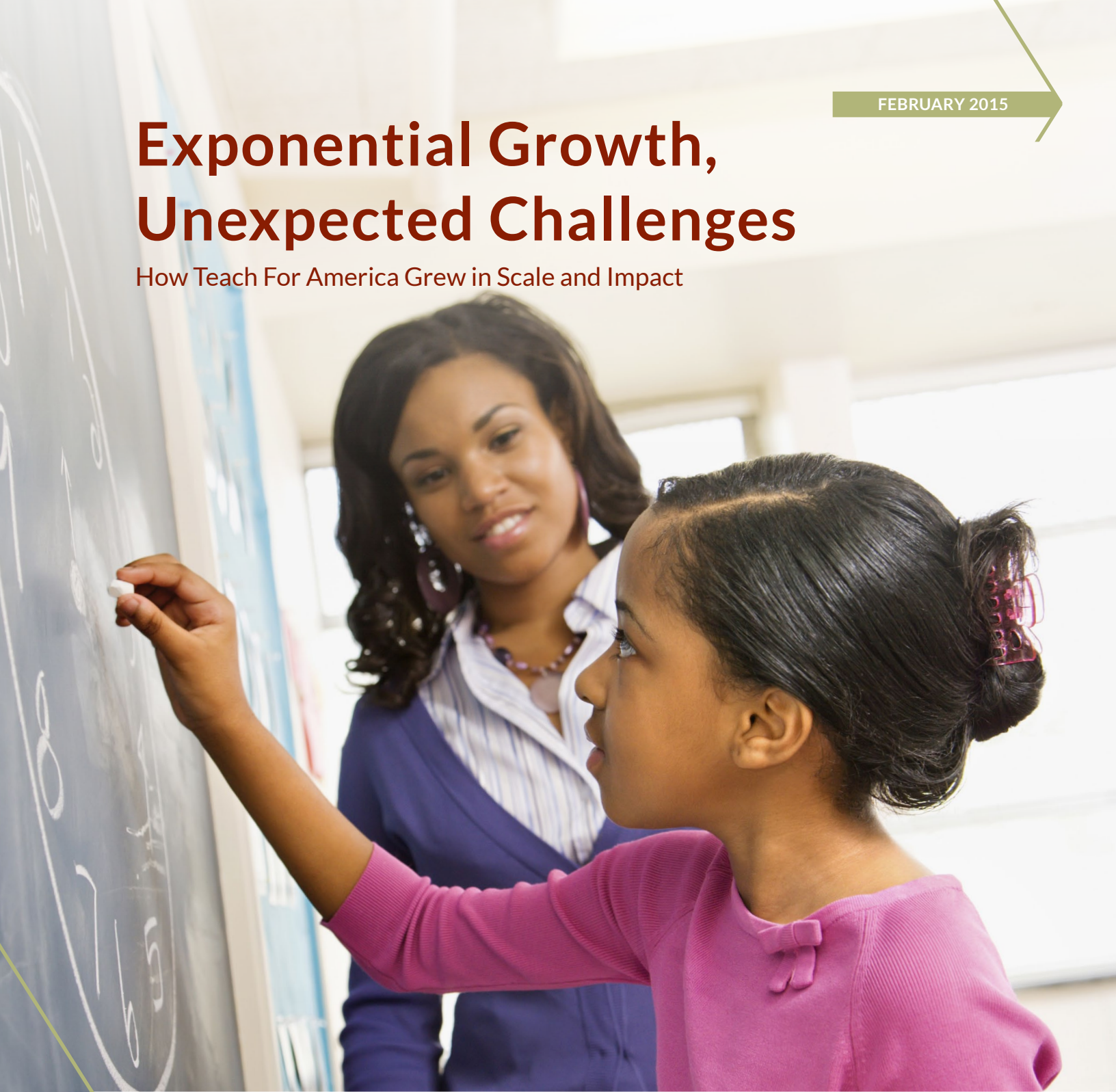


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# Exponential Growth, Unexpected Challenges

How Teach For America Grew in Scale and Impact



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## Executive Summary

Over the past 15 years, Teach For America has grown nearly tenfold, from 1,260 corps members and 3,500 alumni in 2000 to 10,500 corps members and 37,000 alumni today. This type of growth is incredibly rare in education and in the nonprofit sector more broadly. As more proven “social entrepreneurial” organizations seek to grow to scale, they will face decisions similar to those that Teach For America has faced. Any organization’s growth strategy must reflect the nature of its work, the pool of talent it has access to, and the external political and community context in which it operates, so the choices that Teach For America has made may not be right for other organizations. And Teach For America has made mistakes. But in the process it has learned many lessons that can benefit other scaling organizations.

Teach For America’s growth since 2000 has occurred in roughly four phases:

- **From 2000 to 2005**, as Teach For America began to grow, it developed an approach that integrated growth strategy, programming, and development, and was rooted in its Theory of Change. It also rapidly increased its recruitment and selection capacity; put in place key structures to support quality and growth, including systems for measuring corps member impact and using data to inform continuous improvement; and dedicated national capacity to support and manage regional sites.
- **From 2005 to 2007**, Teach For America accelerated its pace of growth and put in place a highly centralized “matrix” operating model in which strong national teams provided intensive support and supervision to regional staff. This approach enabled growth, but it also created overlapping roles and responsibilities among regional teams, as well as

limited flexibility to customize at the regional level. During this time, Teach For America also made significant investments in its capacity to recruit, support, engage, and develop talent.

- **From 2008 to 2010**, the economic downturn, Race to the Top, and the ascendancy of the education reform movement created unprecedented opportunities for Teach For America to grow, leading the organization to further accelerate its pace of growth in response to those challenges. At the same time, it prioritized increasing corps and staff diversity and fostering an inclusive culture that valued diversity and engaged staff and corps members of all backgrounds in dialogue and reflection around issues of race, class, bias, and privilege.
- **From 2011 to 2014**, Teach For America began to experience negative consequences of its rapid growth as well as increased external opposition and backlash from critics of Race to the Top and the education reform movement. These internal and external factors contributed to staff culture challenges and declining rates of alumni and corps member satisfaction, causing Teach For America to slow its pace of growth and focus on strengthening its internal culture and operating model. In response to these challenges, Teach For America has put in place a more robust communications strategy and capacity, increased its focus on developing external and community relationships, and developed a new national-regional structure that provides greater flexibility and autonomy to individual regions. These changes built on re-articulated core values that Teach For America adopted in late 2010. Co-CEOs Matt Kramer and Elisa Villanueva Beard, who succeeded founder Wendy Kopp in 2013, have led Teach For America through this transition.

*Over the past 15 years, Teach For America has succeeded by maintaining an intensive focus on its core activities.*

Over the past 15 years, Teach For America has succeeded by maintaining an intensive focus on its core activities: recruiting, preparing, and supporting corps members to have immediate impact in classrooms, and cultivating and supporting alumni leadership to drive long-term systemic impact. But these activities alone will not realize Teach For America's ambitious vision that "one day all children in this nation will have an opportunity to attain an excellent education."

Realizing this vision requires changes beyond those that Teach For America can drive on its own. To reach "one day," the organization must intentionally position its unique work within a broader ecosystem of families, communities, and organizations working in their own ways to advance educational and social justice. The challenge in the next 10 to 15 years will be to work more collaboratively with those entities while maintaining focus on the core activities that make up Teach For America's Theory of Change—and continuing to perform those activities with ever higher levels of quality.

One part of this work is to share the lessons of the past 15 years with other scaling organizations. Key lessons from Teach For America's experience include:

- **A strong Theory of Change is the foundation for scaling impact.**
- **Scale and quality aren't necessarily countervailing forces—but maintaining quality while growing requires intentional focus matched by resources.**
- **Focus on culture and talent while growing.**
- **Scaling organizations should:**

*Cultivate a diverse staff by:*

- > Making diversity a priority.
- > Setting clear targets related to diversity, and tracking indicators toward those targets.
- > Engaging staff in dialogue around issues of identity, race, class, bias, and privilege.

*Build a sustainable approach to funding by:*

- > Developing clear multiyear plans to grow impact.
- > Distributing responsibility for fundraising.
- > Prioritizing local fundraising.
- > Diversifying funding sources.

*Effectively structure regional and national teams by:*

- > Articulating a clear value proposition for the national/central function.
- > Creating dedicated national capacity to managing local site leaders.
- > Using geographic dispersion to hedge against risk.
- > Holding local staff leaders accountable for fundraising.

*Set and measure progress toward goals by:*

- > Recognizing that ambitious goals are sometimes easier to achieve than modest ones.
- > Not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.
- > Balancing goal orientation and measurement with the human element.
- > Distinguishing between "must meet" goals and those that are more aspirational in nature.
- > Adjusting goals when circumstances change.

Teach for America's experience also has implications for education funders, policymakers, and the broader education reform movement.

- **Implications for the education reform movement:**
  - > Strengthen the talent pipeline for education organizations.
  - > Develop clear narratives and messages.
  - > Value diversity.
  - > Prioritize community relationships.
  - > Pay attention to context.
  - > Invest in independent evaluations—but be realistic about what they can accomplish.
- **Implications for education funders:**
  - > Be open to investing in innovative—but unproven—models with a clear Theory of Change and potential for transformative impact.
  - > Consider allocating more giving to unrestricted, rather than project-based, grants.
- **Implications for policymakers looking to support innovation and scale effective education models:**
  - > Decouple investments in innovation from investments in scaling models with evidence of effectiveness.
  - > Create a dedicated pool of federal funding to scale and sustain effective organizations and models.
- **Implications for policymakers looking to improve teacher quality:**
  - > Be intentional about talent.
  - > Use data to improve hiring decisions.
  - > Identify and cultivate leadership talent.
  - > Invest in state and local talent ecosystems.
  - > Rethink the highly qualified teacher requirement.
  - > Track and publish data on outcomes of teacher preparation programs.

## Introduction

In fall 2014, some 5,400 Teach For America corps members began teaching in U.S. public schools. Another 5,100 returned for the second year of their two-year teaching commitment. Many of these corps members were hired by the 793 principals who are themselves Teach For America alumni, or work in schools founded by former Teach For America corps members. Hundreds of corps members work in districts or school systems whose leaders began their education careers with Teach For America—such as Washington, D.C., Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson, Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson, Tennessee Achievement School District Superintendent Chris Barbic, and Louisiana State Superintendent John White.

The world today looks different than it did when Wendy Kopp founded Teach For America in 1990—or even than it did in 2000. Teach For America's role in education has grown tremendously in the past 15 years. During that time, the number of corps members working in U.S. public schools has increased nearly tenfold, and the impact of Teach For America corps members and alumni has grown exponentially. As more Teach For America alumni work in public education, and as these alumni advance in their careers and take on roles of increasing responsibility—from instructional coaches and principals to school board members and state legislators—they are making real differences in public schools and school systems. To a large extent, Teach For America today operates in a world that it helped create. That in turn leads to new opportunities and new challenges.

Although Teach For America's growth and impact are obvious to anyone working in education policy, philanthropy, or the urban and rural school systems where Teach for

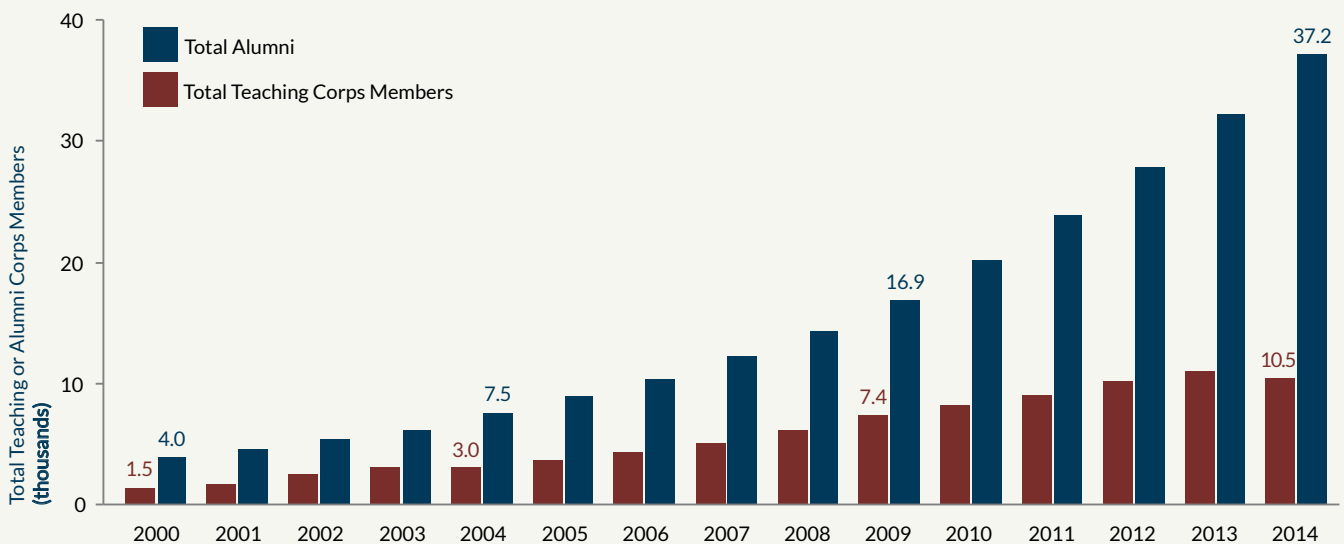
*The number of corps members working in U.S. public schools has increased nearly tenfold, and the impact of Teach For America corps members and alumni has grown exponentially.*



America operates, the magnitude of this growth is striking. The number of Teach For America corps members grew every year from 2000 to 2013, averaging an annual growth rate of 18 percent. Even with a slight decrease in corps size in 2014—the first decrease in more than 15 years—there are now nearly 10,500 corps members working in U.S. public schools. Teach For America is now the single largest source of new public school teachers in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Because corps members join the ranks of existing Teach For America alumni at the end of their two-year corps commitment, the number of alumni has grown even more rapidly—to 37,000 in 2014. Although these numbers are a drop in the bucket in a national workforce of more than 3 million teachers, Teach For America corps members and alumni constitute a much greater percentage of the teaching workforce in certain cities. In Denver, for example, where Teach For America has operated since 2007, corps members and alumni account for roughly 7 percent of district and charter school teachers, while about 10 percent of principals are alumni. In Washington, D.C., where Teach For America has operated since 1992, corps members and alumni constitute about 9 percent of public and charter school teachers, while nearly 20 percent of principals are alumni.

Figure 1 Teach For America's Alumni Growth 2000–2014



Source: Teach For America.



This kind of growth is rare in education and in the nonprofit sector more generally. While venerable national nonprofits exist, most nonprofits are small, locally based, and have limited ambition to grow. A wave of “social entrepreneurship” in education—fueled in no small part by Teach For America alumni—has fostered new education organizations that seek to scale nationally, but many of these organizations remain at a relatively early stage of growth. As they aim to grow their impact, Teach For America offers lessons that can inform their work.

What drove Teach For America to pursue such an aggressive and unprecedented pace of growth? The answers lie in the group’s mission. “The whole point of Teach For America’s growth is that the organization needs to be big to solve the problem [of the achievement gap] on a national scale,” says Eric Scroggins, who previously led Teach For America’s site selection and growth strategy work and now runs the Bay Area region. Teach For America is often perceived as an organization that recruits talented recent college graduates to fill teacher shortages in high-poverty schools, but its actual mission is much broader. Teach For America seeks to close the opportunity gap for low-income students by building a movement of leaders and change agents working to ensure that children growing up in poverty get an excellent education. Realizing this ambitious goal requires a national presence. “To live into our Theory of Change, we had to do three things,” says Teach For America founder Wendy Kopp. “Increase scale, increase teacher impact during the two years [that corps members commit to teach], and increase the impact of our alumni.”

*“To live into our Theory of Change, we had to do three things. Increase scale, increase teacher impact during the two years [that corps members commit to teach], and increase the impact of our alumni.”*  
-Wendy Kopp

As Kopp explains, the story of Teach For America’s growth over the past 25 years is not just a story about increased scale. It’s also a story of concerted efforts to continually improve how Teach For America recruits, prepares, and supports both corps members and alumni—from first contact on a college campus and throughout their careers—in order to maximize their impact on both the children they teach and the broader education system.

As Teach For America has grown, rigorous, independent evaluations (see **Sidebar 1**) have documented the impact that corps members have on student learning. Overall, the most rigorous independent studies—those that randomly assign students to corps members or other teachers, or use sophisticated econometric methods to separate the impact of corps members from other factors shaping student achievement—have found that corps members produce better student learning results in math than do the teachers to whom their students would otherwise have been assigned, including teachers with more classroom experience, and that these gains are educationally significant. In reading and English language arts, Teach For America corps members tend to produce results roughly comparable to those of other teachers (again including both novice and veteran peers). Collectively, these results suggest that, in assessed subjects, Teach for America teachers are certainly not harming students, as their critics claim. In practice, corps members, on average, accelerate learning for their students. This makes Teach For America one of the few teacher preparation pipelines in the country with evidence that, on average, its teachers systematically improve student learning.

## Research Evidence on Corps Member Impact

Over the past decade, multiple independent evaluations have provided evidence of Teach For America corps member impact on student learning. By and large, the most rigorous studies—including both randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental evaluations—paint a common picture: Teach For America corps members are producing better student learning results in math than are the teachers to whom their students would otherwise have been assigned, and comparable results in English language arts. State report cards on teacher preparation programs provide further, though less rigorous, evidence of Teach For America corps members' impact.

