

While We're Talking About Racist Structures of Oppression, We Ought to Talk About Teach For America



Miles Devon Skeens IV [Follow](#)

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If you're not familiar with Teach For America, here's the basic rundown. In 1989, an over-achieving white undergraduate student at Princeton decided that her 21 years on planet Earth had sufficiently informed her of the large structural problems in education such that she should take the opportunity of her senior thesis to propose an idea that would fix the whole thing once and for all. Despite not having an actual degree in any subject even bordering on education, Wendy Kopp proposed (over the course of 177 pages) that the real problem facing America's system of teaching and learning was that poor kids just have really bad teachers. In her view, the solution was (in my opinion, laughably) simple: we take those dumb bad teachers with credentials from Dumb Schools and we replace them with smart graduates of the Best Smart Schools (like Princeton, of course).

And all those “licenses” and “certifications” that states normally require before someone can be entrusted with the education of children? Those are for the dumb teachers from Dumb Schools. Graduates from the Best Smart Schools have more knowledge in every subject, no matter what their degree is in. And any teaching-specific skills that normally require a four-year degree in Education can all be taught in a five-week summer camp, so long as the camp is also run by smart people from the Best Smart Schools. Oh, the innovation!

Well, naturally, politicians and business leaders of the early 90s didn't need too much arm-twisting to be convinced that there was no problem too great for a little Ivy League influence to solve. So, the year after she graduated, at the ripe old age of 22, Wendy became the Founder and CEO of Teach For America, a position she held until 2013, when she stepped down to become Chairman of the Board. In 2020, Teach For America (TFA) placed more than 6200 teachers (the organization calls them “corps members”) in more than 50 “regions” across the United States. They operate from a combination of federal Americorps funding, state and federal grants, and corporate donations to the tune of about \$245 million per year.

Over the years, a lot of ink has been spilled reporting on the various problematic tendencies at TFA. Corps members of color have spoken out regarding lack of diversity in the teacher corps and the pathetically lackluster white-savior-centered “diversity training” that is part of the summer institute. ProPublica published an extensive report in 2019 on the cozy relationship between Teach For America and the corporate charter school movement, exposing that TFA places approximately 40% of corps members in charter schools, undercutting veteran teacher pay and further funneling public money from public schools in poor areas to privately-owned charters, mostly run so rich white people can feel like they're Part Of The Solution, while also turning a profit. Former corps members have written books chronicling the lack of effective training or support and feelings of ostracization and isolation from TFA staff if they dare to ask for basic assistance. Some local leaders have cut ties with TFA because of concerns that the school district wasn't seeing the data to justify the extra cost (yes, partner districts pay TFA a substantial “finder's fee” for the privilege of hiring 22-year-olds with no educational experience and virtually no training, who have usually never stepped foot in the area before coming to rescue it).

Teach For America has an answer for all these accusations. They've even launched a website specifically for battling criticism. And, to be fair, they have made strides in corps

member diversity (they boast prominently on their website that this year's corps is 49% white and 51% people of color, a marked improvement from their numbers even just five years ago). They insist that they aren't an arm of the charter school movement, despite the fact that Kopp's husband runs KIPP, the largest charter school network in the country, which was also founded by TFA alums. They insist that they don't even have a preference for charter placement, despite documents that prove they receive a boatload of money from pro-charter foundations and individuals like the Walton Family, whose donation to Teach For America, until very recently, rewarded TFA with more money for placing corps members in charter schools than traditional public schools.

The fact is, a lot has been written about the disturbing indicators of the racially-problematic internal functioning at Teach For America. These observations aren't new; they've been spread far and wide for much of the last twenty years. Every time, Teach For America responds that they are doing everything they can to correct the problem — just a tiny snafu, nothing to see here. So much has been written — for *years* — about the troubling trends within this mega-organization — whether it's funding and spending irregularities, lack of reliable data that proves any kind of meaningful effectiveness, corps members leaving low-income schools after two years, financial punishment of corps members who dare to strike with the other teachers in their district, a political donation arm that seems to heavily favor alumnus who support expansion of charter schools, or taking credit for educational turnarounds that had little, if anything, to do with them. So much has been written about individual myopic organizational problems, in fact, that I think one fundamental truth tends to be overlooked: America's educational system would be better off if Teach For America didn't exist at all.

Look, I'm not a hater. I joined Teach For America's Baltimore corps in 2013. Like so many of my fellow corps members, I was high on wide-eyed optimism, armed with a bachelor's degree in political science, and low on most (if not all) of the skills and knowledge necessary to be an effective teacher. And like many TFAers before and after me, I completed my two-year commitment and then left to pursue the career I actually wanted. Everything I say about Teach For America, I say with love. The fact is, my experience leading a classroom on Baltimore's west side taught me — a sheltered white kid scarcely exposed to anything outside of the Kentucky suburbs — more about the true nature of this country than I ever could have or would have learned otherwise. I wouldn't trade my time with my students and their families for anything. I developed a camaraderie with my fellow corps members that

survives to this day and I know that there are good people working for Teach For America who are doing good things in their regions. But Teach For America's purpose shouldn't be the education of its corps members. Teach For America, if it exists, should do so because it provides a benefit for students. And it is on this front that Teach For America, as an organization, fails spectacularly.

