, Tennessee; and Los Angeles.

The gift's purpose was far removed from Teach For America's original mission of alleviating teacher [shortages](#) in traditional public schools. It was intended to “generate a longer-term leadership pipeline that advances the education movement, providing a source of talent for policy, advocacy and politics, as well as quality schools and new entrepreneurial ventures,” according to internal grant documents.

The incentives corresponded to a shift in Teach For America's direction. Although only 7% of students [go](#) to charter schools, Teach For America sent almost 40% of its 6,736 teachers to them in 2018 — up from 34% in 2015 and [13%](#) in 2008. In some large cities, charter schools employ the majority of TFA teachers: 54% in Houston, 58% in San Antonio and at least 70% in Los Angeles.

Established nearly 30 years ago to tap idealistic graduates of elite universities to teach at traditional public schools in high-poverty areas, Teach For America has evolved into an informal but vital ally of the charter school movement. Not only does it place a disproportionate number of its teachers in charter schools, but the organization and its affiliated groups also have become reliant on the support of the Walton Foundation and other school choice advocates, including a daughter of billionaire Michael Bloomberg, the

former New York City mayor. As [board members](#) of Teach For America's offshoot leadership organization, which gives to the political campaigns of former TFA teachers, Emma Bloomberg and a Walton family member have supplemented the organization's contributions to charter school proponents with their own donations.

"There's no question that Teach For America as it evolved became joined at the hip to a large degree with the national education reform movement. I suspect that some of this was coordinated in part with funders who are active in the Teach For America funding and the charter and reform activities," said Jeffrey Henig, a professor at the Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of a book about education research and charter school policy. "These billionaire school reformers and the foundations with which they are allied really have become much more sophisticated in the way they strategically use their funding."

Teach For America cautioned its public school teachers against participating in recent teacher strikes in [Oakland](#), California, and Los Angeles. Ava Marinelli, one of just 35 Teach For America teachers in the Los Angeles traditional public schools, joined the picket line anyway.

"With the level of divisiveness between charter and public schools, Teach For America has aligned with the charter school agenda," she said in a recent interview. "This shows with their donors and who their partners are." Teach For America said that it took no stance on whether its teachers should strike, but that the terms of their AmeriCorps funding prohibited involvement with organized labor.

Teach For America CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard said that donors don't sway its approach. "We don't have any one funder that is more than 5% of our overall budget," Beard said. "We are very focused on what are our objectives, what is our mission, what are our values and what are the needs of the community." She said that current grants to Teach For America from the Walton Foundation and other organizations don't favor charter schools over traditional public schools.

She said that the organization does not have a national placement strategy and that where corps members teach is determined by the needs of regional partners. "Every last strategy question is answered locally," Beard said. "Our interest is just to make sure that we are working to ensure that we meet our partners' needs, are serving the students who need us most and are able to advance the needle for opportunity for them."

Both push and pull factors have fostered Teach For America's shift in direction. Since 2016, school districts in San Francisco; Jacksonville, Florida; and Houston have decided to end their contracts with Teach For America, citing, among other reasons, its teachers' relatively low retention rate. At the same time, Teach For America and the charter school movement share a similar goal: promoting innovation by streamlining bureaucracy. Teach For America's alumni have started some of the nation's largest charter networks, including KIPP,

Rocketship Education, IDEA and YES Prep.

Whichever type of school they serve in, Teach For America's teachers devote their intelligence and energy to helping low-income and minority students and closing the nation's unrelenting achievement gap. But its metamorphosis reflects a broader trend: As nonunion charter schools have gained acceptance in the past 20 years, political support for traditional public schools and teacher unions has eroded.

While both the Obama and Trump administrations have backed charter schools, the appointment of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who once [called](#) the traditional public education system a "dead end," fractured the political consensus. The issue divides candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. Bernie Sanders has called for a [moratorium](#) on federal funding of charters until a national review of their growth is conducted. Sanders, [Joe Biden](#) and [Elizabeth Warren](#) have criticized for-profit charter schools, with Sanders advocating an [outright ban](#).

Other candidates, such as Cory Booker and Beto O'Rourke, are sympathetic to charters. As Newark's mayor, Booker [raised](#) millions in private funds for education reforms, including the expansion of charter schools. O'Rourke, whose wife [started](#) a charter school, has [called](#) them a "good idea" for encouraging competition and innovation.