### *Randomized controlled trials*

In 2004, Mathematica Policy Research released the results of an evaluation that used an experimental, or randomized, design (considered the gold standard for evaluating public policies and programs) to compare the learning gains of students taught by Teach For America teachers with those of their peers assigned to other teachers. The Mathematica study included nearly 2,000 elementary school students in six districts across the country. Mathematica found that students assigned to Teach For America teachers had better math outcomes than their peers assigned to other teachers, with gains equivalent to one additional month of math instruction. The same study found no difference in the English language arts outcomes for students taught by Teach For America corps members compared with those taught by other teachers.<sup>i</sup>

A decade later, Mathematica carried out a second randomized study that included data from 4,500 secondary school students in 11 districts. This study found that students taught by Teach For America teachers had better math outcomes than those taught by non-Teach For America teachers, including both novice and veteran teachers and teachers from both traditional and alternative routes. Students taught by Teach For America teachers experienced gains equivalent to 2.6 months of additional instruction, or about a summer's worth.<sup>ii</sup>

In 2015, Mathematica will release a third randomized study, focused on Teach For America's impact on elementary math and reading outcomes. The study includes corps members who entered Teach For America after the organization received a federal Investing in Innovation grant, and focuses particularly on corps members teaching pre-K through second grade who have not been included in previous research studies.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Quasi-experimental studies help create a fuller picture of Teach For America's effectiveness*

Other researchers have used existing state or district-level data on student performance and teacher certification to conduct further research on Teach For America. Although these methods are less rigorous than randomized studies, well-designed quasi-experimental models can help supplement the field's understanding of Teach For America's impact.

In a 2011 study, Zeyu Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor used data from 23 North Carolina districts to compare student learning gains for Teach For America corps members and their traditionally certified peers, including both novice and veteran teachers. Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor found that Teach For America corps members were more effective than their traditionally certified peers across a range of core subjects, with the greatest gains in math and science.<sup>iv</sup>

*continued on next page*

The Strategic Data Project, housed within the Harvard Graduate School of Education, used student assessment data from the Los Angeles Unified School District to compare learning results for Teach For America corps members and other novice teachers. They found that Teach For America math teachers outperformed their novice peers, producing gains equivalent to one to two additional months of instruction. Corps members teaching English language arts had smaller, but still positive, gains.<sup>i</sup>

*State-sponsored studies provide evidence of Teach For America's impact over time*

In recent years, some states have created teacher preparation “report cards” that compare value-added or student growth data for graduates of different teacher preparation programs, including Teach For America. These studies are not as rigorous as randomized ones, but they add another dimension to our understanding of Teach For America’s effectiveness, because they make it possible to compare Teach For America’s results with those of other teacher preparation programs in the state.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill compared data on UNC-prepared teachers from 2007 to 2012 with graduates of other traditional and alternative pipelines in North Carolina, and found that Teach For America teachers were more effective in nearly all included subjects and grades.<sup>vi</sup>

Tennessee produces an annual report card on various teacher preparation programs in the state. Teach For America–Memphis and Teach For America–Nashville are the only two teacher preparation programs in Tennessee that consistently show statistically significant positive results on fourth-through-eighth-grade student test scores when compared with results for all teachers statewide.<sup>vii</sup>

Collectively, these studies provide evidence that Teach For America corps members tend to outperform their peers in math and produce at least comparable outcomes in English language arts.

- i Paul T. Decker, Daniel P. Mayer, and Steven Glazerman, *The Effects of Teach For America on Students: Findings from a National Evaluation* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2004) <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/~media/publications/PDFs/teach.pdf>.
- ii Melissa A. Clark, Hanley S. Chiang, Tim Silva, Sheena McConnell, Kathy Sonnenfeld, Anastasia Erbe, and Michael Puma, *The Effectiveness of Secondary Math Teachers from Teach For America and the Teaching Fellows Programs* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2013) <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20134015/pdf/20134015.pdf>.
- iii *Impacts of the Teach For America Investing in Innovation Scale-Up* (Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research. Forthcoming).
- iv Zeya Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor, “Making a difference? The effects of Teach For America in high school,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 30, no. 3 (2011): 447-469.
- v *SDP Human Capital Diagnostic in the Los Angeles Unified School District* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University, 2012) <http://cepr.harvard.edu/cepr-resources/files/news-events/sdp-laUSD-hc.pdf>.
- vi Patterson, Kristina M. and Kevin C. Bastian, *UNC Teacher Quality Research: Teacher Portals Effectiveness Report* (Chapel Hill, NC: Education Policy Initiative, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014) <http://publicpolicy.unc.edu/files/2014/06/Teacher-Portals-Effectiveness-Report.pdf>.
- vii *Report Card on the Effectiveness of the Teacher Preparation Programs* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Higher Education Commission) [http://tn.gov/thec/Divisions/AcademicAffairs/rttt/report\\_card.shtml](http://tn.gov/thec/Divisions/AcademicAffairs/rttt/report_card.shtml).

*Even if we were doing everything better than any other source of new teachers, it isn't enough, because it's within a system that's letting these kids down.*

*-Ted Quinn*

Teach For America doesn't just want its corps members to produce marginally better results for students, however—it wants them to fundamentally change the trajectory of children's lives. “Even if we were doing everything better than any other source of new teachers, it isn't enough, because it's within a system that's letting these kids down,” says Ted Quinn, who leads Teach For America's internal work to evaluate and improve corps members' impact on student learning. Driven by that rationale, Teach For America has worked aggressively over the past 15 years to improve its recruitment, training, and coaching for corps members in order to further improve their student learning results. At the same time, as the ranks of Teach For America alumni have swelled and these individuals have advanced in their careers, Teach For America has intensified alumni services and programs to increase their impact on education—both in schools and in the broader education landscape.

That education landscape has itself evolved significantly over the past 25 years. When Teach For America was founded in 1990, education was a feel-good issue, but not a major political issue that garnered significant national attention. There were no charter schools, and few advocacy groups other than teachers' unions worked actively to shape education policy. That began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s, due in part to the work of charter schools and education reform organizations led by Teach For America alumni. Teach For America grew alongside this movement, and its corps members and alumni have played a major role in fueling the movement's growth. As a result, some of Teach For America's experiences and challenges over the past 15 years are unique to the organization's mission, work, and organizational culture, but others reflect the common challenges and experiences of many organizations within the education reform movement.

Teach For America was one of the main beneficiaries of policymakers' and philanthropists' increased interest in education. New public and philanthropic resources allowed Teach For America to grow starting in 2000, and its alumni took on key leadership roles in charter schools and education reform organizations. Both Teach For America and the education reform movement continued to grow during the first decade of the 21st century, and reform advocates achieved significant policy successes in the latter half of that decade. But these successes also sparked increasing backlash from educators and interest groups opposed to charter schools, testing, and new approaches to teacher preparation—a backlash that caught both reform groups and Teach for America largely off guard. Teach For America's mission and the roles of its alumni in other reform organizations have led many reform critics to oppose Teach For America as a driver of educational changes with which they disagree. And as political disputes around education have intensified over the past three years, Teach For America has faced new challenges. In the past two years, this backlash, combined with economic factors, has negatively affected corps member recruitment, resulting in the first ever decline in corps size in 2014–15.

The increasing complexity of the education landscape means that as Teach For America has sought to scale and deepen the impact of its corps members and alumni, it has also had to become more sophisticated in how it approaches its work and communicates about that work—especially in how it engages with communities and the larger population of non-Teach For America educators.

In many respects, Teach For America has not simply grown bigger over the past 25 years—it has also grown up. Following a rough infancy and childhood in the 1990s, in the early 2000s Teach For America began an adolescent growth spurt that lasted more than a decade, with the unique mix of overconfidence and insecurity common to teenagers. Today, Teach For America is poised to enter a new phase, a sort of young adulthood in which it must slow or pause the pace of corps growth, accept its role as a mature education organization, and adopt increasingly sophisticated approaches to both its internal operations and external engagement. Just as our childhood and adolescence leave an indelible imprint on our lives as adults—one we ignore at our peril—the next phase of Teach For America’s growth as an organization will also be deeply shaped by its experiences and informed by the lessons of its growth over the past 25 years.

## From the “Dark Years” to a Strong Organization: 1990–2000

*Launching at a national scale enabled Teach For America to capture the imagination of funders, policymakers, and—most important—the college students Teach For America sought to recruit as corps members.*

Even though Teach For America’s pursuit of scale is deeply rooted in its Theory of Change (see **Sidebar 2**), the organization grew very little for most of its first 10 years of existence. That’s due in part—paradoxically—to the centrality of scale to Teach For America’s mission. Because founder Wendy Kopp believed that Teach For America needed to be a national organization operating at significant scale, she launched it in 1990 with 500 corps members spread among six regions across the country—not as the small, one-site pilot program that her advisers counseled.<sup>2</sup> Teach For America expanded to additional sites in the early 1990s, but did so without growing total corps size. Launching at a national scale enabled Teach For America to capture the imagination of funders, policymakers, and—most important—the college students Teach For America sought to recruit as corps members. But, combined with Kopp’s and her founding team’s lack of management or fundraising experience, it also made the organization’s first decade incredibly challenging. During its first seven years, Teach For America regularly struggled to raise the funds needed to operate its program and pay its staff, and also faced management and operational challenges (detailed in Kopp’s 2000 book, *One Day All Children*). As Kopp and her team focused on keeping the organization afloat, growth was far from their minds.

## Teach For America's Theory of Change

### *What all children deserve:*

Like educators, parents and students across the system, we believe that every child deserves an excellent education—one that empowers and supports her to fulfill her potential and realize her greatest dreams. An excellent education ensures that a child has the opportunity to succeed in college and in life, though the decision to attend college is ultimately a personal choice. Education fulfills these promises when students gain strong academic skills and knowledge, grow personally, develop social, political and cultural consciousness, and gain access to opportunities in ways that are aligned with their own strengths, interests and values.

### *The challenge we're collectively working to address:*

Today, despite the hard work of countless talented teachers, committed families, and brilliant children, our education system as a whole is not set up to ensure that low-income students and students of color are able to transcend the systemic challenges of poverty and racism.

### *Our view of what it will take to address this challenge:*

In the face of this reality, we believe two critical things are needed:

- First, children need exceptional teachers, high-quality schools, and a broader set of supports that give them access to the educational opportunities they deserve today
- Second, education systems need massive, lasting change so that equitable educational opportunities are consistently offered to every student. This will require change in our education systems, efforts to address poverty and racism, new approaches to how social services are provided, and shifts in our nation's policies and priorities

Changing this reality depends on the collective action of many people—those directly facing these injustices and those with power and privilege. It takes both existing leaders within education, and new leaders. It takes action from people in every community and in every field fighting together for educational equity and working to attack poverty and racism from all angles. It also depends on extraordinary acts of individual leadership—to break down barriers, develop new solutions and inspire collective action. **In short, it takes a movement.**

### *Our unique role:*

There are many important efforts happening to address the injustices facing America's children growing up in poverty and we strive to be a key partner among many. Teach For America aims to contribute additional leaders to the growing movement to end educational inequity. Our commitment starts with developing teacher leaders who offer their students the opportunity to attain an excellent education and continues through the work our alumni pursue across education and related fields. We drive change through leadership, ultimately with and for the sake of our students, both inside and outside the classroom. We believe that this is a unique and important role to play and our efforts, alongside many others, will enable us to reach our vision of 'One Day' in our lifetime.

Source: Teach For America



By 1998, however, Teach For America had achieved a level of financial stability and organizational health. “Teach For America had come out of a very difficult seven years,” says Co-CEO Matt Kramer. But by 1998, “there was a sense that you could do more, as opposed to trying not to drown.” Teach For America had achieved six priorities that Kopp set in 1995 to secure organizational health: gain financial stability, improve corps member training and support, recruit and effectively manage and develop great staff, strengthen Teach For America’s reputation, strengthen the national board, and build regional boards in each region. During the same time period, leaders in a few Teach For America regions, including the San Francisco Bay Area and Washington, D.C., took advantage of opportunities to grow incrementally. The positive results of this incremental growth in a few regions led Kopp and her team to entertain the possibility of further growth.

The lessons of the early “dark years” continued to shape Teach For America’s growth over the next 15 years. First, Teach For America learned the importance of maintaining a clear focus on its own unique mission. In the early 1990s, Teach For America launched two new initiatives in addition to the corps: TEACH!, which helped districts improve new teacher recruitment, selection, and training, and The Learning Project, which sought to design a new model of schools. These initiatives addressed educational needs related to Teach For America’s mission, but they did not directly advance the mission itself. The burden of operating these additional programs exacerbated the financial and organizational challenges of Teach For America’s early years and ultimately led Teach For America to shut down these initiatives or spin them off as separate organizations. (TEACH! would later be reincarnated as The New Teacher Project—now TNTP—which Teach For America helped incubate in the late 1990s.) Teach For America’s leaders emerged from this experience committed to focusing exclusively on the organization’s core work of recruiting, preparing, and supporting corps members and alumni to become educational leaders—and to resisting demands from partners, funders, and others to take on additional work that is worthy but outside Teach For America’s core mission and competency. This focus has served Teach For America well over the past 15 years—although at times it has created tension with partners who want Teach For America to take on other activities.

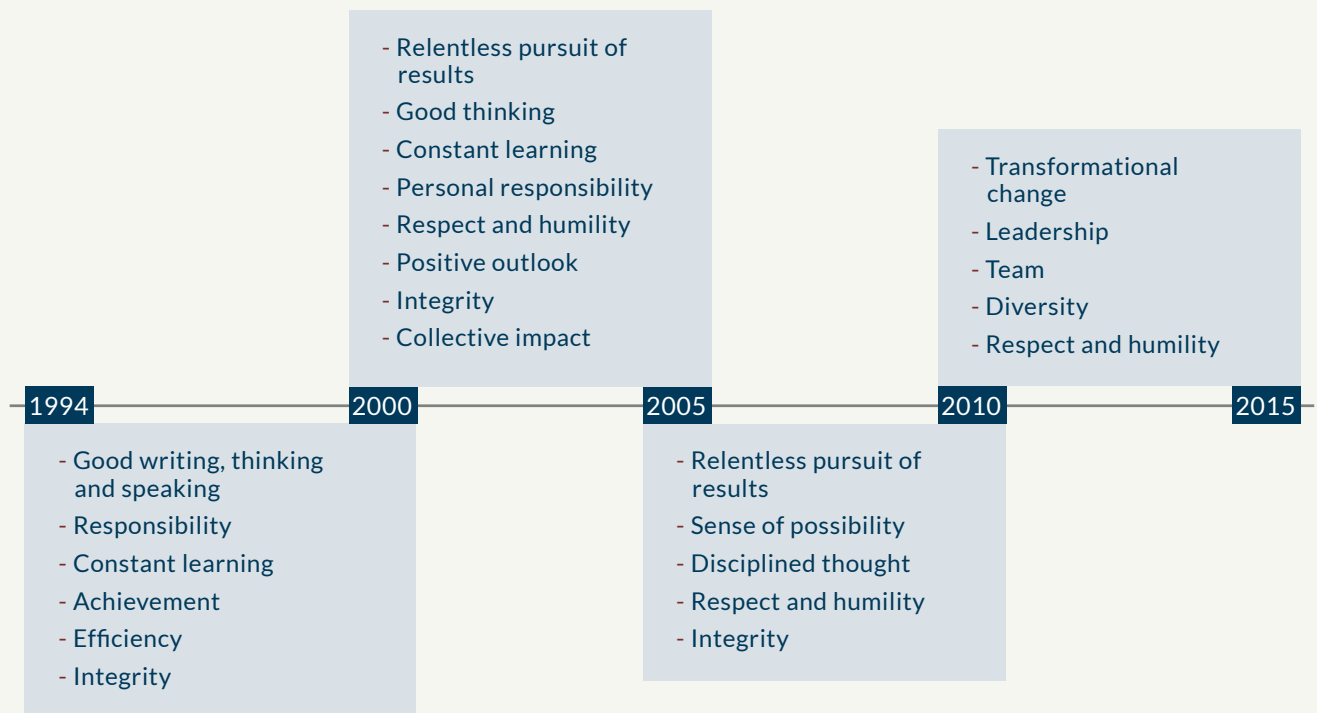
*The dark years instilled in Kopp and her leadership team a strong belief in the importance of effective management.*

Second, the dark years instilled in Kopp and her leadership team a strong belief in the importance of effective management. Many of the organization’s early challenges stemmed in part from its founding team’s limited management experience. Enacting effective management practices, informed by the business and public sector management experience of Teach For America’s funders and supporters, helped put Teach For America on track for greater financial and organizational stability by the late 1990s. In 1998, Kopp hired Jerry Hauser, a 1990 Los Angeles corps member who had gone on to earn a law degree and work as a management consultant with McKinsey and Company, to further strengthen Teach For America’s management capacity. Effective management became highly valued within Teach For America, and specific management principles and practices—setting goals and using data to monitor progress, prioritizing talent and effective people management, and using data to drive continuous improvement—have become central to Teach For America’s culture.

Third, the dark years taught Teach For America the importance of balancing the resources and energy allocated to fundraising and programming functions. In the organization's first two years, Kopp and one other person were responsible for most of Teach For America's fundraising, placing incredible pressure on Kopp and contributing to early funding challenges. Within a few years, Kopp and her leadership team realized that they needed to strengthen the balance between Teach For America's fundraising and programmatic work, and to prioritize fundraising at the local and regional level, where the vast majority of education philanthropy occurs.<sup>3</sup> This insight, which played a crucial role in helping Teach For America achieve financial health in the 1990s, would prove even more crucial as Teach For America began to grow in the 2000s.