Let's start by setting the scene. Teach For America, by design, places corps members in "high need" areas, which are predominantly inner-city schools. Philadelphia, Detroit, Newark, New York City, Los Angeles Unified, Baltimore, Miami-Dade, among others. Even the organization's partner regions in rural areas are mostly majority Black or POC (think Mississippi Delta, South Texas, Plains Reservations). Since the passage of Bush's No Child Left Behind (and exacerbated by Obama's Race to the Top), districts that perform well on standardized testing are rewarded with funding — while schools that perform poorly are punished with less funding. It doesn't take a Phi Beta Kappa to see the flaw in that setup, but it also provides the opportunity for Teach For America to be uniquely harmful to school districts that are already struggling.

Take my home region of Baltimore, for instance. In 2013, the year I started teaching, Baltimore hired 50% of its new teachers from alternative-certification programs. Teach For America supplied over 300 of the city's approximately 4,500 teachers. The city pays these teachers' salaries, health benefits, state retirement, the whole works. They also pay Teach For America a finder's fee of \$3,000 to \$6,000 per teacher. Americorps also chips in a stipend to the corps members of \$11,500 per year. TFA teachers in Baltimore City, no matter their school placement, are also eligible for membership in the Baltimore Teachers Union, which entitles them to benefits like tuition payment assistance from the City of Baltimore. This comes in really handy because Teach For America teachers who are placed in Baltimore corps are automatically admitted to the top-ranked School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. I admit, I took full advantage of this. To date, my Master's in Education from Johns Hopkins is the one degree for which I don't owe a dime. As best I can figure it, the City of Baltimore paid Johns Hopkins, an elite private institution, at least \$50,000 for my education alone. Nearly every TFAer I knew in Baltimore corps took advantage of this program. The majority don't teach after they've obtained their degrees.

And Baltimore isn't alone. Most Teach For America regions have partnered with schools in the area to provide similar opportunities for corps members. And, look, I'm not saying that

it's wrong for school districts to invest in the education and quality of their workforce. It's not. But when you look at what school districts are paying out versus what they're paying *for*, you start to realize just how systemically problematic Teach For America's very existence really is. Baltimore paid me the highest first-year teaching salary in the nation, provided me with excellent health, life, dental, vision, and retirement benefits, and paid for my private education. They paid TFA to find me. In return, they got a 22-year-old white kid from Kentucky with no experience and virtually no training. I taught history without a history degree!

To add insult to injury, I taught both years of my commitment in city charter schools, where any gains I theoretically may have made would only have served to undercut the traditional public education model and further foster the case for privatization. And so it goes, year after year, struggling school districts paying extra for unqualified teachers who, even if they do their jobs as well as TFA promises, still add to the destruction of the school district.

I guess then we should thank our lucky stars that TFA teachers don't perform as well as TFA promises. Even in the most TFA-friendly studies (which, I might add, are usually commissioned by TFA itself), corps members show standardized gains only marginally better than their traditionally-certified counterparts with the same experience. Other studies (at least two of them government-commissioned) have found that there is virtually no difference. Which begs the simple question: what on earth are school districts paying Teach For America to do, exactly?

As far as I can tell, the answer to that question is just as blatant and obvious as you would think: majority Black school districts are using public money earmarked for the education of Black students to pay the salaries, benefits, and higher-education costs of mostly white, mostly privileged employees who often don't know a thing about their region, the culture or community of their students, or how to do the very thing they were hired to do. They pay TFA to recruit these individuals. Then they pay the mostly white, mostly affluent ownership of charter school systems to hire a lot of these cheap teachers, lowering their operating costs, leaving them more money for marketing, allowing them to siphon off the majority of students in the district who were going to perform well anyway. Which, in turn, makes the school district's numbers — both financial and educational — look dismal in comparison. Leading, of course, to further funding for charter schools and less funding for traditional district schools. Teach For America then takes the money the school district gives them and

pays local and national politicians to support further charter expansion and grow its own operation.

Then, every year, they do it all over again. Teacher retention plummets, teacher turnover skyrockets, charters get the credit for their higher test scores, the district gets the blame for their lower test scores, the charters get rewarded with more money, the district gets punished with less. Charter school owners get rewarded with profit, district school leadership gets fired. And the district pays for all of it. Talk about a raw deal.

The truly sad part about this is that, while some partner districts have chosen to cut ties with Teach For America for all of the reasons listed above, I'm not so sure that a lot of districts could do so even if they wanted to. Baltimore City struggles every year to recruit teachers, even with Teach For America. Despite the high costs and huge turnover rate, Baltimore City needs warm bodies just like a lot of struggling inner-city school districts do. Teach For America, for all of its faults, is really good at one thing: recruiting people who may not necessarily be qualified to teach, but who won't quit until they've fulfilled their obligation. Without Teach For America, struggling school districts like Baltimore would have to recruit a third of their teaching workforce from mostly traditional certification sources, a daunting task that takes a huge commitment of staffing, planning, and resources — luxuries not usually found in school districts being financially punished every year for dismal test scores. And so, Teach For America remains. Like an educational narcotic, districts know it's poison headed straight for their heart, but they also desperately need it for their short-term survival.