As a Princeton University senior in 1989, Wendy Kopp had a radical idea to curb the teacher shortages plaguing America's least resourced public school classrooms: Send them the country's brightest college graduates.

"We take all of these promising future leaders and have their first two years be teaching in low-income communities, instead of working in banks," Kopp said. "I thought that would change everything. It would change the consciousness of the country."

Within a year, Kopp's idea became Teach For America, which recruits new graduates from top colleges, trains them for five weeks, places them in schools nationwide and mentors them during a two-year classroom commitment.

Fueled by Kopp's prolific fundraising, the nonprofit grew quickly. In 2000, it [raised](#) \$25 million from private donors, government grants and foundations, which supported about [1,600](#) new corps members a year. By 2016, its contributions and grants [rose](#) to \$245 million with an [endowment](#) of about \$208 million, enough for [3,500](#) new members a year. Today, Teach For America ranks among the 100 [largest](#) nonprofits in the country.

The charter school movement, which arose soon after Teach For America's founding, was booming as well. Publicly funded but privately managed, and regarded by some proponents as a way to fix a failing education system weighed down by unions and bureaucracy, charter schools nearly [tripled](#) in enrollment from 2006 to 2016.

While Teach For America has received more than \$40 million annually in government

grants, according to the recent tax [filings](#), some of its largest private donors also bankroll charter schools. Over the years, these backers — including Greg Penner, Walmart’s board chairman and a Walton family member by marriage; Arthur Rock, a retired Silicon Valley entrepreneur; and Eli Broad, a Los Angeles philanthropist — have cycled through Teach For America’s board. Together, the three tycoons and their family foundations have [doled out at least](#) \$200 million to Teach For America.

“There are only so many donors and Teach For America is probably going after all of them, certainly whether they have a charter agenda or not, but many of them are very supportive of charters,” Kopp said.

Rock said in an email that he devotes almost all of his time and philanthropy to supporting K-12 education. “I support those organizations which have a proven record of helping children,” he said. Penner declined to comment, and Broad did not respond to questions related to his support of the organization.

Teach For America has long maintained that it does not prefer charter schools. “We believe in public education,” the organization states on a [webpage](#) devoted to combating criticism. “We’re not concerned about whether kids (or teachers) go to traditional district schools or public charter schools or innovative magnet schools, and TFA takes no institutional position on school governance.”

Marc Sternberg, a former corps member, now runs K-12 education for the Walton Family Foundation, which has given more than \$100 million to Teach For America over the years. He said the foundation has a “bedrock partnership” with Teach For America. To Sternberg, the missions of the two organizations are intertwined: expanding educational opportunity, and options, for children.

“I was placed in a school that was pretty dysfunctional,” said Sternberg, reflecting on his Teach For America experience at a traditional public school in the South Bronx in the late 1990s. “It lacked a leadership thesis that is necessary for organizational success. The entrepreneur walks into that environment, and sees all the great things, and develops an understanding of the problem statement and then wants to do something about it.”

While Sternberg said that the Walton foundation is “agnostic” about the types of schools it funds, the foundation has been one of the most [generous](#) supporters of charter schools, [having spent](#) more than \$385 million to help launch and sustain about a quarter of the nation’s charter schools since 1997. In 2016, the foundation announced that it would spend an additional \$1 billion to [support](#) charter schools, expand school choice and develop “pipelines of talent.”

The foundation’s 2013-15 grant paid more for placing TFA teachers in charter schools, Sternberg said in an email, because “we wanted to ensure that the growing number of charter schools had access to high-quality educators given increased demand from communities.” Its current grants to TFA provide equal funding for teachers at charter and

traditional public schools, he said.

Today, in most of the cities targeted by the 2013 grant, TFA partners with more charter schools than traditional public schools, according to AmeriCorps data. In [Indianapolis](#) and [greater Los Angeles](#), about two-thirds of TFA's partner schools are charters. In [New Orleans](#), where [nearly](#) all of the schools are charters, all of TFA's corps members are assigned to charter schools. In the past five years, the proportion of TFA teachers placed in charter schools has increased even as the raw numbers have gone down, reflecting an overall decrease in corps members.