Finally, internal organizational problems during the dark years led Teach For America to articulate core values and use them to intentionally cultivate internal culture and inform management decisions. Teach For America first developed a set of core values in 1994, during a period of significant internal strife and funding challenges, and used these values to reverse a deteriorating internal culture and create a shared sense of purpose and operating norms among its staff. Over the past 20 years, Teach For America has refined these values in response to both a changing external landscape and its own organizational maturation (see Figure 2). Throughout Teach For America's growth, these values have remained the cornerstone of both staff and corps member culture.

Figure 2 > Teach For America's Core Values Have Evolved Over Time



Source: Teach For America

## Starting to Grow: 2000–2005

Teach For America approached its 10th anniversary celebration, in 2000, with a renewed sense of confidence and possibility. “We had achieved stability while strengthening the program and internal management system,” says Kopp. “We felt that we had a solid foundation and we were faced with the question: ‘What next? Where do we go from here?’”

*“We felt that we had a solid foundation and we were faced with the question: ‘What next? Where do we go from here?’”*  
-Wendy Kopp

Just as Teach For America was asking that question, a major opportunity was emerging. Philanthropic funders were increasingly interested in education. As the nascent charter school movement grew in the late 1990s, a few extraordinary charters, such as the KIPP schools, started by Teach For America alumni Mike Feinberg and David Levin, produced impressive academic results for low-income children, which caught the attention of national philanthropists and policymakers. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act also placed a once politically moribund issue front and center on the political landscape. These forces attracted a new type of philanthropist, including the newly created Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the venture capitalist John Doerr, and the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, who began investing significant resources in education. And that created an opening for Teach For America to grow.

In 2000, Gap, Inc. founder Donald Fisher, who had already made a significant investment to expand the KIPP charter school model, after seeing a *60 Minutes* segment, offered Teach For America a three-year, \$8.3 million grant to double in size over the next five years. This was a challenge grant, which meant that Teach For America would need to raise matching funds from other sources to secure Fisher’s funds. Fisher’s approach—a major, multiyear

investment that was tied to specific growth and funding goals but placed few strings on how funds were used—stood in stark contrast to the smaller, project-oriented grants that most education foundations offered. Securing this type of funding enabled Teach For America to focus on its core mission, rather than chasing after project-based funding opportunities. And the matching requirements helped Teach For America secure similar unrestricted funds from other sources. This meant that Teach For America “could get the resources up front and be creative about accomplishing things,” says Kramer.

As part of the grant (and a subsequent fundraising campaign to secure matching funds), Teach For America developed its first five-year growth plan—a strategic plan outlining what goals the organization would accomplish in the next five years; the staffing, systems, and structures needed to achieve those goals; and the fundraising this would require. Not only did this five-year plan set Teach For America’s course for 2000–05, it also became the framework for how Teach For America would plan for growth in subsequent time frames, 2005–10 and 2010–15. “The discipline of the five-year planning process was huge for us,” says Kopp. “Stepping back at junctures and considering strengths, weaknesses, challenges, opportunities, priorities—it provided a way of aligning across the system around priorities, depersonalizing questions around organizational capacity and whether we have the right team to take us forward, and [it] set us up to raise growth funding.”

The 2005 growth plan, created in 2000, established five goals for the next five years:

- Grow corps size and diversity, from 1,691 corps members in 2000 to 3,800 in 2004.
- Ensure corps member impact on student achievement, by expanding corps member training and support infrastructure and creating a new system, known as the “significant gains” system, to measure corps member impact.
- Foster alumni leadership, by creating an Office of Civic and Career Opportunities and building partnerships with employers and graduate schools.
- Build a thriving, diverse organization, by broadening the leadership team; cultivating a strong national board; and ensuring high-quality, diverse staff.
- Ensure financial sustainability, by raising up-front growth funds and diversifying funding streams. The original growth plan projected that the annual budget would grow from \$9.3 million in fiscal year 2000 to \$26.2 million in 2004. To achieve its growth goals, Teach For America would also need to raise \$16.6 million in growth funding apart from annual operating budgets.

The plan’s ambitious growth goal—to double the corps size in five years—was controversial among Teach For America’s staff and supporters. “Many staff wanted to focus on improving quality before increasing numbers,” then-Chief Operating Officer Jerry Hauser recalls. “There were a lot of questions around: ‘Why would we grow now when we were still imperfect on so many fronts?’ ‘There were so many ways we could improve, why would we grow at the same time?’” Staff involved in training and supporting corps members felt

*“The discipline of the five-year planning process was huge for us. Stepping back at junctures and considering strengths, weaknesses, challenges, opportunities, priorities—it provided a way of aligning across the system around priorities, depersonalizing questions around organizational capacity and whether we have the right team to take us forward, and [it] set us up to raise growth funding.”*  
-Wendy Kopp

a particular need to continue improving in these areas. Some staff members worried that growing more rapidly would require lowering the bar for admitted corps members, and still others felt that Teach For America should focus on increasing corps diversity, rather than growth. Staff who had been with Teach For America during the “dark years” were understandably reluctant to take on new challenges just as the organization seemed to be finding its footing, and feared that growth might undermine hard-won organizational and financial stability.

Ultimately, it was Kopp’s vision that led Teach For America to settle on ambitious growth goals. “There was a moral imperative to grow,” Kopp says, “but there was a lot of debate and internal angst. People were concerned we would sacrifice quality with growth.” The literature on scaling innovation tends to suggest that growth inevitably leads to loss of quality and inconsistent implementation. In education, many models or innovations have produced positive results in a single school or district but failed to produce comparable results when replicated on a broader scale.<sup>4</sup> So Teach For America staff had good reason to fear the effects of growth. Kopp, however, saw things differently. “Wendy saw that growth and quality were intertwined,” says Hauser. “She just saw that we would never make the progress that we wanted without dramatic growth.”

Much of Teach For America’s experience over the past 15 years bears out Kopp’s initial intuition. As the organization grew rapidly from 2000 to 2011, many of the indicators it used to measure performance—applicant quality, corps member impact, and principals’ satisfaction with corps members—stayed constant or even improved.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining and improving quality while growing required tremendous effort and resources, and would not have been possible if Teach For America leaders had not prioritized growth and improvement simultaneously and invested resources in both. But increased scale itself also offers some benefits that can support quality. “We tend to talk about growth and quality as if they are countervailing forces,” says Hauser, “but a core part of our argument and experience is that growth and improving quality were not opposites but went hand in hand.” Hauser identifies three ways in which growth enabled Teach For America to enhance quality: it helped Teach For America expand its base of supporters and attract new funding resources, create professional opportunities that attracted new talent, and systematize things that had previously been done ad hoc.

The process that Teach For America used to set goals—which Hauser describes as “a sense of possibility grounded in success”—also helped mitigate some internal and external reservations about growth. “We looked at where we were doing best and said, ‘What if we got everyone to that level?’” recalls Hauser. For example, to project how many applicants Teach For America could recruit in a given year—a key factor that determines overall corps size—leaders identified their most successful campus recruiters and estimated the potential increase in applicants if all recruiters could generate similar results.

*We tend to talk about growth and quality as if they are countervailing forces, but a core part of our argument and experience is that growth and improving quality were not opposites but went hand in hand.*

*-Jerry Hauser*

This “sense of possibility grounded in success” also characterizes the approach to data-driven continuous improvement that has been a hallmark of Teach For America’s work over the past 15 years: using data to identify the highest-performing staff or corps members, analyzing what those staff or corps members are doing and the factors that contribute to their success, and replicating those practices across the entire organization.

## Measuring Impact on Student Learning

Central to these efforts was the implementation of the “significant gains”—or sig gains—system, designed to create a common measure of impact for all corps members. “Teach For America has always encouraged goal-setting, but sig gains was monumental because it was the first time Teach For America attempted to aggregate data and create national norms for performance,” says Ted Quinn, who currently leads Teach For America’s evolving efforts to measure corps member impact. At the individual level, this common metric enabled program directors—the Teach For America staff who coach and support corps members—to provide actionable feedback to help corps members improve. At the organizational level, Teach For America was now able to aggregate data across the national network to refine recruitment, selection, and training practices.

*“Teach For America has always encouraged goal-setting, but sig gains was monumental because it was the first time Teach For America attempted to aggregate data and create national norms for performance.”*  
-Ted Quinn

Teach For America decided to make student learning, as measured by test scores, the central element in measuring corps member impact. But while most Teach For America staff and corps members agreed that student learning should be the key metric, identifying common, objective measures of student learning was challenging. This was particularly true in the pre-NCLB environment in which Teach For America began developing significant gains, but it has remained a challenge over the past 15 years.

Corps members work across all grade levels and subjects, each of which has different standards and assessments. Measuring student learning in some grades and subjects (such as those in which students take regular state- or district-mandated assessments) is much easier than in others (such as preschool or classes where students have severe cognitive disabilities). Standards and assessments also vary widely across school districts and states—making it difficult to collect and compare data across a national organization.

The significant gains system sought to address some of these challenges by defining one and a half years of academic growth as a common metric for students’ learning, regardless of grade, subject, or region. With data from the assessments used by the schools and districts in which corps members worked, Teach For America was able to classify each corps member as making significant, solid, limited, or unknown gains. While the sig gains system had its own weaknesses (see **Sidebar 3**) it produced concrete, quantitative measures of corps member performance that regions—and the organization as a whole—could track to monitor progress and drive improvement. Over time, the sig gains system and its successor measures played an invaluable role in Teach For America’s efforts to enhance quality and corps member impact.

## Evolution of Teach For America's Approach to Measuring Student Impact

Common measures of corps member impact on student learning are essential to enable Teach For America to continuously improve its programming. But measuring student learning is no simple task, and over time Teach For America has tried a variety of approaches.

The **significant gains** system, which Teach For America put in place in the early 2000s, made the best of the data available at the time, but it also created its own challenges. Sig gains was a binary measure—corps members either made significant gains or they didn't—fostering an incentive for program directors to focus on corps members right at the cusp of making significant gains, and limiting support for continuous improvement at an individual level. Because program directors were responsible for monitoring corps member progress toward sig gains—and were also accountable for the percentage of their corps members who made sig gains—the relationship between program directors and corps members often felt more evaluative than supportive. Because the assessments used varied significantly based on school, district, or state requirements, achieving one and a half years of academic growth was easier for some corps members than for others.

In 2007, Teach For America sought to address some of these challenges by adopting the **NWEA Measures of Academic Progress**—an adaptive assessment used by schools across the country to measure student progress and growth. NWEA MAPs would have provided a rigorous, comparable measure of student learning gains across Teach For America corps members. But the organization was forced to abandon the effort to use NWEA as a common national measure, because of the challenges involved in imposing additional assessments on classrooms. NWEA still plays a crucial role in measuring corps member impact in many regions where districts have adopted NWEA as part of their assessment systems.

More recently, Teach For America created the **Student Achievement Measurement System**, which establishes tailored benchmarks for student progress on commonly used assessments in each grade and subject, taking into account students' baseline academic performance. SAMS evaluates corps member impact based on the percentage of the benchmark that each corps member's students achieve. This approach creates a more rigorous and comparable measure than the previous sig gains system did, and replaces that binary metric with a continuum of performance. But its implementation has been hampered because relatively few schools or districts use SAMS-compatible assessments—currently, only about 15 percent of corps members have high-quality SAMS data.

Teach For America still has not found the perfect way to measure corps members' impact on student learning. As more states adopt new, Common Core-aligned summative and formative assessments, the number of corps members with common, high-quality measures of student learning may rise. Still, establishing a rigorous and common metric for corps member impact is likely to remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. But the organization's experience over the past 15 years suggests the importance of not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. Even a flawed measure like sig gains has proved highly valuable in helping identify and learn from high-performing corps members; monitor trends across years and regions; and drive continuous improvement in corps member selection, training, and support. At the same time, Teach For America's experience illustrates the importance of carefully monitoring the kinds of incentives that different metrics create within an organization, and the need to refine metrics over time to avoid creating the wrong incentives.



*Teach For America developed the Teaching as Leadership (TAL) framework, which articulates the organization's understanding of what it means to be a transformational teacher in high-need schools.*

Also in the early 2000s, Teach For America developed the Teaching as Leadership (TAL) framework, which articulates the organization's understanding of what it means to be a transformational teacher in high-need schools. TAL emerged from intensive observation of Teach For America's highest-performing corps members and alumni aimed at understanding and codifying the specific teacher actions and beliefs that lead to life-changing gains for students. Although Teach For America began developing TAL before the creation of the sig gains system, over time, sig gains data have helped Teach For America learn more about the factors that differentiate the most effective corps members and refine its approach to teacher selection and development based on those lessons.

Initially, the TAL team identified four principles on display in the most effective corps members' classrooms—big goals, student investment, a cycle of continuous improvement, and relentless pursuit of goals. Later, they identified two additional principles—purposeful planning and effective execution—and built out a detailed rubric that program directors could use to observe corps members in the classroom and provide actionable feedback to improve performance.

TAL serves as the foundation of Teach For America's approach to corps member preparation, training, and support. Its rubric plays a central role in Teach For America's Summer Institute corps member training, as well as in the ongoing support and coaching that MTLs (managers of teacher leadership and development, as program directors have been called since 2011) provide to corps members. In 2010, Kopp, Steven Farr, and Jason Kamras published a book distilling the lessons of Teach For America's TAL work for a broader audience, and Teach For America launched a TAL website that makes the TAL rubric and TAL-related tools available to corps members, alumni, and other educators. As a result, schools and educators outside Teach For America now also use these resources to support teacher effectiveness. In 2009, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Teach For America undertook a rigorous study to validate TAL by comparing TAL rubric data from some 300 classrooms with district-produced value-added data for the same classrooms. This study demonstrated that TAL rubric scores predicted gains in student learning, and in-depth analysis of the relationships between specific rubric components and value-added data informed the further evolution of TAL.

Over the past two years, Teach For America has further expanded TAL beyond specific teacher practices to include the teacher mind-sets and teacher-student relationships that underlie those practices. This expansion, known as TAL X.O, is informed by Teach For America's ongoing research into the mind-sets and actions of its most effective corps members, and is designed to help corps members shift from thinking solely about their own actions to thinking about how those actions contribute, along with other factors and relationships, to the broader goal of driving transformative impact on children's lives. In conjunction with the rollout of TAL X.O, Teach For America has also begun piloting a broader range of corps member impact metrics, including student and families surveys.

## Principal Surveys Inform Teach For America's Understanding of Corps Member and Alumni Impact

Although Teach For America invests considerable resources and energy in measuring corps member impact on student learning, the organization does not believe that test scores alone provide a full measure of corps member or alumni impact. For 20 years, Teach For America has surveyed principals to evaluate their satisfaction with corps members. For the first decade of Teach For America's history, principal surveys provided the only national measure of corps member impact; today they complement independent evaluations and SAMS data to provide a more complete picture of corps member impact than student learning data can alone.

Teach for America engages independent survey firms to conduct a national survey of principals who have Teach For America corps members working in their schools. In its most recent iteration, the survey asks about school leaders' perception of corps member and alumni effectiveness in driving student achievement, improving school culture, and fostering leadership, as well as the likelihood that principals would choose to hire corps members in the future.

The 2013 survey, which included responses from just under 2,000 principals, indicated that 95 percent of principals were satisfied with their corps members and 96 percent were satisfied with the alumni working in their schools. Ninety-one percent said they would recommend that another school leader hire corps members.

Roughly half of these principals believed that corps members outperform other beginning teachers in key areas such as leadership and classroom impact. Forty-seven percent of respondents believed that corps members had greater leadership skills than other beginning teachers, and 51 percent believed that corps members had a greater classroom impact than other beginning teachers.

In the 2013 iteration of the principal survey, Teach For America added questions about alumni, as well as corps members. Sixty-five percent of principals indicated that alumni had stronger leadership skills than other veteran teachers, and the same percentage agreed that alumni had greater impact in the classroom. These results speak to the longer-term component of Teach For America's Theory of Change—but also show room for improvement among both corps members and alumni.

## Recruitment and Selection

In developing the 2005 growth plan, Teach For America realized that recruitment would be a major hurdle to achieving its ambitious growth goals. Recruiting enough applicants who meet Teach For America's rigorous selection criteria was—and remains—the essential condition for growing the corps size. During its first decade in operation, when incoming corps size remained relatively steady at about 500 a year, Teach For America put in place recruitment practices and infrastructure that reliably generated this number of new corps members each year. Doubling the corps size would require radically upping the game on recruitment—at a time when no one knew where the potential ceiling on recruitment might be.

Meeting this challenge fell to Elissa Kim, who became Teach For America's executive vice president of recruitment in 1999, and the team of 10 staff members who worked with her. "When we embarked on our 2005 growth plan, we didn't have a clear path to doubling the size of the corps," Kim recalls. "That reality was daunting. We knew, however, that there were thousands of talented college students who were committed to engaging in this issue in a deep and meaningful way. We just had to find them. We knew that to double in size, what we had done for the last 10 years wasn't going to get us there—and that is what led to real innovation in how we pursued and compelled college seniors and professionals to come join us." Kopp concurs. "It wasn't a given that we would figure out how to grow the applicant pool," she says. "Elissa and her team stuck with it, developed a strategy, and carried it through with an incredible level of discipline. It made a critical difference that we had the right people bringing so much energy and leadership to that." Kim, a 1996 New Orleans corps alum, has continued to lead Teach For America's recruitment team for the past 15 years, while taking on additional responsibilities for admissions, growth, strategy, and development.

To inform its recruitment strategy, Teach For America conducted market research on potential recruits. "The huge finding was that we were only targeting the altruists, the do-gooders," says former Communications Director Melissa Golden. "But there was a huge group of other potential recruits who weren't necessarily traditional do-gooders but who were interested in finding roles where they could have long-term impact. We weren't speaking to those people, so they were going into finance and other sectors. We needed to tell a broader story about a national movement for broader impact." Based on this insight, Teach For America developed a new set of messages designed to target these "long-term changers," and focused on delivering those messages consistently in recruiting and other outreach efforts. "We emphasized to our staff that everyone was an ambassador for our brand, and that staff needed to talk about us in a certain way," Golden says. Teach For America created a one-page document outlining common messages for use by all recruiters and others representing the organization.