This is going to be hard for some people to accept, but it's time we start talking about it, anyway. Education is not the silver bullet. Education won't fix poverty, it won't fix homelessness, it won't fix violence or food insecurity or lack of opportunity. Politicians from both political parties have been telling us for years that investments in education can turn impoverished communities into middle-class utopias. It's not true. A college education is far more often a symptom of privilege than a road map to it. I joined Teach For America in 2013 because I truly bought this bag of goods: that education was the game-changer for poor communities. I was wrong.

The fact is that poverty has a much greater impact on education than education does on poverty. It's not some giant mystery why the best public schools in America are in some of the wealthiest communities and the worst public schools are in the poorest. Schools are a

product of their communities. Schools are a reflection of society. Low-performing schools are a symptom of society's larger problems. If a child is worried about where their next meal is coming from, whether they're going to be shot on the way home from school, whether their rent will get paid this month, or whether they'll have heat this winter, it shouldn't be any surprise that they aren't paying so much attention in calculus class. Human instinct necessarily places your immediate basic needs above all else. You can't build a house on quicksand. And you can't learn on an empty stomach.

For years, politicians at every level of American governance have pushed their responsibilities onto teachers. If a school performs badly on standardized testing, then it must be because the *school* is bad. The solution is clearly to fire everyone at the school for gross incompetence. Nevermind that you've been trying that for the last 50 years and, no matter what, the school has always been bad. Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. Communities are holistic ecosystems. Without access to basic necessities, it is very unlikely that a child will develop an academic foothold. Put simply: the government is failing to adequately provide basic services for these children, and then blaming their teacher for it.

I'm far from the first to say this, and I sincerely hope that I'm not the last. But it is very important to understand this concept when talking about Teach For America. Because TFA, from its very beginning, has justified its own existence under the premise that schools fail because school employees aren't good enough at their jobs. Sometimes this is undoubtedly true. But, on the whole, TFA's model for change completely misses the major contributions that cause low test scores. It's the poverty, stupid. And Teach For America only makes that problem worse by bleeding dry one of the few public institutions left to actually provide government services to poor communities: their school districts.

I wonder how much effort was actually expended in 1990 to determine if Wendy Kopp's assumptions about the true nature of problems in communities she had never seen and regarding students she had never met were actually even *true*. I'm willing to bet there was very little. America, if it ever truly was, is not currently facing a teacher shortage. We have plenty of veteran teachers to go around. Why is it necessary that we spend \$250 million a year to fill classrooms in poor areas with people who aren't qualified for the job? Why is that a better use of our money than feeding our kids? Or adequate public housing? Or even just schools that aren't literally caving in?

It's really worth asking yourself whether you would find it acceptable for someone with no educational background or credentials to be responsible for an entire year of your child's education. What if it was two teachers? What if it happened every single year? What if you found out your school district was paying *extra* for them? And, if you wouldn't find this acceptable for your kids, then I think you gotta ask yourself why it should be acceptable for children of color in poor areas. Students who are already behind can't afford another year of teachers who are just getting their feet wet. Too many students have inexperienced teachers every single year as it is. Even if education could solve the world's problems, how is this the model?

Teach For America is a bad idea and it was always a bad idea. It has survived this long because too many politicians and business leaders don't actually know anything about poor minority communities or the solutions to major societal problems. It's apparently much easier to invest in Teach For America than to adequately distribute wealth to poor communities. It's much easier to say you support solutions for inner-city schools than to actually allocate the resources necessary to fix the underlying problems that lead to bad schools in the first place. It's much more popular to dump piles of cash into a black hole of "innovation" than to do what we all know is the real solution: simply giving poor people more money. Teach For America is a program designed specifically to help privileged white people make it appear that they are giving back, when in reality they are invading communities of color and robbing them blind. If there were any justice in this world, the whole idea would have been a non-starter from the very beginning. If there were any justice in 2020, then this would be TFA's last year of operation. But I think we both know it won't be.

My time as a TFA corps member is some of the most cherished of my life. It's where I did a lot of the work for which I'm most proud. It's where I earned my Masters, built lifelong friendships, learned about a community I had never seen, and worked every minute possible to try to make a difference. But there is not a doubt in my mind that a veteran teacher with roots in the West Baltimore community would have been better at my job than I was. There's not a doubt in my mind that my students needed that teacher more than they needed me. And there's not a doubt in my mind that I took that teacher's place because hiring me made some wealthy white people a little wealthier. Even if I wanted to feel like a savior for my students, there would simply be no justification for it. For me, Teach For

America was life-changing. What keeps me up at night is the thought that it may have been life-changing for my students as well.