Another major donor to both Teach For America and charter schools is the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, created by the founders of The Gap. In 2009, the fund gave \$10 million over five years "to continue Teach For America's role as a pipeline of teachers and leaders in the charter school movement," according to an [internal agreement](#).

In 1994, two Teach For America alumni founded the Knowledge is Power Program, now one of the nation's largest charter school networks. As chief executive of the KIPP Foundation, Kopp's husband, Richard Barth, has [overseen](#) the network's expansion.

"Leadership is critical, and so we have been very involved with Teach For America, which is an organization that has really given birth to KIPP and to many of the top charter school organizations around the country," the Fishers' son, John, said in a filmed 2012 [interview](#). "The human pipeline — the pipeline of top talent — has really been accelerated through the success of Teach For America."

As of 2012, a [third](#) of KIPP's teachers were Teach For America corps members and alumni. KIPP did not provide more recent figures. "You look at the percentage of the principals and teachers at KIPP and it's clear that it's a pipeline," Kopp said.

As school superintendents and state education directors, TFA alumni have pushed to expand charters. In 2011, former corps member John White became superintendent of the state-run Recovery School District, which oversaw most of New Orleans' schools. He's now the state [superintendent](#) of education. Over the same period, [charter schools](#) in the city and across the state have [proliferated](#). The last traditional public schools in New Orleans are set to [close](#) or begin a transition to charter control by the end of the year, and by 2022, all of the city's schools will be charters.

Cami Anderson, a Teach For America alum and former employee, was a key adviser to Cory Booker in his unsuccessful 2002 campaign for mayor of Newark, New Jersey. In 2011, when Booker was mayor, she became Newark's superintendent of schools. She reorganized the district, which [led](#) to mass layoffs of public school teachers and an increase in charter enrollment.

Under Teach For America alum Kevin Huffman, who served as Tennessee commissioner of education from 2011 to 2015, the number of charter schools there [doubled](#). The state's

current commissioner, Penny Schwinn, was also a TFA corps member. In Washington, D.C., two charter-friendly Teach For America alumni have led the district over the past decade: Michelle Rhee and Kaya Henderson.

Eric Guckian, a former Teach For America corps member, headed the organization's North Carolina chapter, and he later [pushed](#) for more charter schools as a senior adviser for education to the state's governor. He said propelling TFA alumni into positions of power was always the plan.

"The promise of Teach For America, when I was pitching it to potential donors, was that all these kids are going to turn into leaders and that has manifested itself," Guckian said.

Not all of Teach For America's alumni leaders favor charter school expansion. After teaching for more than two decades in traditional public schools in Compton and Los Angeles, Alex Caputo-Pearl was elected to lead the local union, United Teachers Los Angeles.

"There are a lot of very good people who are attracted to the program and do good work," said Pearl, who joined Teach For America in 1990. "I was in a classroom because nobody would be there if I wasn't there."

But, he said, Teach For America's agenda has shifted. In Los Angeles, where about a quarter of students are [enrolled](#) in charter schools, Teach For America has become the "main contributor to the characterization and privatization of public schools, rather than helping to address the teacher shortage in public district schools," he said.

At ICEF Inglewood Middle Charter Academy, in a low-income and predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood in Los Angeles, five of the school's eleven teachers are TFA members, including English teacher Joy McCreary. One morning in May, she peppered her seventh graders with questions about a passage they had read on the photographer Eadweard Muybridge.

"And what was Muybridge trying to find out by photographing a horse running?" she asked a student in the second row of her classroom, which was decorated with white lights strung against curtained windows, student projects and motivational messages promoting humility and determination.

"If a horse could fly," the student responded. McCreary nodded.

McCreary grew up in the Los Angeles suburbs; both of her parents were teachers. In June 2018, she graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, with degrees in international development, political science and German studies, and joined Teach For America. Her [five weeks](#) of training included coursework and teaching at a summer school program. Unlike teachers at traditional public schools, who typically gain certification by completing a qualified prep program and passing a standardized test, charter school teachers and TFA corps members may not need traditional certification. Over the years,

TFA has successfully [lobbied](#) state and [federal](#) legislators for a classroom fast track for its members.

“Teaching is very sink or swim,” McCreary said. “The best way to learn how to teach is just to teach.”

When McCreary joined Teach For America, she didn’t care what kind of school she ended up in. Now she’s glad it’s a charter school.