Meanwhile, the recruitment team was developing a radically different and much more effective approach to recruiting candidates. Early on, Teach For America's recruitment efforts looked a lot like those of other employers: a recruiter came to campus once or twice a year and gave a presentation to whoever showed up. In the 2003–04 school year, however, one recruiter, working at Harvard University, focused her efforts on one-on-one, half-hour-long conversations with student leaders, meeting with 50 students a week. This approach—similar to that used by effective political and community organizers—proved so successful that Teach For America scaled it nationwide in the 2004–05 school year. Teach For America had already shifted more recruitment staff to the field in 2002–03, which provided on-the-ground capacity to conduct one-on-one meetings. Teach For America also began hiring part-time student coordinators to conduct outreach on their campuses and

*We knew, however, that there were thousands of talented college students who were committed to engaging in this issue in a deep and meaningful way. We just had to find them.*  
-Elissa Kim

help recruiters identify and connect with promising leads. Turning what had previously been an unpaid volunteer role into a paid part-time position dramatically increased the professionalism and leverage of the student coordinator role. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of recruitment staff grew from 10 to 29.

As a result of these changes, and the creation of an online application that made it easier to apply, Teach For America was able to more than quadruple its applicant pool, from 4,000 in 2000 to more than 17,000 in 2005. Teach For America's recruitment team was also able to take advantage of external factors (such as an increase in volunteerism after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks) and redouble its efforts to overcome external recruiting challenges.

To accommodate this deeper applicant pool, Teach For America needed to rapidly scale up its selection process, while maintaining consistent and rigorous standards. The central components of Teach For America's selection process—defined competencies, a rubric used to assess applicants' demonstration of competencies, and a full-day in-person interview—have been in place since the 1990s. But as the number of applicants skyrocketed, Teach For America needed to scale its selection capacity and systems. This was an enormous operational task. Scaling the labor-intensive process required drawing on staff from across the organization—including both regional and national staff—to conduct interviews and observe candidates. To ensure consistent decisions across diverse selectors, Teach For America refined its interview questions, tasks, and rubrics, and developed common training for all staff participating in selection. As a further check, senior national recruitment and admissions staff review 20 percent of all application files each year—including those of all applicants who were “on the bubble” for selection—to ensure quality control and check for selection biases. These strategies, created in the early 2000s, remain part of the admissions process today.

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Technology played a crucial role in helping Teach For America scale up both its recruitment and selection processes, allowing the organization to create an online application system and to electronically collect, track, and analyze a significant amount of data on candidate prospects, applicants, and corps members. Without an online application and electronic data tracking, it would have been impossible to build a process that allows the review of more than 50,000 applications annually.

Even as it scaled its selection process, Teach For America was continuously refining that process, using corps member impact data collected through the new significant gains system. “People think the secret sauce in TFA selection is about particular criteria and screens,” says Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel, who led the selection team from 2000 to 2007, “but I think the big lesson is the evaluation cycle,” in which Teach For America compares admissions data with data on corps member impacts to understand which corps member competencies evaluated upon admission best predicted later classroom success. Teach For

America then refines its selection model to place greater emphasis on these competencies. “If more districts—which have better data than TFA could get—would study their own processes in this kind of evaluation cycle,” says Ayotte-Hoeltzel, “they could learn more and do much better” in selecting and hiring effective teachers.

While many of the competencies that Teach For America looks for in selecting corps members have changed little since the 1990s, others have been added or removed. The greatest changes, though, have been to the relative weight of the competencies, as well as the specific questions, tasks, and strategies that Teach For America uses to assess them, which evolve annually in response to data.

“If more districts—which have better data than TFA could get—would study their own processes in this kind of evaluation cycle, they could learn more and do much better.”  
-Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel

## Building Organizational Capacity

Doubling Teach For America’s scale required significantly expanding organizational capacity. In 2000, Teach For America was relatively small, with fewer than 100 employees, and still operated in a very start-up-like mode. Getting to 3,000 corps members by 2005 required significantly increasing staff capacity, to more than 500; systematizing tasks and activities that had previously been done ad hoc; and creating a more professional external presentation of the organization. This, in turn, helped build Teach For America’s credibility with potential district partners, funders, and other stakeholders. “Creating a simple story and a clear, professional image of who we were enabled us to get in the door and make headway among our key constituents,” says Melissa Golden.

In addition to building out existing functions—such as recruitment, admissions, training and support, and technology—expanding Teach For America’s organizational capacity required putting in place new functions, roles, and teams. Two of these teams—the Regional Management Team and the Growth, Strategy, and Development Team—would prove particularly crucial to Teach For America’s future growth.

## Overseeing and Supporting Regions

By 2000, Teach For America was operating 15 different regions, each led by an executive director, who was responsible for managing the regional team; raising funds; building and maintaining community, stakeholder, and district relationships; and serving as the public face of Teach For America in the region. Each of these executive directors reported directly to COO Jerry Hauser—an arrangement that would prove to be unsustainable as the organization began growing.

In 2001, Teach For America hired Lee McGoldrick, an alumnus of the 1993 Los Angeles corps and Georgetown law school, as vice president of regional management, responsible for overseeing regional EDs. Since Teach For America’s founding in 1990, its regional EDs had been responsible for the success or failure of Teach For America in their regions. Due to Teach For America’s lean organizational hierarchy, regional EDs had a high level of autonomy in determining how to reach the goals for their region—and this remained

the case after McGoldrick took on the regional management role. Rather than trying to micromanage how the EDs did their work, McGoldrick worked with each one to set goals in several key areas of success: fundraising, board development, staff and organizational management, programmatic outcomes, and corps culture. In addition, she served as a point of contact to make sure EDs got the support and resources they needed from national teams. Because of the large number of EDs for which she was responsible, McGoldrick took a “triage” approach, identifying regions as high-performing, facing challenges in a few specific areas, or significantly struggling. In high-performing regions, the regional management role was limited to occasional coaching and helping EDs get what they needed. A second set of regions were performing well in some areas but needed support to address challenges in other areas. Finally, McGoldrick recalls, “a small cluster of regions were really rough,” and typically required new leadership, because Teach For America lacked the capacity to intervene intensively to support EDs who struggled and did not believe that directly running regional sites was an appropriate role for the national team.

The regional management function remained a small one within Teach For America through 2005. (McGoldrick left the role in 2003 to join the newly formed Growth, Strategy, and Development Team; she currently leads Teach For America’s policy and legislative analysis work.) That year, it began to play a larger role in the next phase of the organization’s growth. Over time, the original insight behind the regional management role—that effectively supporting a network of dispersed regional sites requires national staff focused on managing regional leaders and interfacing between regional and national teams—has proved crucial to Teach For America’s successful growth as a multiregion, national organization.

### Creating a Growth Engine

To secure the full \$8.3 million Fisher challenge grant in 2000, Teach For America would need to raise \$8.3 million in funding from other sources over a three-year period. Teach For America had had dedicated development staff since the early 1990s, and Kopp continued to serve as the organization’s primary fundraiser. But Kopp and Hauser realized that, in order to meet its ambitious growth goals and sustain that growth over time, the organization would need to significantly increase its fundraising base—starting, but not ending, with raising the full match for the Fisher Challenge.

To lead this work, Kopp and Hauser recruited Kevin Huffman, a 1992 Houston corps alum who had gone on to law school and taken a job at a Washington, D.C., law firm. “My initial response was ‘Wow, that sounds miserable, I have no interest,’” says Huffman, “but as I spent time with Wendy, who talked about her approach to fundraising, I realized that this is really about building relationships and engaging people as champions for the work, as opposed to just asking people for money. And I started to understand the extent to which this was a hugely strategic, hugely important challenge.”

*In order to meet its ambitious growth goals and sustain that growth over time, the organization would need to significantly increase its fundraising base.*

Huffman joined Teach For America in 2000 as vice president of development. In this role, he established both Teach For America's internal development infrastructure and its strategy for linking programmatic and funding growth. (In recognition of this linkage, Huffman's role was later expanded to senior vice president of growth, strategy, and development.) In the mid-1990s, Teach For America had recognized that regional fundraising would be crucial to long-term stability, and made fundraising a key expectation of regional executive directors' jobs. But there was neither a clear rationale linking EDs' regional fundraising goals to regional corps size or larger organizational goals, nor centralized support to help EDs meet their goals.

*[Teach for America's fundraising approach was designed] to build champions and ensure that the work of opening and growing sites was tied to building political and funding support in the community.*

*-Kevin Huffman*

Under Huffman's leadership, Teach For America linked regional fundraising expectations to regional corps size—making regional EDs responsible for raising the funds to cover the costs associated with corps members in their region, and making regional growth contingent on raising those funds. At the same time, Teach For America shifted its attitude toward selecting new sites: rather than choosing regions where it wanted to be and working to build partnerships and raise funds in those places, the organization would establish a target for the number of new regions it planned to launch each year, and place the onus on prospective regions to put in place the funding and other conditions necessary for launch. This approach—which essentially put regions in competition with one another to become Teach For America sites—was possible in large part because demand from cities and school districts exceeded the number of regions Teach For America was able to launch every year.

Linking Teach For America's growth strategy and fundraising in this way created an engine that would fuel growth for the next 15 years. The underlying philosophy behind the approach was not just about money, however. As Huffman explains, this approach was designed "to build champions and ensure that the work of opening and growing sites was tied to building political and funding support in the community." Creating local funders and political champions would in turn "ensure that as we grew we could sustain ourselves over time." McGoldrick notes an additional benefit of this approach: it encouraged executive directors to prioritize relationships with leaders in their communities. "Regions had to invest in their landscapes, and Teach For America's regional leadership had to be plugged into the community context."

Corps allocation was the fuel that made the engine run. Each year, Teach For America's recruitment and selection teams generate a certain number of corps members, and Teach For America must determine how to distribute those corps members across new and existing sites—a process known as corps allocation. The process begins when regional EDs develop their annual regional strategic plans, which project the number of corps members they'll need in their region, based on both demand from school and district partners and the amount of funding they believe they can raise. The national team must then take these regional plans, review their assumptions and feasibility, and reconcile aggregate demand across all regions with the size of the incoming corps.



This process has determined both how much Teach For America grows in any given year and where that growth occurs. Although Teach For America uses five-year growth plans to set goals for the entire organization, those plans do not include targets for annual corps growth or for the size of individual regions. Rather, annual growth in any region, as well as across the entire organization, is the result of regionally developed strategic plans. In the early 2000s, most regional EDs saw unmet need in their regions and wanted to grow their corps size to respond to that need. The resulting combination of regional strategic planning, national corps allocation, and linking regional growth to regional fundraising created a “flywheel” of corps growth and increased funding that fueled Teach For America’s overall growth.

Figure 3 > Teach For America’s Approach to Allocating Corps Members

**Regions plan annual growth** based on:

- Regional vision
- Fundraising potential
- Partner demand

**National team approves plans**, considering:

- Site performance, plan, and capacity
- Total supply of corps members
- Needs of all regions

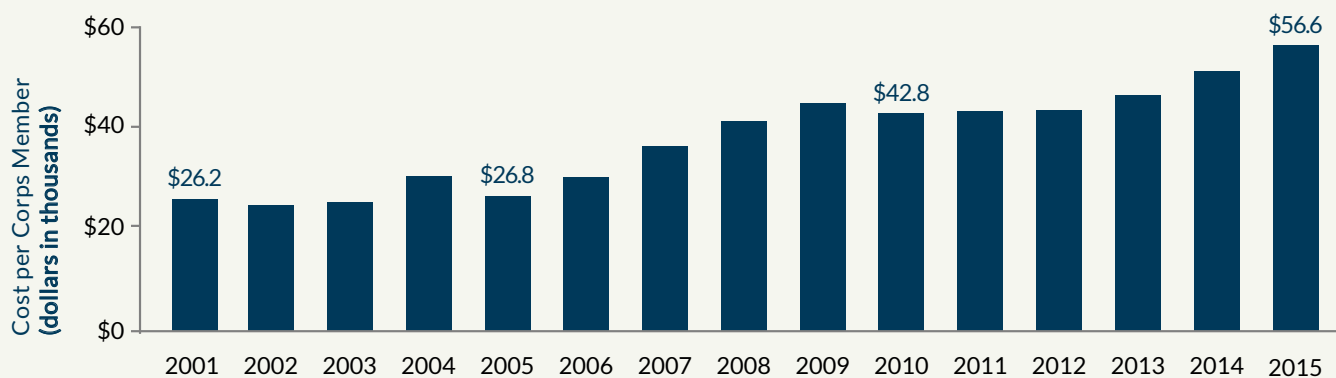


*“When you’re small,  
you’re going after the  
lowest-hanging fruit;  
we’re probably already  
getting the easiest  
5,000 applicants. Each  
increment after that will  
be harder to get and more  
labor-intensive.”*  
-Kevin Huffman

Even as Huffman focused on building out the strategic connection between regional growth and development, he worked to broaden the organization’s national base of individual, corporate, foundation, and public funders. Just as funding and growth were integrated at the regional level, they were closely connected at the national level. Growth plans proved a powerful fundraising tool, enabling Teach For America to attract donations of undesignated “growth funds” with few limitations on their use. In addition to private and philanthropic funds, Teach For America also sought to expand its public funding. Since 1994, Teach For America had received federal funding through AmeriCorps, and state and federal funds constituted 3 percent of Teach For America’s funding in fiscal year 2000. As Teach For America grew, it sought to increase its federal funding proportionate to its organizational growth. Doing so required building capacity within Teach For America to identify and pursue untapped sources of state and federal funding.

These strategies enabled Teach For America to not only meet but wildly exceed the fundraising goals it set in 2000. In its 2000 proposal to the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, Teach For America projected growth in revenues from \$10 million in 2000 to \$26 million in 2004. In fact, Teach For America’s budget for 2004 came in at \$40 million—a testament to the success of the organization’s fundraising model, but also evidence that scaling the corps cost more than Teach For America or its funders had anticipated. Many of Teach For America’s funders, who came from business backgrounds, had assumed that growing the corps would lead to economies of scale and reduced per-corps-member costs. In fact, Huffman says, “economies of scale were near impossible to find, because of the nature of the work.” Recruiting corps members, training them, and supporting them in the classroom were all highly labor-intensive activities, making it difficult to realize economies of scale. If anything, scaling increased the marginal cost per corps member. “When you’re small,” says Huffman, “you’re going after the lowest-hanging fruit; we’re probably already getting the easiest 5,000 applicants. Each increment after that will be harder to get and more labor-intensive.” Teach For America’s efforts to increase corps member and alumni impact —by developing the significant gains system and creating an office to support alumni, for example—further increased costs. Although Teach For America’s fundraising success enabled it to cover these additional expenses, the increases in per-corps-member costs concerned some Teach For America staff members and funders.

Figure 4 Real Costs Per Corps Member Have Increased Over Time



Source: Teach For America internal data.

Notes: All costs are reported in inflation-adjusted, 2015 dollar amounts.

## An Unexpected Policy Challenge Spurs Increased Engagement in Public Affairs

As Teach For America began to grow in the early 2000s, it confronted a new challenge. The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, contained a little heralded provision requiring all public school teachers to be “highly qualified” by the end of the 2005–06 school year. The law defined a “highly qualified teacher” (HQT) as someone who “obtained full State certification as a teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification) or passed the State teacher licensure examination, and holds a license to teach in the State.”<sup>6</sup> While the exact meaning of the provision was disputed, both Teach For America and legislative staff feared that it could prevent Teach For America corps members—many of whom were enrolled in alternative certification programs but had not yet obtained certification—from teaching in public schools after the 2005–06 deadline.

When the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations for No Child Left Behind in June 2002, it included provisions allowing teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs that met certain standards to be deemed highly qualified even if they had not yet completed their certification program. This provision meant that Teach For America corps members were safe—at least in the near term. (In 2010, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled

that teachers enrolled in alternate route programs were not highly qualified.) But even if the highly qualified provisions did not prevent Teach For America corps members from teaching, they profoundly influenced Teach For America's growth.<sup>7</sup>

All Teach For America corps members would now need to enroll in alternative certification programs that met the requirements of the HQT regulation. This, in turn, meant that most Teach For America regions needed to form partnerships with local higher education institutions offering such programs, and that corps members would need to enroll in and take alternative certification coursework—often at significant cost to the corps members. This created a significant barrier to some prospective corps members who already had significant undergraduate debt and could not afford to pay both living expenses and the costs of coursework on a teacher's starting salary. In addition, it markedly increased the importance of the AmeriCorps education awards for which Teach For America corps members were eligible, because they could in most instances be used to help cover the costs of certification coursework.

At the same time, HQT provisions created an opening for Teach For America in some cities. In addition to certification or licensure, the HQT provision also required teachers to be qualified specifically in the subjects they taught—typically evidenced by a major in the subject or by passing a content knowledge test. Teach For America's corps include a higher percentage of math and science majors than most teacher preparation programs. Teach For America's ability to provide teachers with math and science majors filled a crucial void in districts that had historically filled positions in math, science, and other shortage areas with “out of field” teachers and could no longer do so under HQT's requirements.

*Teach For America's ability to provide teachers with math and science majors filled a crucial void.*

Narrowly dodging the HQT threat convinced Teach For America that it needed to significantly increase its engagement in federal and state-level policy—not just to increase its funding but to protect its work against opponents who might seek to use the political process to shut it down. In 2001, the organization hired Monica Healy, a longtime Capitol Hill staffer, as its first full-time government affairs director. Working on Kevin Huffman's team, Healy was responsible for developing Teach For America's first proactive government relations strategy.

