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## Philip Kovacs Takes on TFA in Huntsville

By [Anthony Cody](#) on November 19, 2011 10:59 AM

*In the past few weeks, Philip Kovacs has taken a public stance in Huntsville, Alabama, raising questions about the school district's decision to invest significant resources in bringing Teach For America interns to that city. This is a guest post by him, describing his concerns.*

### Guest post by Philip Kovacs.

When I first heard about [Teach for America](#), I thought it sounded like a good program. Given a hard to staff school in a poverty stricken city, why not let enthusiastic college graduates with some training go in and put their hearts and souls into classrooms that would otherwise be staffed with less-prepared or unprepared individuals?

That line of thinking began to change as I read [column](#) after [column](#) problematizing the venture. Over the past two years, my city (Huntsville, AL) laid off over 300 certified teachers, many of them graduates of my program. Then I found out our city had signed a \$1.7 million deal for at least 170 TFA members. That figure is not firm, as the contract stipulates "at least" 170 TFAers over the next four years. Recent reports suggested it was \$1.9 million.

When I learned that TFA members...They are not teachers, any more than a recent undergraduate with 5 weeks of medical training is a doctor, or a lawyer, or a police officer. (Given the choice between someone with 5 weeks of training in any of those 3, or someone trained via an extensive program, which would you choose?)

...when I learned that TFA members were coming to my city, that they were going to cost the District an additional \$5,000 per year more than other new teachers cost, I became very interested in the research supporting the program. I bought and read [Learning on Other People's Kids](#), a book written by a former TFA trainer and a respected scholar. Have you read that book? It is dedicated to TFA members, and it is eye-popping to say the least.

Regarding the research supporting TFA, what I found was, well, nothing. There is no peer-reviewed research that supports the program.

There are two paid-for studies, one which acknowledges its own flaw re: sample not reflective of population. The other was identified by the Department of Education as flawed for misidentifying causation. You can learn more about both by reading this excellent post, ["Good" vs. "Poor" Studies of Teach For America](#). (In fact, please visit the site and tell Russell hello. I am in his debt for his help preparing me for the school board meeting this past Thursday.)

I have, however, seen two, peer reviewed pieces, one of which can be downloaded here: [Teach for America: A Review of the Evidence](#) (the other is forthcoming in the rather conservative Kansas Law Review) suggesting that TFA members are worse for elementary students in both reading and math, as determined by test scores. NOW, I don't think test scores are the best indicator of teacher or student performance, so I'd be more than willing to judge the success of both teachers and students using other data points. But test scores are the gods of the current educational reformers, and if their gods don't support what they are doing, there is some sort of problem in the temple.

At best the empirical evidence is mixed, at worst, it is damning. Given that the organization has been around for 20 years, if it was so good, why aren't there dozens of peer-reviewed reports proving it?

Furthermore, if I were a high level Teach for America employee or the founder (who makes the paltry sum of \$350,000 a year heading her non-profit), I would commission study after study to prove the program's success.

Goodness, I would probably go and buy a study from the Manhattan Institute or the Heritage Foundation, or Cato or any other report-producing think tank that hates teacher's colleges and the teachers that come through our doors.

There are dozens of these organizations, if there weren't, we wouldn't be living in the most anti-teacher moment in history, save the early 1600s when there was an active effort in the colonies to keep all people illiterate, not just the slaves.

Here is something else to consider. Market based reformers claim that competition works and that the market should determine success. If this was the case with TFA, the organization would not need **\$25,000,000 from the federal government** or another **\$25,000,000 from the Broad Foundation** to stay afloat. Its overwhelming success would earn enough dollars from the cities who use its graduates. In reality the "free" market can be ignored when you have enough money to buy yourself out of it.

If my city could not find qualified, certified teachers, I might support TFA recruits entering classrooms as part of a rigorous scientific study, if and only if parents were notified and given the choice to opt out, as is required by law.