“Charter schools place a much higher focus on teacher development,” McCreary said. At traditional district schools in Los Angeles, she added, “You get these old, battle-ax teachers that have been there forever and are doing the same things every year and are not necessarily trying out new things or being challenged to try new things.”

Natalie Kieffer, the principal, also participated in Teach For America. After three years of teaching at a traditional public school in Los Angeles, Kieffer was laid off during the financial crisis and moved to a charter school. Within a decade, she rose from teacher to principal.

“There were opportunities for growth that I wouldn’t have been offered in [the Los Angeles Unified School District],” Kieffer said. “Being laid off was a blessing in disguise.”

The Inglewood school district recently [revoked](#) the academy’s charter due to low [academic performance](#), forcing it to close at the end of the year. Kieffer, who did not respond to emailed questions about the closure, will become an assistant principal at a charter high school next year. McCreary will move to another Los Angeles charter chain, the Alliance College-Ready network.

Another Teach For America corps member in Los Angeles, Faisal Hirji, is equally loyal to his school — a traditional public high school. The veteran teachers whom McCreary perceives as battle-axes, Hirji praises for their hard-earned wisdom. Hirji, who teaches special education, said TFA’s five-week training, plus a handful of online modules that it provided on how to teach children with special needs, weren’t nearly enough.

“Our kids are being dramatically underserved compared to what an experienced teacher could do,” he said. (Teach For America said that students of its teachers were at least as likely to pass state assessments as their peers.)

Like Hirji, all of Teach For America’s corps members in Los Angeles public schools were assigned to special education classrooms. “We were thrown into the fire,” he said. Teach For America said that aside from the summer institute, it provides “coaching, collaboration with veteran teachers, and local professional development opportunities” throughout a corps member’s commitment, but Hirji said its support was not enough. Realizing that Hirji needed a mentor, the principal at his East Los Angeles school had him work alongside a veteran special education teacher for his first semester.

“I didn’t learn anything from Teach For America,” he said. “I learned it all from my school.”

Typically, public school districts or charter schools pay Teach For America an annual finder's fee of \$3,000 to \$6,000 per teacher. From 2013 through 2017, Teach For America reaped more than \$110 million in recruitment and placement fees, according to tax filings. The districts or charters also pay the teachers' salaries and benefits.

Often, they're ponying up for short-timers. According to Teach For America, about 30% of its corps members leave teaching at the end of their two-year terms, and research has shown that only [one-fourth](#) stay in the classroom for more than five years, compared with about half of all new teachers.

In 2016, the San Francisco Unified School District [cut ties](#) with Teach For America, citing concerns about retention rates. The following year, Duval County, Florida, which includes Jacksonville, [ended](#) its contract, which allowed for up to \$600,000 a year to Teach For America for the annual [recruitment](#) of at least 100 teaching candidates. About a third of TFA corps members stayed beyond two years in the district and only a tenth stayed for five years, a [study](#) from Teachers College, Columbia University found. In comparison, 60% of new teachers who weren't affiliated with Teach For America stayed more than two years, and 40% more than five years. Teach For America said that its retention rate in Duval County has since improved, and that almost 80% of those who started teaching in 2017 plan to stay for a third year.

"One of the biggest questions was the return on investment," said school board chair Lori Hershey. "We could certainly recruit teachers at less expense and keep them longer than two years."

In 2018, Houston's district [renewed](#) its contract with Teach For America despite [plans to lay off](#) hundreds of teachers. Then, this May, its board discontinued the contract for the coming school year. Mika Rao, a managing director for regional communications and public affairs at Teach For America, called the decision "a great loss for [Houston's] kids."

School board trustee Elizabeth Santos, who has taught in Houston's traditional public schools for over a decade, voted to end the contract, [calling](#) TFA "problematic." It "deprofessionalizes teaching, increases turnover and undermines union organization," she said at the board meeting.

Trustee Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca, a [former](#) corps member who briefly worked as a program director for Teach For America, supported renewal. "We tend to have a teacher shortage every year and this just allows principals to be able to have the opportunity to hire with this route," she said at a [board meeting](#).

About a third of Teach For America corps members in Texas are still teaching there after five years, compared with over three-quarters of non-TFA teachers, according to a [recent study](#) by the American Institutes for Research. Rao said TFA's retention rate in Texas school districts has improved 20% since 2010.