As Teach For America entered the next phase of its growth, its government affairs engagement would produce significant benefits. Over the next several years, the group secured federal appropriations earmarks as well as language within the 2008 Higher Education Act reauthorization that specifically singled out Teach for America for funding.<sup>8</sup> Even as Teach For America increased its engagement in public policy, however, it remained focused on issues that directly affected its funding or its ability to place corps members as teachers, and avoided taking stances or lobbying on most other education policy issues—a strategy that became increasingly difficult to maintain as Teach for America continued to grow.

## Growing Rapidly: 2005–2008

*A 2004 evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research, a widely respected independent research firm, had found that elementary school students assigned to Teach For America corps members had stronger math gains than a control group of students assigned to other teachers.*

Teach For America approached the close of its first five-year plan in a relatively strong position. It had achieved most of its growth goals, demonstrated that it could recruit more than 15,000 applicants each year, built a strong and sustainable organization, and created a fundraising juggernaut that dramatically exceeded even its own ambitious expectations. It had overcome a threat from No Child Left Behind’s highly qualified teacher provisions and gained credibility with funders and policymakers.

Even more important, a 2004 evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research, a widely respected independent research firm, had found that elementary school students assigned to Teach For America corps members had stronger math gains than a control group of students assigned to other teachers (see **Sidebar 1**). The study had a powerful effect on perceptions of Teach For America, particularly among policymakers and prospective funders. Prior to the Mathematica study, even many policymakers and educators who respected Teach For America’s work had questions about the impact of relatively untrained corps members on at-risk children. The Mathematica study showed that not only did corps members do no harm to students they taught, but they actually had a meaningful positive impact.

Experience from 2000 to 2005 had shown that Teach For America could grow significantly while maintaining and even improving quality. In the process of growing, Teach For America’s national and regional leaders had also seen that school, district, and regional demands for corps members outstripped existing capacity to meet them—creating potential for further growth. So in 2004, as they were developing the growth plan for the next five years, Teach For America’s leaders decided to accelerate the pace of growth and really test the limits of Teach For America’s potential to scale.

In 2005, Teach For America established the following goals for its growth by 2010:

- **Grow the size of the corps** from 3,500 corps members to 7,500.
- **Increase the diversity of the corps** to 33 percent corps members of color and 20 percent of corps members receiving Pell grants (an indicator of low-income background) by 2010.
- **Maximize the impact of corps members** on student achievement, with 50 percent of first-year corps members and 80 percent of all corps members demonstrating significant gains by 2010.
- **Foster alumni leadership** as a force for change, by expanding alumni support offerings and increasing the number of alumni serving as school leaders to 600 and elected officials to 100 by 2010.
- **Build an enduring institution** by strengthening organizational capacity, increasing alumni support, building brand awareness, and further diversifying and growing Teach For America's fundraising base.

At the time, Teach For America estimated that achieving these goals would cost \$366 million over five years and require growing fundraising by 20 percent annually to reach a total budget of \$101 million in 2010. (Ultimately, it would cost more than \$435 million, and funding would rise by more than 30 percent annually to reach a total budget of \$193 million in 2010.) These were very ambitious goals. But by this point, ambitious goals had become a hallmark of Teach For America's culture—one that had proved crucial to its success. "It's counterintuitive," says Kevin Huffman, "but it's easier to double than to grow by 10 percent. Incremental growth is hard to sustain and get champions. Massive growth ignites a different level of energy. It's one of the big lessons of growth we learned again and again." Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel concurs: "When you set incremental goals, people do what they were doing before just a little bit better. Ambitious goals force you to really rethink what you're doing." These ambitious goals were about to drive major changes in Teach For America.

## New Regions as an Engine of Growth

New regions would be a particularly important engine in achieving Teach For America's growth goals. From 2000 to 2005, Teach For America added seven new regions, bringing the total to 23. Over the next five years, Teach For America would add 19 new regions, bringing the total to 42. New regions were a particularly appealing target for growth because they opened the door to entirely new pools of local funding. While existing regions might already have tapped much of the local fundraising potential, new regions brought with them new funders. And because Teach for America's approach to site selection put the onus on local leaders to create the conditions required to launch, many new regions attracted public funds from school districts and states, as well as private funders.

*“When you set incremental goals, people do what they were doing before just a little bit better. Ambitious goals force you to really rethink what you're doing.”*  
-Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel

As Teach For America focused on expanding to new regions, it built increasingly sophisticated and complex systems for selecting new sites. Previously, the organization had selected new regions based primarily on three factors:

- Was there a need for Teach For America's work in the region? (Prior to 2005, Teach For America primarily expanded in communities that suffered from teacher shortages.)
- Would state policies allow Teach For America corps members to teach in the region?
- Could Teach For America raise sufficient funds to support the region?

In 2006, as Teach For America prepared to ramp up its expansion to new regions, the director of new site development, Kira Orange Jones (an alumnus of the 2000 Southern Louisiana corps who would soon become the executive director of the New Orleans region), recognized a need for more systematized selection criteria that prioritized a region's conditions for success as well as its potential to advance Teach For America's mission and impact goals. The Growth, Strategy, and Development Team adopted a set of data-based site selection criteria based on three factors:

- magnitude and depth of student need in the region
- corps member placement preferences
- regional wealth (a proxy for fundraising potential that includes individual, corporate, and philanthropic assets).

Teach For America also took into account other ways in which a new region could help advance national goals, for example by bringing in new board members and corporate sponsors. But to ensure that Teach For America's expansion focused on regions with the greatest potential to advance its mission, regional need carried the greatest weight in the new selection model.

In the late 2000s, Teach For America further refined its approach to site selection, creating a quantitative "new site attractiveness index" based on five factors:

- Regional need, which took into account percentage and total number of students with free and reduced lunch stats, as well as data on students failing to graduate high school
- Funding, which replaced the previous regional wealth criteria and took into account the diversity of individual, corporate, and philanthropic funding opportunities to cover the first three years of operating costs
- Corps member preferences, based on the prevalence and total number of young degree-holders in the region
- Public affairs, which included regional media and political factors, such as the presence of political champions for Teach For America's work, and the potential impact of these factors on Teach For America's national brand and support
- Impact on existing regions, which became more important as the number of Teach For America regions grew, creating the potential for inter-region competition for corps members and funding.



*Site selection decisions emerge from the confluence of innate regional characteristics—such as size and depth of need—and the creation of on-the-ground conditions that support Teach For America’s success.*

Teach For America continued to use this new site attractiveness index and criteria through 2013, adjusting the weighting of the index factors in response to changes in the external landscape. (For example, Teach For America increased the weight of corps member preferences in its site selection criteria as part of its response to increased recruitment challenges.) Since 2013, the overall pace of growth has slowed, and Teach For America has decided to reallocate resources away from new site expansion to focus on supporting existing regions. This means that, for the near future, the bar for creation of new sites is very high; Teach For America will expand only when there is a clear path for a potential new site to meet all conditions for success.

While selection criteria help Teach For America identify sites that carry particular promise to help advance its Theory of Change, these criteria have never been the sole basis for expansion decisions. Rather, site selection decisions emerge from the confluence of innate regional characteristics—such as size and depth of need—and the creation of on-the-ground conditions that support Teach For America’s success. These conditions are reflected in Teach For America’s “green-lighting” criteria for new sites, which typically include: securing three years of funding up front, identifying an executive director, signing memoranda of understanding with alternative certification providers; and signing placement agreements with school and district partners. Both Teach For America staff and local champions or partners within a region play a role in creating the necessary conditions to launch. A superintendent who wants to bring Teach For America to her district, for example, may broker relationships with funders or make the case to the school board to approve Teach For America’s contract. In other regions, early funding supporters may broker introductions to other prospective funders or community leaders.

During the period of its most rapid expansion, Teach For America typically maintained a pipeline of several potential new regions “in development.” This approach mitigated the inherent political risk in working with public school systems, and ensured that if one planned site was unable to launch in a given year, another one was ready to go. It also created competitive pressure on local funders and district leaders to create the funding and other conditions required to launch—because they knew that Teach For America could choose to expand to another region instead.

## Increased Emphasis on Alumni

Alumni have always been crucial to Teach For America’s Theory of Change. During its first 15 years, however, Teach For America focused the bulk of its resources and energy on corps member programming, and provided relatively little formal support for alumni. “Our main strategy was that the corps member experience was a lever that put corps members on a path to long-term impact as alumni,” says Andrea Pursley, executive vice president of alumni affairs.

By 2005, Teach For America’s alumni base had grown to more than 6,000—and was poised to grow exponentially in the coming years. Moreover, alumni from Teach For America’s early years—now in their mid-30s—had begun taking significant leadership roles in

education (see **Sidebar 5**). Even as alumni like national teacher of the year Jason Kamras and YES Prep founder Chris Barbic were illustrating the potential of alumni leadership, the pathways through which alumni could move to positions of greater leadership were often unclear. Teach For America realized that school districts, while desperate for leadership talent, didn't invest in identifying potential leaders or developing their leadership pipelines in the same way that Teach For America—or many organizations in other sectors—did with its own staff. As a result, many alumni who wanted to pursue school leadership roles found limited support within their districts. Similarly, while years in the classroom had led many alumni to develop compelling ideas for new organizations or tools to advance

## Sidebar 5

### Alumni Support

To meet the needs of its growing alumni base, Teach for America's Alumni Affairs Team has created a robust menu of programming that helps alumni identify their role in advancing student equity and access the professional learning and development opportunities that equip them for that role.

Teach For America's annual alumni survey is an important tool for this work. The survey originally focused on basic information regarding alumni's jobs and geographic location, allowing Teach For America to track the numbers of alumni who remained in education, and to follow their progress in their careers. As it implemented the 2010 growth plan, Teach For America upgraded the alumni survey to collect information on their interests and career goals. This information is synced with the Alumni Affairs career planning database and the Teach For America Constituent Tracker, a relationship management system that allows Teach For America to centralize information on its corps members, alumni, and other stakeholders. This allows the organization to send targeted information to alumni based on their interests, career goals, and geographic location. Teach For America also uses the survey to identify career areas in which alumni need support, so as to inform the development of future offerings. In addition, the survey collects data on alumni satisfaction with Teach For America using the net promoter score, a common industry metric. Response rates to the alumni survey have exceeded 50 percent since the early 2000s, and over the past five years have averaged closer to 70 percent, making the alumni survey a robust source of information on alumni satisfaction, interests, career progression, and goals.

Since 2005, the Alumni Affairs Team has created several dedicated initiatives to support alumni in pursuing certain leadership roles in education:

- **The School Leadership Initiative** (2006) supports alumni interested in becoming principals or school leaders.
- **The Social Entrepreneurship Initiative** (2007) supports alumni seeking to launch new transformative education organizations.
- **The Teacher Leadership Initiative** (2009) supports alumni seeking to take on additional leadership roles while remaining in the classroom.

*continued on next page*

- **The Rural School Leadership Initiative** (2012) provides support customized to the unique needs of alumni leaders in rural communities.
- **The School System Leader Fellowship** (2012) supports alumni in developing the core managerial, political, and strategic skills to take on high-level district or school system leadership roles in the next two to three years.
- **The Capitol Hill Fellowship** (2013) places alumni in paid, full-time, yearlong congressional staff positions.

Teach For America develops dedicated initiatives in areas where it recognizes both significant alumni interest and clear needs within the educational sector, and where alumni's need for support and development align with Teach For America's core competencies and the resources it can bring to bear through its school and community partners.

In addition to targeted initiatives, the Alumni Affairs Team also provides broader support, including *One Day* magazine and online career resources. The national office supports regional teams in engaging and supporting local alumni. Regions design their own alumni offerings based on local needs, often including career development and skill-building workshops, one-on-one advising, information on local opportunities, and networking events for alumni and supporters. Alumni living outside of established regions receive support from the national team.

Teach For America's alumni programming has expanded significantly over the past 10 years. Each year, the Teach For America alumni base grows not only in numbers but also in diversity of age, current jobs, and career goals. As the alumni base continues to grow and evolve, so will Teach For America's alumni services.

equity for disadvantaged students, they often lacked the networks or entrepreneurial skills to translate those ideas into action. These challenges called into question the earlier assumption that corps experience alone would provide the lever for lifelong impact.

Teach For America recognized that realizing the potential of a growing alumni base would require a more concerted focus on cultivating alumni leadership throughout alumni's careers. To address these needs, a 2005 reorganization created a dedicated Alumni Affairs Team (replacing the previous Office of Civic and Career Engagement) to ramp up national initiatives and support regional programming. Teach For America also established ambitious goals for alumni leadership.

Over the past decade, Teach For America's alumni base has ballooned to more than 37,000, and alumni have gone on to have greater impact than anyone in the organization imagined in 2005—as heads of large urban districts, leaders of state school systems, founders of major charter management and other education organizations, and state and local elected officials. Even many alumni who have chosen to leave education entirely are visibly advancing the causes of social justice in other ways. For example, Steven North, a 1993 Eastern North Carolina corps member, went on to earn an M.D. and public health degree

after being exposed to the concept of school-based health care during his time in the corps. As founder and medical director of the Center for Rural Health Innovation, North works closely with local school districts to improve students' academic outcomes through access to health care. Mark Levine, a 1991 New York corps member, founded the Neighborhood Trust Federal Credit Union to serve low-income families in the Washington Heights community after seeing that his students' families lacked access to mainstream financial institutions, and was elected to the New York City Council in 2013. Darius Charney, a 1995 Greater New Orleans corps member who went on to earn degrees in law and social work from the University of California Berkeley, was the lead attorney in a federal class action lawsuit challenging the New York City Police Department's "stop and frisk" policies. And these are just a few prominent examples of alumni who continue to work in high-poverty communities or on behalf of social justice causes after leaving the education field.

Beyond these high-profile alumni, it is abundantly clear that for many district and charter partners, Teach For America's most important value proposition is not in its ability to fill teacher vacancies with corps members but in the fact that a disproportionate share of those corps members go on to assume positions of leadership within their schools and districts. "The biggest value-add is that the conversion rate from teacher to school leader is higher than among other groups," says Tom Torkelson, a 1997 Rio Grande Valley corps member and the founder of the IDEA charter school network. "And the alum we've been able to retain over time have really stood out." Executives in other charter networks, such as the Noble Charter Network in Chicago, and districts, such as the District of Columbia Public Schools, echo this sentiment.

*We had a strong program but needed the organizational capacity, infrastructure, and processes to match our growing scale.*

*-Jeff Wetzler*

The number of alumni will continue to grow more rapidly than corps size into the foreseeable future. In some regions, such as the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, the Twin Cities, Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., alumni already outnumber corps members by a large margin—with significant implications for regional resource allocation and programming. These evolving dynamics will require Teach For America, at both the national and regional levels, to continually assess the balance of its efforts between the first (corps members) and second (alumni) prongs of its Theory of Change, and to continue to evolve its programming to maximize the impact of a growing and maturing alumni base.

## **New Structures to Support Growth**

In 2005, Teach For America's leaders realized that the rapid growth they planned would require a new organizational structure. "We were thinking about how to make Teach For America a more enduring institution by 2010," says Jeff Wetzler, who worked as an external consultant on the team that led the restructuring and now serves as Teach For America's executive vice president of strategy, innovation, and organizational development. "We had a strong program but needed the organizational capacity, infrastructure, and processes to match our growing scale."