The fact is Huntsville laid off 300 teachers over the past two years, many of whom were graduates of my university, and there is no teacher shortage in our city. In fact, competition for jobs is extreme with one principal telling me that she has 50 applications for every position...50!

I am also disturbed by the cronyism involved in all of this. Our new superintendent graduated from the **Broad Foundation's super-prep center**. The Broad Foundation supports TFA. It doesn't take an architect to connect these dots. Importantly, there are other non-traditional programs that prepare individuals for teaching. I went through one! There is an **excellent program in North Carolina** that has an amazing retention rate, so why not go with them given the overwhelming research that shows experience matters?

(For research challenging the argument that experience does not matter, see from the left leaning EPAA: **Does Teacher Preparation Matter? Evidence about Teacher Certification, Teach for America, and Teacher Effectiveness**. . See also, from the very right-of-center: Eric A. Hanushek & Steven G. Rivkin, **Pay, Working Conditions, and Teacher Quality**, 17 FUTURE CHILD. 69, 77 78 (2007).

After consideration for my untenured self and the futures of my students, I decided to go and ask our Board of Education a few questions. They are included below in case you want to ask them to your board members, and I encourage you to do so. I suggest you practice them more than I did, so you can look up more often in order to make eye contact with the Board. I was, in fact, pretty nervous, which is silly because 1) they work for me and 2) there is not a more incredulous audience than 25 high school juniors!

*Philip Kovacs is a former high school English teacher who teaches teachers at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. He is the editor of **The Gates Foundation and The Future of U.S. Public Schools**, priced*

*to move at Amazon.com... His research interests includes education in and for democracy and critiques of neoliberal think tanks, institutes and foundations. You can follow him on twitter @philipkovacs.*

Here's a [link to the YouTube clip](#) of Philip talking to the school board, note the camera in the back, as he called the news and convinced them to come to the meeting.

**Here are the questions he asked the school board:**

1. You've claimed there is "overwhelmingly positive research" in support of Teach for America (TFA). This is demonstrably false. Why are you making this claim when there are only two, non-peer reviewed reports on TFA, both of which have been discredited by scholars?

Furthermore, given that TFA has been around for over 21 years, if they were so successful, shouldn't there be dozens of peer-reviewed studies showing that success?

As there is no peer reviewed research on TFA, this is in fact an experiment, as such, will you give notice to parents whose children will take place in your experiment, as is required by law?

If your answer is "no," are you in fact demanding that all families participate in your experiment, or will parents be allowed to place their children in classrooms with professional teachers?

2. Will you guarantee that TFA members will be equitably distributed across the district and not only placed in Title I schools, which would be in direct violation of the ongoing federal desegregation order re: Hereford v. Huntsville?

Furthermore, will you provide the media with the percentage of black teachers laid off and the percentage of white "new faces" replacing them, or will the media need to use the Freedom of Information Act to determine those figures?

3. I am aware of several alternative programs that have better retention rates than TFA (see, for example, North Carolina). Did you solicit competing bids from these other organizations? If so, where are those bids, if not, why not?

4. Dr. Robinson claims the \$5,000 per year is for professional development, but TFA claims the money must be used towards paying off college loans. Who is incorrect on this point?

Are my tax dollars going to professional development, or am I paying off other people's college debt because, quite frankly, I have plenty of my own college debt.

5. If, in two years, your \$1.9 million experiment on Huntsville's children has not produced "overwhelmingly positive results," will you hold yourselves accountable and resign?

For the record, what is your metric for determining "overwhelmingly positive results?"

6. Will you provide members of the media with the exact amount of money you have given to the Broad Foundation since Dr. Wardinsky arrived, or will you make them use the Freedom of Information Act to determine to that figure?

7. Will you agree to stop outsourcing public education and to immediately end outside-of-district spending until the media has had time to determine, exactly, how much of our tax dollars you have given away?

**What do you think of Philip Kovacs' approach and the questions he has raised? Is Teach For America present in your schools? What do you think of their role?**

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