Many of those who stay in education after their two-year stint in a traditional public school eventually shift to charter schools. While a quarter of corps members were placed in charter schools, about 40% of alumni who stayed in education later worked in them, according to a review of [survey data](#) from Teach For America alumni in Texas. TFA said this disparity is misleading because their data shows that alums who continue as teachers, instead of going into administration, switch from traditional public schools to charters at a lower rate than the other way around. About two-fifths of its alums in Texas are currently employed in administration or leadership, mostly in charter schools, according to the survey.

Tiffany Cuellar Needham, the executive director of Teach For America in Houston, said many alumni shuttle between both types of schools. “We see our alums make very intentional decisions about, for example, starting in a traditional public school district and maybe going to a charter school to get a certain sort of professional development that they think they need and then going back to a traditional district,” she said.

Beard, TFA’s chief executive, said the rejections by major school districts don’t indicate a national trend. “Every community has different dynamics and politics and budgets, and there’s lots of nuance and complicated factors going in,” she said.

This year, TFA’s turnover prompted Cristina Garcia, a Democratic state assemblywoman in California and former math teacher, to [propose](#) requiring teachers from Teach For America and other trainee programs to stay in the classroom for at least five years. Because Teach For America only demands a two-year commitment, it would have to change its model to operate in the state.

[Supported](#) by the California NAACP and the California Federation of Teachers, and [opposed](#) by the charter school lobby, the bill would also ban the finders’ fees that Teach For America charges schools. “Allowing Teach For America to come in, learn on the job, to experiment and create reform advocates is not creating people that are going to stay in the classroom,” Garcia said. “Is it really about creating a void because we have a teacher shortage, or is it about creating education reform advocates?”

Republican state Assemblyman Kevin Kiley cast the only vote against the bill in the education committee. “It’s probably the most disgraceful piece of legislation I’ve seen,” he said. It [passed](#) the appropriations committee in May, but it has been delayed until next January.

Kiley himself contributed to Teach For America’s low retention rates. After graduating from Harvard in 2007, he joined Teach For America and taught at a traditional public school in Los Angeles, where he started a debate team. After his two-year stint, he attended Yale Law School and worked as a deputy California attorney general.

“Many [corps members] stay in the classroom, but others move on, and that’s by design,” he said.

When Kiley ran for State Assembly in 2016, Leadership for Educational Equity, a “[dark money](#)” group that does not disclose its donors in its [tax filings](#), advised him on strategy in regular phone calls. “I was a first-time candidate, and I was seeking wisdom wherever I could find it,” he said.

LEE [contributed](#) \$8,360 to his winning campaign, according to campaign finance filings. In addition, after he filled out an internal questionnaire that asked the charter school supporter about his views on education reform and other issues, his campaign received more than \$33,000 from three LEE directors — Silicon Valley entrepreneur Arthur Rock, Emma Bloomberg and Steuart Walton — and some of their family members.

LEE “put me in touch with two or three donors, which is a small percentage of overall funding,” Kiley said. “You draw from all sources when you’re running.”

Kopp [established](#) LEE in 2006 to help Teach For America alumni gain power, including by giving to their political campaigns. Although the two organizations operate independently, they share office space, and Teach For America [donates](#) millions of dollars to LEE each year through an intermediary foundation. Only Teach For America alumni can be LEE “members,” entitling them to free training on leadership development, civic engagement and other topics.

LEE, which [received](#) \$29 million in contributions and grants in 2017, helped more than 150 alumni run in local and state races in 2018, according to an internal presentation obtained by ProPublica. (Leadership for Educational Equity said the presentation’s figures were incomplete and unreliable.) Half of LEE members that ran for office were women, and almost half were people of color.

The group gives to TFA alums regardless of their views on education. But if candidates indicate on the internal questionnaire that they support school choice or charters, directors Walton, Bloomberg and Rock often add their own individual donations, according to three former employees.

“The survey that the team uses is to really help the candidates to articulate” their positions and values, said Jason Llorenz, vice president of communication for LEE. “Certainly where we can help to connect to other people that can support them, whether that be about choice or about gun control or any number of other things, we certainly do.” Leadership for Educational Equity said it has contributed to several candidates who were supported by teacher unions.