### New Leadership

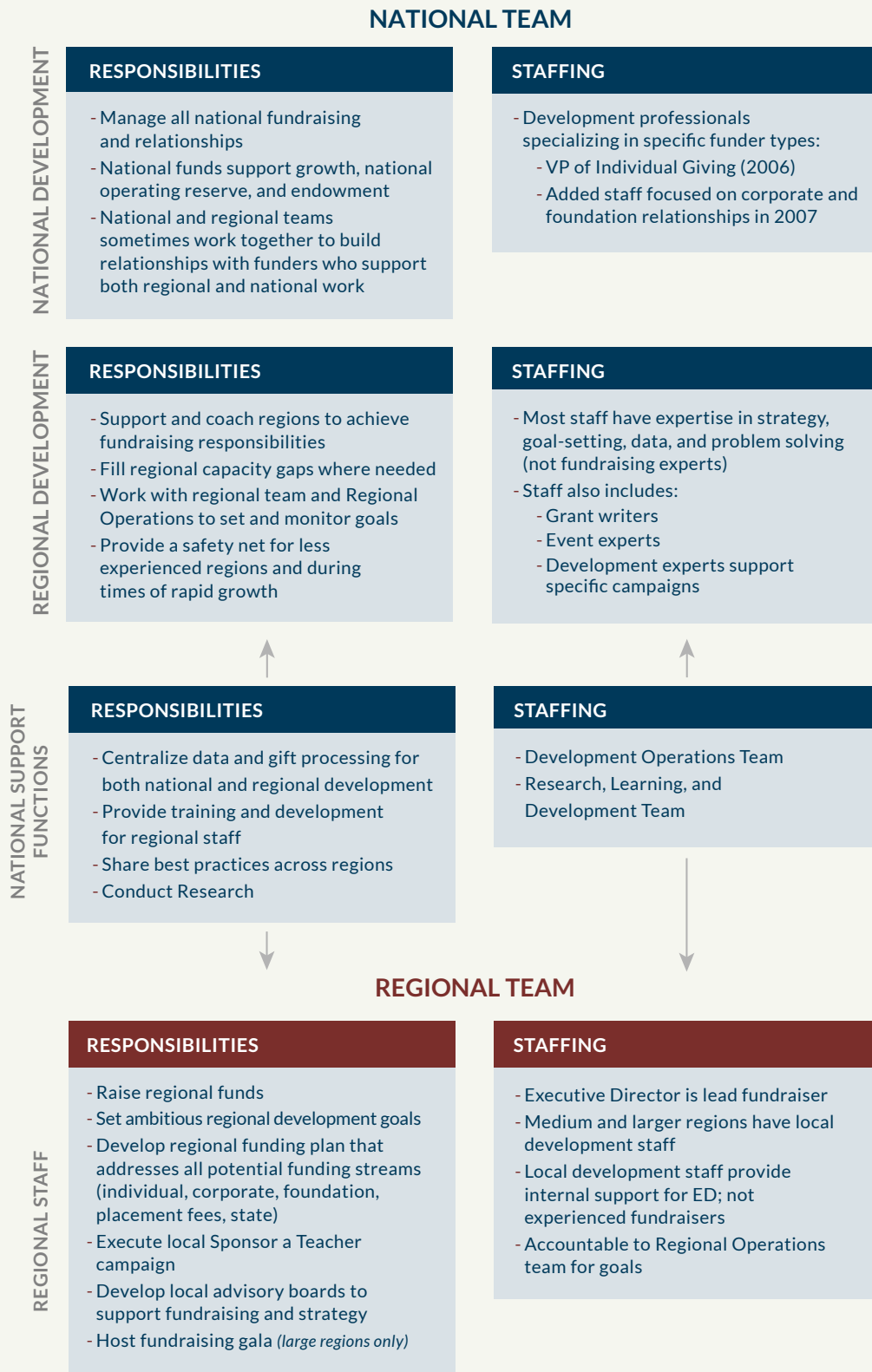
As part of its internal reorganization, Teach For America restructured its leadership team and created new roles. Two of the new leaders would prove particularly important to the organization's future. Matt Kramer, a McKinsey & Company partner and the husband of a Teach For America alum, had worked with the organization on a variety of pro bono consulting projects starting in 1999. In 2005, on a detail from McKinsey, Kramer joined Teach For America as chief of program, responsible for overseeing recruitment; teacher preparation, support, and development; and alumni support. In 2007, Kramer joined Teach For America full-time as president. Elisa Villanueva Beard, a 1998 Phoenix corps member who had led the Rio Grande Valley region from 2001 to 2005 and served as vice president for regional operations since then, became chief operating officer, responsible for overseeing all 23 of Teach For America's regions. In addition to Wendy Kopp, Kramer, and Villanueva Beard, the restructured leadership team included Senior Vice President for Growth, Strategy, and Development Kevin Huffman, as well as the senior vice presidents responsible for marketing and communications, human assets, and finance and operations.

### Entering "The Matrix"

To support its growth, Teach For America put in place a highly centralized "matrix" structure in which dedicated national staff teams buttressed core activities carried out at the regional level—such as corps member support and development, fundraising, communications, and alumni support. Wetzler calls this a "belt and suspenders approach." The Regional Development Team, created as part of the 2005 restructuring, exemplifies how the matrix worked in practice. While regional executive directors were responsible for raising funds to support the work in their regions, they did so with support from a nationally based Regional Development Team, whose members focused on helping EDs meet their goals. "There was a huge need for development support among regions," says Stephanie Morimoto, who led the Regional Development Team from 2005 to 2010. Most EDs were former corps members in their mid-20s with little or no prior development experience. Yet Teach For America's development model relied heavily on regional fundraising. The Regional Development Team filled the gap, enabling Teach For America to increase regional fundraising by more than 30 percent each year from 2005 to 2010 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

## Regional and National Staff Teams Play Distinct Roles in Supporting Teach For America's Fundraising



Regional EDs met with funders in their regions and made fundraising asks, but the Regional Development Team provided crucial support behind the scenes, offering both strategic fundraising expertise and help with execution. “Regional Development’s role was to coach regions in figuring out how to construct local campaigns to raise renewable funding every year, create a multiyear growth campaign, and create a pitch to raise from larger donors,” explains Morimoto. Regional Development staff also helped with grant proposals and reporting.

Similarly, Teach For America’s national communications shop included multiple teams. The National Communications Team handled national and organization-wide communications, and the Regional Communications Team worked with each regional ED to develop and support a regional communications strategy based on the local landscape and the ED’s vision. Regional EDs served as the Teach For America spokespeople for their regions.

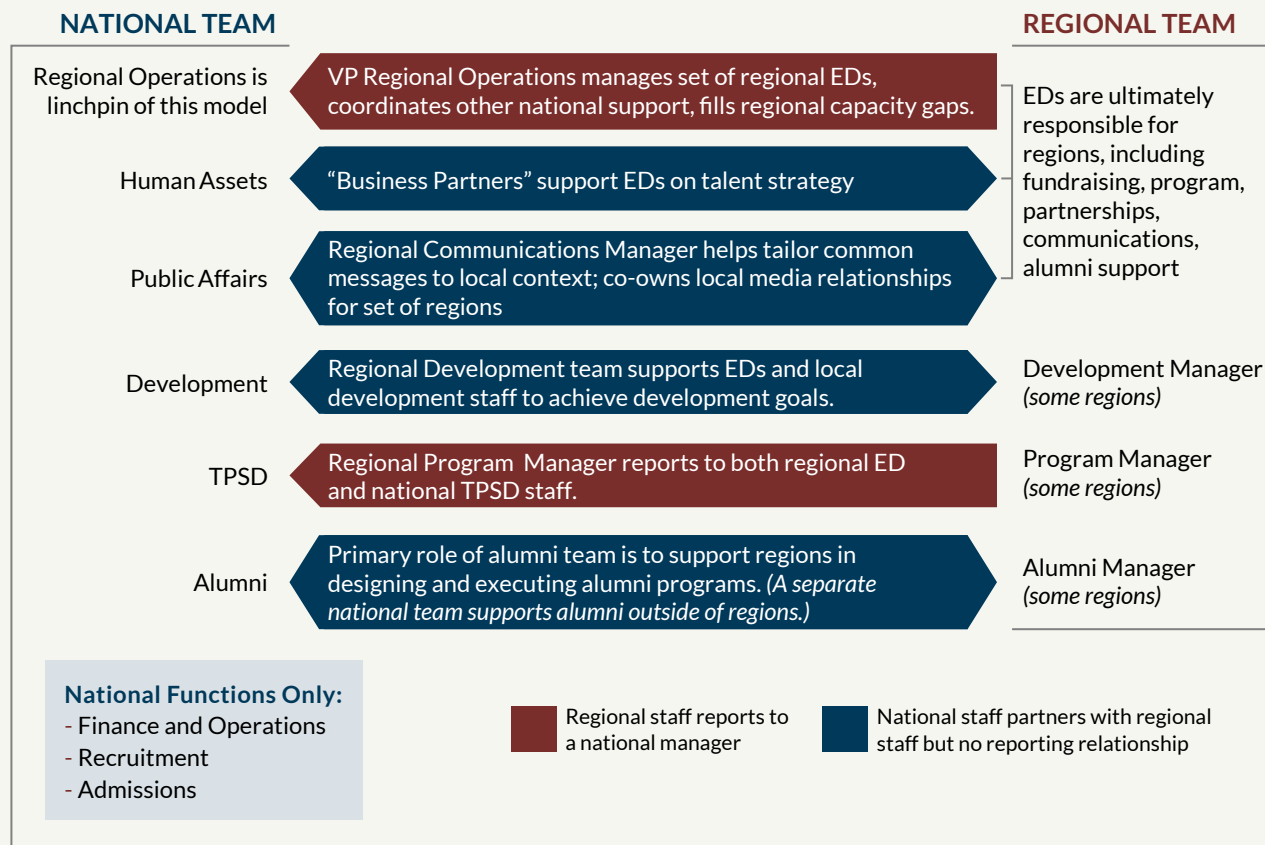
*“When you’re able to develop central teams that are working at the highest level, they become real knowledge hubs of how to do things and help regions build strategy and implement.”*  
-Elisa Villanueva Beard

This approach allowed Teach For America to leverage communications and fundraising talent—both of which proved challenging to find—across multiple regions, rather than trying to find staff with specific skills in each region. It also allowed Teach For America to build regional support teams with deep expertise in development, communications, and other areas, and to rapidly share effective practices across all regions. “When you’re able to develop central teams that are working at the highest level, they become real knowledge hubs of how to do things and help regions build strategy and implement,” says Elisa Villanueva Beard. “There’s only so much capacity that EDs and regional teams have—they’re doing everything—and when you have a whole team focused on thinking about development, or program, or communications, that can really enhance the quality of the work put out.” In addition, having centralized capacity to support regions in these areas allowed the national team to quickly identify trends or needs that were common across regions, and to create supports or tools that could be used across all regions.



Figure 6

## Teach For America's Matrix Operating Model Allocated Responsibilities Between National and Regional Teams



The linchpin of the matrix model was the Regional Operations Team. Teach For America had had national staff focused on managing regional EDs since 2001, but rapid growth and the implementation of the matrix model made the regional operations function more important than ever. “As Teach For America increased our aspirations for impact and scale, there was a realization that the regional staff on the ground needed more support,” says Emily Gelb, who became vice president of regional operations in 2007. Regional EDs had a high level of responsibility: their job included managing the regional staff, fundraising, building relationships with district and community partners, navigating political and public relationships in the region, and setting the regional strategy. But EDs typically had relatively little experience—a few became EDs directly out of the corps, while many others had only a few years of other experience—and typically lacked training in all the skills the role required. Average ED tenure was relatively short, only two to four years, and turnover was high. Successful EDs tended to move on to positions of greater responsibility within the national organization, while others burned out in the demanding role. Under these circumstances, EDs needed both effective management and significant support from the national team.

*The fact that corps members are nationally recruited and then allocated to various regions provides a clear value proposition for the national team, enabling a model that requires regions to raise the majority of funding even as they remain under tight central oversight.*

Under the matrix model, the Regional Operations Team took on an additional role: coordinating between regions and the numerous national teams created to support their work. “All these functional teams were engaged with EDs, and it was overwhelming [for EDs] dealing with lots of different people,” says Villanueva Beard. “Someone [from the national team] needed to manage it [on behalf of the EDs]. So we needed to become the bottleneck.” In addition to these roles, the Regional Operations Team also helped fill gaps in capacity at the regional level, which were not uncommon given the rapid pace of growth. Regional Operations staff often moved to regions to temporarily fill ED vacancies.

Through strong centralized control, the matrix model ensured a base level of quality across all regions. “Though we were scaling quickly, we were able to maintain a high level of quality and consistency in our program across regions, in large part due to the support and oversight provided by national teams,” says Latricia Barksdale, who held a variety of positions within Teach for America before becoming vice president of strategy and organizational development in 2013. It also provided a safety net for struggling regions. “We’ve had low-performing regions,” acknowledges Villanueva Beard, “but not to the point they fell apart. We wouldn’t let them fall apart—that was everybody’s job.” If a region faced challenges in a particular area, such as development, staff from the Regional Development Team within the national office would step in to provide support.

As Teach for America implemented the matrix model, corps member recruitment and selection remained an entirely national function, for both practical and philosophical reasons. National recruiting allows Teach For America to recruit at colleges where it does not have a regional presence, and makes it possible for Teach For America to place corps members in high-need regions with few higher education institutions from which to recruit. A large, national pool of applicants also enables Teach For America to be more selective and maintain a high bar for quality. Philosophically, Teach For America believes that recruiting corps members from around the country—who might otherwise never set foot in places like the Mississippi Delta or the Rio Grande Valley—to these regions plays a valuable role both in broadening the perspectives of corps members and in bringing new talent and perspectives to high-need communities.

Although they were not created for this purpose, national recruiting and selection functions made the matrix approach possible. The fact that corps members are nationally recruited and then allocated to various regions provides a clear value proposition for the national team, enabling a model that requires regions to raise the majority of funding even as they remain under tight central oversight.

The matrix allowed Teach For America to grow rapidly while maintaining quality. “They couldn’t have grown as fast or big without that [tight central control],” says the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund’s Chris Nelson, who has overseen the fund’s relationship with Teach For America since the mid-2000s. But it was not without its limitations. “The trade-off was that we didn’t focus on truly building the capacity of our EDs,” says Elisa Villanueva

*As Teach For America grew rapidly in the late 2000s, it often faced challenges in finding the talent it needed; the pace of growth simply outstripped the available talent pipeline.*

Beard. “That was our intent, but when you’re moving fast, you start to solve problems rather than building capacity.” Although the matrix provided a safety net for less seasoned EDs, these supports began to feel constraining as these EDs gained experience and skill. Kwame Griffith, a 2002 Houston corps member who served as Atlanta’s ED from 2007 to 2011 and now leads the Regional Operations Team, describes his own process: “In my first year, I struggled and had a lot of support from matrix functions. In about a year and a half, after lots of coaching and support, I got my feet under me and learned how to manage the team. By the third year, I had a vision and growth strategy in mind. I started feeling the national organization was helpful in some ways but getting in the way in others, which created tension.” These tensions would grow as Teach For America did, and as more of its regions attained significant scale. But as Teach For America grew rapidly in the mid- and late-2000s, a centralized approach proved necessary.

## **Talent**

Rapid growth required Teach For America to expand its staff. From 2005 to 2010, as the number of corps members increased by 142 percent, the number of staff members nearly quadrupled, from 317 to 1,212. The lion’s share of this growth occurred at the regional level, as Teach For America added new regions and grew in existing ones. (More than half of today’s staff members work in regions.) But implementing the matrix model also required increased national capacity to support regions. Some of this growth was “catch up” growth—the lean operating structure put in place in Teach For America’s scrappy start-up years had grown only modestly from 2000 to 2005. Equally important, Teach For America used growth funds raised in conjunction with its 2010 growth plan to make significant investments in its Teacher Preparation, Support, and Development Team and newly created Alumni Affairs Team, in order to improve program quality and increase corps member and alumni impact.

An emphasis on talent is baked into Teach For America’s culture. Just as Teach For America’s mission in the broader world rests on the belief that getting the highest-quality talent into schools is crucial to solving the achievement gap, there is within Teach For America a strong belief that exemplary talent is crucial to the organization’s success. Teach For America’s leaders, beginning with Kopp and COO Jerry Hauser in the late 1990s, have always emphasized hiring, developing, and promoting top-quality staff as central to effective management. And through its work with corps members and alumni, Teach For America has always had unique access to a strong pipeline of young talent.

Yet as Teach For America grew rapidly in the late 2000s, it often faced challenges in finding the talent it needed; the pace of growth simply outstripped the available talent pipeline. Because of its rapid pace of growth, Teach For America lacked a “bench” of talent who could step up when a new role or position was created to support growth, or when an existing staff member was promoted to a new position or left to pursue other opportunities. Because of this lack of a bench, Teach For America relied heavily on “stretch roles”: staff who succeeded in one role would be rapidly promoted to a role with even greater responsibility. Co-CEO

Elisa Villanueva Beard, who in 2005 was promoted from being the executive director of one region to overseeing all regions as vice president of regional operations, offers one example of this approach in action. Another is Ify Offor, who, after serving in the corps and completing law school, was hired as vice president of new site development. Despite a lack of prior fundraising or program management experience, Offor raised millions of dollars from 2008 to 2010 and supported the launch of nearly a dozen new sites. Josh Anderson became an ED after serving in the corps and spending eight months on the Recruitment Team; over the next seven years, he would lead the Chicago region's growth to more than 600 corps members.

This use of "stretch roles" created tremendous professional opportunities for high performers who could rise to the challenge. But it could also set staff up for failure and burnout. "It was very sink-or-swim," says Lora Cover, who was part of Teach For America's Human Assets Team from 2006 to 2013 and led the team from 2012 to 2013. "We were often dependent on leaders of teams, themselves in stretch roles, supporting our new managers."

In making hires and awarding promotions, Teach For America also had a tendency to prioritize talent—as demonstrated in a previous role—and mind-set over the specialized skills or expertise required for a particular role. This approach, which reflects Teach For America's overall philosophy and Theory of Change, has worked well for some roles, particularly in development. But a lack of specialized expertise has also placed the organization at a disadvantage in other areas, such as communication. Over time, Teach For America has recognized that some types of positions require more specialized expertise and experience, and has placed greater emphasis on hiring for these specific skills. But identifying and recruiting individuals for more specialized roles has proved challenging.

Regional executive director positions have also been particularly difficult to fill. EDs are responsible for raising all the funds needed to support a region's work; serving as the public face of Teach For America in that region; building relationships with districts, schools, donors, and university preparation partners; managing the regional staff; and setting the vision and strategy for the region. Very few people can do all these things well—much less do all of them well at the same time. Finding the right people for the roles has often been challenging—particularly during periods of rapid growth. Early on, Teach For America selected regional EDs who were inexperienced—typically former corps members with a couple of years of post-corps experience in Teach For America or another organization—but had a strong goal orientation and ability to influence others to achieve goals. In many cases, this approach worked incredibly well: relatively unseasoned EDs such as Sarah Usdin in New Orleans, Cami Anderson in New York, Brad Leon in Memphis, and future Co-CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard in the Rio Grande Valley positioned Teach For America to have significant impact in their regions, enabling the organization's growth in the mid-2000s. But others struggled in the role. Even among successful EDs, the demands of the role led to high rates of burnout: the average ED tenure during the mid-2000s was two to four years, and some regions experienced long vacancies in ED positions. As regions grew, the role required more management skills, political savvy, and local knowledge and connections, making it even harder to find staff with

the necessary attributes. By 2013, these challenges would play a key role in motivating Teach For America to rethink its operating model and national-regional structure. Between 2005 and 2010, however, they often meant that Teach For America struggled to find and retain high-quality executive directors.

Figure 7

## Executive Director Competencies Have Evolved Over Time



Exacerbating this turnover was a tendency to recruit high-quality talent from regional teams to positions within the national team. “If a staff member in the field had a lot of talent, Teach For America would bring them over to the national team,” recalls Jeff Wetzler of the period from 2005 to 2010. “The philosophy was that you could affect more than one region.” The concentration of talent within the national staff enabled Teach For America to develop exemplary national teams to support regions in their work, but it also led to a perception among Teach For America staff that promotion and professional advancement meant joining the national team, rather than assuming greater leadership or responsibility within a region—a perception that Teach For America is currently working to reverse. In 2013, Eric Scroggins, then executive vice president for growth, strategy, and development, accepted a position as ED of the Bay Area region—sending a powerful signal throughout the organization about the increasing value and priority that Teach For America placed on regional leadership.

### **Human Assets**

Teach For America’s Human Assets Team has played a key role in the organization’s ability to meet its talent needs as it has grown. While Teach For America has always had staff devoted to human resources, the 2005 restructuring significantly elevated this work by creating this team and installing a well-respected senior leader, Aimee Eubanks Davis, at the helm.

The mission of the Human Assets Team is to “attract, engage, develop, and retain” top talent. To realize this mission, it has put in place a variety of systems and supports for talent within Teach For America. One of the team’s first tasks in 2005 was developing more formal and structured systems for human resources processes and data. “We were still functioning like a grassroots mom-and-pop with lots of homemade spreadsheets,” recalls Marion Hodges Biglan, who has played multiple roles on the Human Assets Team since 2005. Once the basics were put in place, the Human Assets Team could build more robust systems and supports to engage and develop talent. Teach For America’s Leadership Competency Model, a part of the personnel evaluation system, created a common language for employees to understand expectations for their work, as well as the criteria for promotion. The team also created “talent trackers,” which managers used to track employee performance and progress toward promotion. Managers and Human Assets staff then used this information to plan for succession within teams and to identify team members who might be candidates for promotion to roles in other parts of the organization—thereby developing an internal talent pipeline. An acquisitions team within the Human Assets Team focused on recruiting top talent from outside the organization.

Human Assets also created a team of business partners to support regional EDs and other managers in developing and implementing talent strategies for their teams. For example, a business partner might work with a manager to set recruitment and retention goals for his or her team, to craft development plans for employees with promotion potential, or to lay out a succession plan for the team. If a team member had promotion potential but there were

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no immediate opportunities within his or her current team, a business partner also worked with managers and other Human Assets staff to identify opportunities for that person on other teams, enhancing staff retention and building the pipeline. This approach helped Teach For America create a culture in which all managers understood that developing the internal talent pipeline was their responsibility and had support to carry out that responsibility. Business partners also served as a “one-stop shop” for managers to address any HR-related challenges that came up with their teams. Because business partners typically came from the teams with which they worked, they had a high level of credibility with managers—increasing the credibility of the overall Human Assets Team within Teach For America.

While many nonprofit and education organizations treat human resources as an administrative function with little connection to their missions, Teach For America has sought to elevate the Human Assets Team’s work as imperative to its ability to fulfill its mission. That prioritization is reflected in the stature of Aimee Eubanks Davis, who led the Human Assets Team as chief people officer prior to becoming executive vice president of public affairs in 2013, as well as in the significant investments that Teach For America made in building its Human Assets team between 2005 and 2010.

Recognizing that rapid growth posed potential risks to internal staff culture and engagement, the Human Assets Team also began working with Gallup, the national polling organization, to implement the Gallup Employee Engagement Survey as a measure of staff culture and engagement. Over time, this tool has helped Teach For America identify trends in staff engagement and satisfaction and to make adjustments in response to those trends. This tool has also helped Teach For America improve its diversity by identifying and addressing gaps in the satisfaction and engagement of employees from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## **Prioritizing Diversity**

Diversity is crucial to Teach For America’s mission. “My own belief and conviction is that we were not going to be successful if we weren’t diverse,” says Wendy Kopp.

Teach For America believes that a movement of leaders who will address the challenges of poverty and education must, given the nature and complexity of these challenges, be a diverse movement, encompassing a range of perspectives and experiences. To succeed, it must ultimately be led by people who have themselves been directly affected by poverty, racial discrimination, and bias. To build a pipeline of diverse leaders, Teach For America must first have a diverse corps.

The common perception of Teach For America as a movement of young, white, affluent, elite college students has always been based more on myth than on fact. Although Teach For America’s founding team hailed largely from Ivy League institutions, the organization has always been more diverse—at both the corps and staff levels—than the myth suggests. The 1990 corps included 26 percent corps members of color. Teach For America has



always made corps diversity a priority in its recruitment efforts, and in 1992 created a dedicated recruiting position focused on historically black colleges and universities. Despite its internal commitment to diversity, however, Teach For America did not emphasize diversity in its external branding and messaging, allowing the perception of a largely white, elite institution to flourish.

As the organization prepared for rapid growth in 2005, however, it recognized that ensuring a diverse corps and staff while growing would require an even more intentional focus on diversity, and it set explicit goals to significantly increase corps diversity by 2010. Teach For America's commitment to diversity is not limited to the corps, however. Over the past decade, it has fostered a deep commitment to diversity at three distinct—and equally important—levels:

- Teach For America seeks to recruit and place a diverse corps and develop diverse corps members and alumni as leaders in the field.
- Teach For America seeks to build a staff that reflects the diversity of its corps and the students it aims to serve.
- Teach For America seeks to engage corps members, alumni, and staff in ongoing self-reflection and candid dialogue around issues of race, class, and privilege.

### Building a Diverse Corps

By 2005, 29 percent of Teach For America corps members were people of color, including 12 percent African American and 6 percent Hispanic. The corps included higher percentages of black, Latino, and male teachers than many other teacher preparation programs or the U.S. public school teaching force as a whole. In public perception, however, myths about Teach For America's elitism overshadowed its actual diversity, creating political challenges in some communities.

Moreover, Teach For America was not satisfied with its level of diversity. Leaders, including Kopp, believed that building a movement to tackle the challenges of educational inequity demanded a corps that reflected the demographic profile of the children and families affected by educational inequity. Kopp and other leaders had seen the impacts of corps members who shared the experiences and backgrounds of the low-income, primarily African American and Hispanic students they taught. "My conviction in this grew over time as I saw firsthand the added value that people who shared the background of their students could bring—in the classroom, in grounding our staff discussions, in inspiring confidence and trust in our communities," says Kopp.

Some staff members, however, feared that the pressures of continued growth would lead to a reduced focus on diversity and a reduction in corps diversity. In 2005, some regions, such as Atlanta and Houston, had much higher levels of corps diversity than others. To ensure that growth would result in a more, rather than less, diverse corps, the 2010 growth plan

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-Wendy Kopp

*50 percent of the corps members who began teaching in fall 2014 were people of color, 47 percent were from low-income backgrounds, and one-third were first-generation college-goers.*

included explicit goals for corps member diversity: by 2010, one in three Teach For America corps members would be a person of color, and one in five would be from a low-income background (as reflected by receipt of federal Pell Grants for college).

Increasing corps diversity was an organization-wide effort—but the greatest pressure and responsibility fell on the Recruitment Team. To ensure that recruiters focused on diverse candidates, the data dashboards that the team used to track progress began to track the number of diverse candidates that recruiters were contacting and meeting with. The Recruitment Team also increased staffing on campuses with high numbers of black and Latino students—Teach For America has always recruited at leading historically black colleges and at Hispanic-serving institutions—and added new campuses with high representation of minority candidates. Recruiters also began to draw on leaders from other parts of the organization—such as regional executive directors—to help with outreach to diverse candidates.

Focusing attention and resources on diversity has produced results: by 2010, 31 percent of incoming corps members were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, and 28 percent had received Pell grants. And diversity has continued to increase: 50 percent of the corps members who began teaching in fall 2014 were people of color, 47 percent were from low-income backgrounds, and one-third were first-generation college-goers. Teach For America is significantly more diverse than the typical teacher preparation program—nationally, only 26 percent of candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs are people of color.<sup>9</sup>

Teach For America did not increase diversity by lowering the bar. Over the past decade, the applicant admission rate has remained relatively consistent, at about 14 to 16 percent (despite a few one-year spikes and dips, there is no clear trend toward either higher or lower admissions rates). This relatively stable rate suggests two things: First, Teach For America has maintained a consistent standard of admissions rigor while growing. Second, increasing applications numbers have not meant lower-quality applicants. Corps member impact data also suggest that Teach For America has maintained quality with a more diverse corps. Data from 2010 to 2013, when the incoming corps grew even more diverse, offer no evidence of lowered selectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, increasing corps diversity has generated unforeseen payoffs. Teach For America experienced a significant decline in applications for the 2014 corps, due to a combination of increased competition for talent in an improving economy and a growing backlash against education reform. The greatest application declines were among white students; the number of applications from African American candidates declined only slightly, and the number of applications from Latino candidates increased. Had Teach For America not made the effort to diversify its recruitment from 2005 to 2013, it might have experienced an even greater drop in applications.

The diversity of Teach For America corps members has also become a key selling point for the organization with some school and district placement partners. Principals in these communities may be able to fill teaching vacancies without Teach For America, but they value the group's ability to provide teachers who reflect the demographics of the students in their schools. Partner demand for diverse corps members further reinforces Teach For America's own commitment to diversity.

### Retaining and Promoting Diverse Staff

To honor its mission and to support a diverse corps, Teach For America needed a diverse staff. As the staff grew rapidly from 2005 to 2010, the Human Assets Team worked to ensure diversity—from entry level positions through senior leadership. Many of the strategies that Teach for America used to recruit and hire diverse staff were not that different from those it used in recruiting diverse corps members: set goals for diversity, and pay attention. The Human Assets Team worked to build diverse pools of applicants for open positions—at time holding positions open until there was a sufficiently diverse pool.

As executive vice president of people, community, and diversity, Aimee Eubanks Davis was responsible for both Teach For America's human assets functions and its diversity work. Reviewing staff promotion and retention data, she discovered a troubling trend: while Teach For America had been successful in recruiting and hiring black and Latino staff, it was much less successful in retaining and promoting them. Black and Latino staff also expressed lower levels of engagement and satisfaction than their white peers did. She set out to find out why, listening to and talking with managers and staff from across the organization to understand what was happening. She discovered that many black and Latino leaders within Teach For America had a profoundly different experience from their white peers. Without intending to, Teach For America had developed a culture in which many people of color did not feel they could bring their "whole selves" to work. "People who shared backgrounds of our students felt we didn't talk at all about race, class, privilege, inclusion," says Eubanks Davis. "If you don't talk about it, you can't make it better. We had to name what we wanted to be."

*We exist as an institution that's born out of other institutions in the country that don't make it easy for people who are not part of the dominant culture to succeed.*  
-Elisa Villanueva Beard

In the absence of candid dialogue, unspoken assumptions about what it took to be successful worked against staff from certain backgrounds. "We exist as an institution that's born out of other institutions in the country that don't make it easy for people who are not part of the dominant culture to succeed," acknowledges Co-CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard.

Eubanks Davis realized that addressing these issues would require intentionally engaging all Teach for America staff in a process of self-reflection and dialogue around issues of race, class, and identity. Although such study and self-reflection had long been a central element of corps members' training at Summer Institute, it had never been incorporated into Teach For America's internal staff training and culture. The diversity team developed a 40-hour diversity series that all staff—regardless of their own background or role in the organization—must complete. The series is grounded in Beverly Tatum's book, *Why*

*Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, which confronts the challenges that educators of all races face in talking about issues of race and identity, and also plays a key role in Teach For America's corps member training. Not only does this series push all staff to reflect individually on their own identity and experience of bias and privilege—it also builds community and a common language around issues of race and class. Eubanks Davis believes that this has been important in enabling Teach For America to increase retention and promotion of diverse staff and move toward a more inclusive staff culture. "Teach For America is at its best as a diverse organization," she says. "Its work is about race, class, and privilege, and it needs to have internal dialogue and understanding about this."

*“Teach For America is at its best as a diverse organization. Its work is about race, class, and privilege, and it needs to have internal dialogue and understanding about this.”*  
-Aimee Eubanks Davis

The diversity and human assets teams also pushed managers to look carefully at how they were developing and promoting diverse staff on their teams. "We were incredibly deliberate and intentional," says Eubanks Davis. "We measured lots of things." As managers developed succession plans or identified staff for promotion, they were explicitly accountable for identifying and developing staff from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds—and for explaining what they were doing to support diverse staff who weren't yet ready for promotion.

The combination of staff-wide dialogue and relentless, data-driven focus on diversity goals produced results. Within a few years, Teach For America had eliminated gaps in retention of racial and ethnic groups, and more black and Latino staff were being promoted. And this progress occurred at a time when Teach For America was also achieving considerable success in growing the corps, hitting fundraising and recruitment targets that increased by as much as 30 percent annually, and demonstrating evidence of corps member and alumni impact—further illustrating that achieving diversity goals does not mean sacrificing impact or quality.

Teach For America continues to struggle with issues of race and class. Given our nation's history and the issues Teach For America seeks to address, it would be impossible—or dishonest—not to. But by confronting these issues directly and candidly, it has made tremendous, albeit imperfect, progress.

## Growing Education Reform Movement Creates New Opportunities and Challenges: 2008–2011

*Teach For America was in many ways the forerunner of these organizations, and its alumni, such as Rhee, played a major role in founding and staffing the organizations that made up this new education reform movement.*

In 2007, Washington, D.C., Mayor Adrian Fenty appointed Michelle Rhee, a Teach For America alumna (Baltimore 1992) and the then-CEO of The New Teacher Project, as chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools. A 37-year-old Asian American woman with a penchant for words like *crappy*, Rhee hardly fit the typical profile of a big-city superintendent. This unexpected choice drew national attention—not just to D.C. and Rhee, but also to an education reform movement that had been slowly gaining steam over the past decade.

As the charter school movement grew in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few extraordinary charters, such as the KIPP schools, started by Teach For America alumni Mike Feinberg and David Levin, produced impressive academic results for low-income children, catching the attention of national philanthropists and policymakers. George W. Bush made education a signature issue in his 2000 presidential campaign and, once elected, pushed for the landmark No Child Left Behind legislation. At the same time, philanthropic organizations, including the newly created Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, began investing significant resources in education—including Teach For America's growth. Philanthropic funds also fueled the creation or development of education organizations—such as The New Teacher Project (now TNTP) and NewSchools Venture Fund—that promoted new approaches to teacher preparation, hiring, and evaluation or supported the growth and replication of charter schools. Teach For America was in many ways the forerunner of these organizations, and its alumni, such as Rhee, played a major role in founding and staffing the organizations that made up this new education reform movement.

## Taking Policy Seriously

As new education reform organizations grew, however, they increasingly encountered local, state, or federal policies that posed barriers to their success, as well as political opposition to their work. Realizing that both policy and politics played a crucial role in determining the success of the growing movement, education reformers—and the funders supporting their work—became more involved in policy and advocacy to build political and public support for education reform ideas.

*Teach For America likewise recognized that it needed to engage more strategically and proactively on public policy issues.*

Teach For America likewise recognized that it needed to engage more strategically and proactively on public policy issues. Although the 2001 experience with highly qualified teacher requirements had shown that Teach For America could not afford to ignore public policy, the organization had resisted building its capacity to engage in advocacy and public affairs—for many years, Monica Healy was a one-person government affairs shop. By 2007, however, a variety of factors made clear that Teach For America needed a more robust public affairs team. As the organization grew, managing its relationship with AmeriCorps demanded more attention. In addition, the organization had begun to secure federal funding through the annual appropriations process, which required significant lobbying efforts. Regional executive directors had become more involved in shaping public policy in their regions—working on legislative and regulatory changes to ensure that corps members could teach in the state, and seeking state funds to support their regions' work—and needed national support for these efforts. Communications and media relations—always a challenge for Teach For America—had become increasingly crucial as the organization grew to scale and drew more media attention, but Teach For America lacked a clear strategy for communicating its message proactively to key audiences or responding to attacks from critics.

To address these interrelated challenges, Teach For America tapped Kevin Huffman to lead a new Public Affairs Team in 2007.<sup>11</sup> This team's charge covered all of Teach For America's government relations work, including all efforts to raise funds from public (state or federal) sources, all external-facing public affairs and communications work, and the Office of the General Counsel. In addition to bringing these previously siloed functions together in one place, Teach For America created new staff roles focused on public policy, research, and building relationships with key stakeholder groups both in Washington, D.C., and nationally. This allowed Teach For America to enhance its engagement and credibility among national policymakers and groups working on federal education policy, and to better support regions' work on state policy.

As one result of these efforts, Teach For America was able to nearly triple its state and federal funding, from \$16.4 million in 2007 to \$43.1 million in 2011. Investments in public affairs also positioned Teach For America to respond when, in 2009, the enactment of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act created additional policy and funding opportunities. Although federal and state funding helped support Teach For America's growth, the group's success in securing designated appropriations in state and federal

budgets did not win it friends among other education organizations—even many allies and supporters—which felt that Teach For America was being unfairly singled out for funding, and resented its willingness to engage in lobbying and advocacy for its own benefit, but not for other education funding or policy issues.