Carl Zaragoza, LEE vice president of elected leadership, also said his team teaches candidates to network. “With money, the value added that we offer our folks is to how they will build relationships with folks that do have money who are aligned with their values,” he said. “That is part of the individual coaching we provide.”

Bloomberg, who is also on the KIPP [board](#), said that Leadership for Educational Equity

“supports a diverse set of leaders in communities across the country who believe deeply in the importance of high quality public education.” In the past, at her request, LEE has recommended candidates for whom her contributions could make the biggest difference, according to her communications adviser. It’s a coincidence that some of the candidates she funds favor education reform, because that’s not one of her criteria, the adviser said. Walton declined to comment on his donations or work with LEE, and Rock didn’t address questions about them.

Beard, TFA’s chief executive, is also on the LEE board. When asked about its work, she said it’s “a totally separate entity,” which Teach For America’s alumni choose to participate in. “We believe leadership development is core to what we do. We believe that we should be supporting our alumni in pursuing all of their interests and helping them ensure that they are accelerating their own leadership.”

Vilaseca, the Houston school board trustee who voted to renew Teach For America’s contract, was a founding teacher at a KIPP charter school. Walton family members and Rock [gave](#) a total of \$20,000 to her 2017 campaign, in addition to \$6,000 from LEE. Vilaseca did not respond to emailed questions.

Also in 2017, two Teach For America alumni ran against each other for the Los Angeles school board. Nick Melvoin, a charter school advocate, challenged board president Steve Zimmer, who taught at a traditional public school and was backed by the union. LEE contributed \$2,200 to Melvoin, and \$1,100 to Zimmer. (LEE said it gave another \$1,100 to Zimmer, but his campaign treasurer said it was never received.) Rock and the Bloomberg family added \$5,400 for Melvoin, but nothing for his opponent. Melvoin won and has become the most vocal charter supporter on the board.

“My north star is anything that will help improve outcomes for kids is good, and charter schools are doing that,” Melvoin said. This year, he was the only school board member to oppose a citywide moratorium on charters.

When Ava Marinelli heard last fall that her fellow teachers at Los Angeles Unified School District were planning a strike, she wanted in.

“I know where my values lie, and they lie with the union,” said the second-year Teach For America corps member, who graduated in 2017 from Boston University. “I’m not crossing a picket line.”

But her decision carried a financial risk. Through Teach For America, she and other corps members received scholarships from AmeriCorps, a federal program that prohibits [assisting or promoting union organizing](#). The money helped pay for Marinelli’s coursework toward a master’s degree in education, a key teaching credential.

Teach For America cautioned Marinelli and other corps members not to strike, or else they would lose their Americorps funding. As a strike loomed, they asked Lida Jennings,

executive director of Teach For America in Los Angeles, if they could give up their AmeriCorps money. Jennings agreed, but she told them that to retain even partial funding, they would have to cite extenuating circumstances for striking, such as harassment, pressure or bullying from other teachers, according to three corps members who spoke with her.

Jennings confirmed this position in an email to ProPublica. The teachers “had a difficult process to navigate due to the federal regulations they have to follow,” she wrote. “Those choosing to exit would have to demonstrate and detail extenuating circumstances, such as challenges at their placement school or other impact.”

Marinelli followed this advice. She told Jennings in an email that she faced “intimidation” at her school — a falsehood that still haunts her. “I lied to exercise my civil rights,” she said. “I was encouraging my colleagues to go on strike. No one intimidated me to do this.” Teach For America agreed to replace the striking teachers’ lost scholarship money with private funds. It has since arranged that, in the future, all teachers who choose to join a picket line will be suspended from AmeriCorps during the strike and then reinstated at the end, with no impact on their scholarships.

Alongside her students, their parents and her fellow teachers, and wearing a bright red scarf wrapped around her neck, Marinelli picketed outside of her school as well as the district’s headquarters, frequently leading chants with a megaphone, for all six school days until the strike was settled. The union extracted key concessions, including a board vote on whether to support a statewide cap on the number of charter schools.

“It felt so hypocritical to join Teach For America for the social justice lens and then not go on strike, compromising the values that brought me to Teach For America,” Marinelli said. “Even though they claim to be an apolitical organization, I really felt there was an agenda.”