### **An Education Reform Organization?**

Rhee's 2007 appointment to D.C. Public Schools chancellor galvanized the growing education reform movement. What had begun as a movement of outsiders now had one of its own at the head of a major urban school system. Rhee's actions in the new role—reforming the central office bureaucracy, closing under-enrolled schools, and creating a new teacher evaluation system, IMPACT, that evaluated teachers based on evidence of student learning—advanced policies and practices long championed by reformers. These actions also made Rhee a polarizing figure, however, garnering enthusiastic praise from those who agreed with her agenda and harsh criticism from those—including national teachers' union leaders—who opposed the reforms. Rhee's emphasis on holding teachers and leaders accountable for student learning—she famously fired a principal on national television—combined with her blunt style of discussing the shortcomings within the District's long-troubled system, struck some observers as overly hostile to or disrespectful of rank-and-file classroom teachers. As Rhee became Teach For America's most famous alum, her polarizing stature also impacted how Teach For America was perceived by external stakeholders—for better and worse.

The relationship between Teach For America and the larger education reform movement is a complex one. Teach For America's work is grounded in a belief that achieving educational equity for low-income children will require dramatic changes in public education. But Teach For America's mission has never been to advance a specific policy agenda or philosophical approach to reforming the education system. Rather, its mission is to recruit and develop exemplary leaders who can then work in their own ways—from a variety of political perspectives and philosophies—to improve education and life outcomes for low-income children. While many Teach For America alumni have gone on to positions of leadership in education reform advocacy and charter school organizations, others, such as United Teachers Los Angeles President Alex Caputo-Pearl, have become leaders in organizations that advance different approaches to improving public education. Moreover, Teach For America's mission requires it to work in partnership with organizations—such as school districts and schools of education—that education reform groups often criticize or avoid. While many education reform groups choose to work outside the system, in charter schools and nonprofits, most Teach For America corps members work in traditional, district-run public schools, and Teach For America's success depends on its ability to maintain relationships with traditional school system leaders and stakeholders.

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The growth of the education reform movement in the late 2000s clearly helped advance Teach For America's mission. The rising media and political profile of education reform helped attract corps members, and growing charter school networks and other education reform organizations created employment and leadership opportunities for alumni. The same donors who supported education reform efforts also helped fund Teach For America's growth. And new state policies—such as expanding alternative teacher certification and raising caps on charter schools—created further opportunities for Teach For America to grow. These same opportunities also carried risks, however. Critics of the reform movement increasingly viewed Teach For America as a force driving an agenda that they opposed.

## Economic Downturn and Stimulus Create Opportunities and Challenges

Education reform groups gained particular traction following the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, whose campaign had endorsed many key reform ideas, and whose administration promoted them in federal policies, including the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Race to the Top program. From 2010 to 2012, more than 20 states passed legislation or enacted regulations that created new teacher evaluation systems reflecting key components of D.C.'s IMPACT system, and 46 states adopted the new Common Core State Standards, a common set of expectations for student learning developed by states. Reform-minded Teach For America alumni also took on additional positions of influence in states and large urban school districts: Kevin Huffman left his position as Teach For America's executive vice president of public affairs to become commissioner of education in Tennessee. John White, a 1998 New Jersey corps alum and former Chicago executive director, served on the leadership team of the New York City Department of Education and became Louisiana state superintendent of education in 2012. Mike Johnston, a 1997 Mississippi Delta alum, was appointed to the Colorado legislature in 2009 and sponsored a groundbreaking tenure and evaluation reform bill that drew support from both reform organizations and the Colorado chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. Cami Anderson, a 1993 Los Angeles alum and former New York City ED, became superintendent of Newark Public Schools in 2011. Kaya Henderson, a 1992 New York alum, who led Teach For America's recruitment and admissions team from 1995 to 1997 and served as ED of the Washington, D.C., region from 1998 to 2002, succeeded Rhee as chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools in 2010.

*While reformers were achieving policy gains, however, the nation's public schools were suffering from budget cuts and layoffs spurred by the 2008 financial crisis and resulting recession.*

While reformers were achieving policy gains, however, the nation's public schools were suffering from budget cuts and layoffs spurred by the 2008 financial crisis and resulting recession.

The 2008 recession created both challenges and opportunities for Teach For America. They illustrate the complex and countervailing forces that shape the organization's growth. Four distinct factors determine Teach For America's scale and pace of growth at any point in time:

- The supply of corps members generated through recruitment and selection processes
- Demand for corps members from school and district partners
- Funding raised from philanthropic, individual, corporate, and public sources
- Teach For America's organizational capacity.

Figure 8

### Four Factors Determine Teach For America's Scale and Pace of Growth



Teach For America's recruitment, partnership-building, and development activities determine the first three of these factors, but they are also influenced by external forces, as exemplified by the recession. Corps member supply skyrocketed, as a weak job market spurred new college grads and young professionals who might otherwise have pursued careers in other sectors to apply to Teach For America. From 2007 to 2008, the number of applications to Teach For America grew by more than 35 percent—from just over 18,000 to nearly 25,000—and rose again by more than 40 percent in each of the following two years. Recruitment numbers were so strong that in the winter of 2008–09, Teach For America dialed down recruitment efforts, focusing on candidates of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and shifting focus from college seniors to underclassmen, to build the pool of applicants for future years.

As corps member supply spiked, however, cuts in state and district budgets led to teacher layoffs and reduced partner demand in some places, including large, established regions such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

These countervailing forces created a challenge for Teach For America: How could the organization capitalize on increased corps member supply when some district partners were reducing demand for corps members?

Rather than scaling back, Teach For America chose to grow, using the situation to expand the corps in high-need rural regions. “Skyrocketing recruitment numbers created a massive opportunity to grow in regions, like the Delta, where I never would have imagined we could grow,” says Co-CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard. Earlier in the decade, Mississippi Delta Executive Director Ron Nurnberg had built strong relationships with state officials, who saw that Teach For America attracted high-quality talent to a region where school struggled to fill vacancies with qualified teachers. At the request of State Superintendent Hank Bounds, Nurnberg had already begun implementing a plan to gradually grow the corps in the region, then numbering about 100 members. When increased national recruitment created an opportunity to accelerate the pace of growth in the Delta, Nurnberg was able to leverage these relationships to increase state funding—even in a challenging fiscal climate—and grow the corps to 350. To match state funds, Teach For America tapped philanthropic funders, including the Walton Family Foundation and Netscape founder Jim Barksdale. This approach illustrates one major benefit of having a presence in multiple, very different, regions: economic conditions that make expansion difficult in some regions can create opportunities to grow in others. Operating in multiple regions—and having a growth strategy that is responsive to local need and flexible about where growth occurs—creates a hedge against risks or barriers to growth in any one region.

“*Skyrocketing recruitment numbers created a massive opportunity to grow in regions, like the Delta, where I never would have imagined we could grow.*”  
-Elisa Villanueva Beard

In other regions, Teach For America responded to shifts in demand by significantly increasing the percentage of corps members it placed in charter schools, which were growing even as districts laid off staff. In the Rio Grande Valley, for example, where a major state budget cut in 2011 led many districts to put a freeze on new hires, the IDEA Charter School network increased the number of corps members it hired, allowing Teach For America to maintain corps size in that region. In Los Angeles, where significant layoffs limited opportunities to place corps members in district schools, 84 percent of corps members in 2013–14 were placed in charter schools. As a result, the share of corps members working in charters nationally increased rapidly, from less than 10 percent in 2006 to 34 percent in 2013.

Some district partners maintained relationships with Teach For America even through rounds of budget-related layoffs. This sometimes created political challenges, as critics accused Teach For America corps members of taking veteran teachers’ jobs. But it’s possible for a district to have both an excess of teachers in some certification areas and a shortage in other areas—such as science, math, special education, and English language learning—where Teach For America places a high percentage of corps members. In 2012–13, 4 percent of Teach For America corps members were assigned to teach ELL students and 10 percent were assigned to special education placements. The percentage of corps members

working in these areas remained relatively stable from 2008 to 2012, however, suggesting that Teach For America did not respond to placement challenges by radically increasing the percentage of corps members working in these areas.

### **2008 Growth Campaign Capitalizes on Changing Education Policy Landscape**

Successful national fundraising was crucial to Teach For America's ability to grow in these circumstances. Like placement demand, funding could be a counter-cyclical factor. Foundation endowments and giving fell during the financial crisis, and individual donors suffered stock losses. Teach For America had also increased the number of regions that received a portion of their funding from state education budgets—and many states cut their budgets from 2008 to 2013. Despite these challenges, Teach For America was able to increase its funding rapidly during the economic recession, from \$114 million in 2008 to \$229 million in 2011.

Several factors contributed to this success. The heightened profile of education reform increased foundation and donor interest in education. In 2008, recognizing that skyrocketing recruitment created an unprecedented opportunity to grow even more quickly than planned, Teach For America launched a campaign to raise an additional \$80 million. These funds allowed Teach For America to seize the opportunity created by rising numbers of applications, accelerate the pace of corps growth, and add new regions.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), passed by Congress in 2009 to stimulate the economy, also created new funding opportunities. ARRA included \$98.2 billion in education funds, of which \$48.6 billion was allocated to states to reduce cuts in public education budgets. Teach For America was able to persuade policymakers in several states to use ARRA funds to sustain or increase Teach For America funding or support the organization for the first time.

ARRA also authorized two major competitive federal grants programs—Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (i3)—that would provide key support for Teach For America's work. Race to the Top was a \$4.35 billion federal program that offered competitive grants to states to implement reforms in four key areas: college and career readiness standards and assessments, data systems, teacher effectiveness, and turning around low-performing schools. Some states, including Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Tennessee, chose to include partnerships with Teach For America in their plans to improve teacher effectiveness. (Grant requirements also spurred several states to make changes in their alternative certification policies, creating new openings for Teach For America.)

In 2010, Teach For America won a \$50 million i3 Scale Up grant. This program is designed to support the development of innovative education models and bring models with evidence of success to national scale. Given both its commitment to scale and rigorous evaluation studies documenting corps member impact on student learning, Teach For America was a natural fit for this program. The organization received \$45 million to expand to 8,000 incoming corps members by 2015, plus \$5 million to fund a rigorous, independent evaluation of corps member impact on student achievement.

## Adapting to a New Landscape: 2011–Present

*The plan failed to anticipate a variety of changes—within Teach for America itself and the broader education landscape—that would require rethinking both the pace of growth and the structures and practices that supported this growth.*

In 2010, at the peak of its growth, Teach For America created its 2015 growth plan, outlining goals for the next five years. This document was largely a continuation of Teach For America's 2010 plan, projecting growth to 15,000 corps members and maintaining four organizational priorities similar to those in its 2010 plan:

- Grow in scale and diversity
- Maximize corps member impact on student achievement
- Foster alumni leadership
- Become an enduring institution

To achieve these goals, Teach For America projected increasing annual revenue to more than \$400 million by 2015.

Like Teach For America's previous five-year growth plans, it was ambitious. The goals it laid out were based largely on an assumption that current trends and structures would continue. The plan failed to anticipate a variety of changes—within Teach for America itself and the broader education landscape—that would require rethinking both the pace of growth and the structures and practices that supported this growth.

## Core Values

In concert with the development of the 2015 plan, Teach For America undertook a review of its core values. The organization's core values have always played a crucial role in establishing a strong staff culture. Staff members regularly reference the core values in conversations about their work, and often refer to them when making decisions. "Our core values are the connection to the why of our work, and they keep the how and what in perspective," says Chief Knowledge Officer Steven Farr. Over the course of its history, Teach For America has treated the core values as a living document, regularly reviewing, updating, and revising as the organization matures and its needs and priorities evolve.

From 2005 to 2010, Teach For America's core values reflected the goal-driven culture that supported its rapid growth:

- Relentless pursuit of results
- Sense of possibility
- Disciplined thought
- Respect and humility
- Integrity

*“Our core values are the connection to the why of our work, and they keep the how and what in perspective.”*  
-Steven Farr

The re-articulated core values reflect the key lessons from the diversity team's work to confront issues of race, class, bias, and privilege. They are also shaped by a recognition that a relentless focus on results and data—while key to enabling Teach For America to achieve its goals—had contributed to high staff burnout, reduced staff and corps member satisfaction, a lack of emphasis on the interpersonal and relational elements of Teach For America's work, and a loss of a sense of joy or fun in the work. "You have all kinds of dashboards of data about how corps members are performing," says Farr, "but core values are the set of commitments that helps Teach For America use that data in ways that are aligned to who we want to be."

The re-articulated core values reflect Teach For America's continued sense of urgency about the need to dramatically improve educational outcomes, but incorporate an increased focus on the interpersonal and relational elements of Teach For America's work, through an emphasis on teamwork, diversity, respect, and humility (see **Sidebar 6**).

## Teach For America's Core Values

- **Transformational change:** We seek to expand educational opportunity in ways that are life-changing for children and transforming for our country.
- **Leadership:** We strive to develop and become the leaders necessary to realize educational excellence and equity.
- **Team:** We value and care about each other, operate with a generosity of spirit, and have fun in the process of working together.
- **Diversity:** We act on our belief that the movement to ensure educational equity will succeed only if it is diverse in every respect. In particular, we value the perspective and credibility that individuals who share the racial and economic backgrounds of the students with whom we work can bring to our organization, classrooms, and the long-term effort for change.
- **Respect and humility:** We value the strengths, experiences, and perspectives of others, and we recognize our own limitations. We are committed to partnering effectively with families, schools, and communities to ensure that our work advances the broader good for all children.

Source: Teach For America

The re-articulated core values are intended to strengthen Teach For America's staff, corps, and alumni culture, and to reflect how Teach For America operates when it is at its best. They also reflect lessons from the Teacher Preparation, Support, and Development Team's work to refine the Teaching as Leadership framework. TAL X.0, the most recent iteration of that framework, seeks to broaden the focus of teacher preparation and support beyond teacher behaviors to encompass the mind-sets that underlie those behaviors and the relational contexts in which they occur. In the same way, the re-articulated core values expand their focus beyond the actions of individual staff and corps members to intentionally situate that work within a broader context of communities and relationships. They reflect an understanding that the "one day" goal is not something individual staff or corps members—or even Teach For America as an organization—can achieve on their own, but requires corps members, staff, and the organization at large to work in partnership with one another and with a network of stakeholders and organizations seeking to advance educational equity.

This shift also required changing the way staff and corps members oriented themselves in relation to the core values, but Teach For America did not clearly communicate this in rolling out the core values to corps members, alumni, and staff. As a result, some staff and corps members began to feel personally accountable for values—such as transformational



change—that they couldn’t possibly achieve on their own. “They were hearing it as ‘Nothing is good enough,’” says Ted Quinn. Data on corps member and staff satisfaction helped Teach For America recognize this, however, and the leadership has begun working to more clearly communicate what these core values mean for the day-to-day work of individual staff and corps members.

## Leadership Transition

In February 2013, Teach For America Founder Wendy Kopp announced that she would transition out of her role as CEO, in order to focus on Teach For All, a separate organization that she had co-founded in 2007 to help replicate Teach For America’s work in countries around the world. Kopp remains deeply engaged with Teach For America as chair of the board of directors, but she is no longer the day-to-day leader of the organization. Co-CEOs Matt Kramer and Elisa Villanueva Beard have assumed that role.

This was a significant change—Kopp had led Teach For America since 1989 and was the widely recognized public face of the organization. Such transitions can pose significant risks and challenges. “Many times you have an entrepreneur whose name is interchangeable with the organization,” says board member Steve Mandel. “There’s a transition from the entrepreneur founder to others. Either in for-profit or nonprofit, those transitions bring common challenges.”

*Although Kopp’s transition marked a major shift for Teach For America, it was less disruptive than many similar leadership transitions at other organizations, in large part because Kopp had intentionally cultivated strong leaders to succeed her.*

Although Kopp’s transition marked a major shift for Teach For America, it was less disruptive than many similar leadership transitions at other organizations, in large part because Kopp had intentionally cultivated strong leaders to succeed her. In the years leading up to Kopp’s transition, Matt Kramer had been elevated to president of the organization and assumed most of the day-to-day responsibility for overseeing Teach For America’s national teams, while Villanueva Beard oversaw the regions. Board members and senior leadership at Teach For America agree that the transition has been a smooth one. Although some board members originally questioned the co-CEO model, the co-CEOs and the board concur that it has worked out in practice. “It helps that we genuinely like each other,” Kramer says of himself and Villanueva Beard, “and we have complementary skill sets” that bring unique strengths to the role. “It’s not as efficient as a single leader, but the upside is we get a lot of leverage because we get two perspectives on every issue and can be in multiple places at the same time.”

The first thing that Kramer and Villanueva Beard did in their new roles was to go on a “listening tour” around the country, meeting with Teach For America staff, corps members, alumni, and external stakeholders. “The listening tour showed us that externally the people who most directly interact with Teach For America—students, parents, teachers—were very positive about our impact,” says Villanueva Beard. “That was very affirming. But we also saw that internally, our staff, corps members, alumni had some fundamental questions about us, our impact, where we were headed, where we needed to go, and lots of different opinions about how to answer those questions.” That realization informed Kramer and Villanueva Beard’s decisions and priorities in their new role.

Coming out of the listening tour, the co-CEOs articulated five commitments:

- Being better listeners
- Tailoring approaches to the unique needs of each community
- Tempering a data-driven nature with a greater appreciation for human stories
- Aligning placements with local demand, not national plans
- Investing more to support corps members.

While these commitments were originally personal ones that Kramer and Villanueva Beard made to Teach For America staff and corps members, other staff within Teach For America have since embraced these commitments and begun incorporating them into their work. The new commitments were very much in line with the revised set of core values that Teach For America had articulated in 2010. They also helped position the organization to respond to emerging internal and external challenges.

## Responding to External Opposition

The listening tour made clear that Teach For America needed to significantly up its communications game. “We were in the midst of a massive public affairs crisis,” says Villanueva Beard.

Historically, Teach For America had shied away from engaging in public debate and avoided responding to critics. “Our public affairs strategy in the past had been to keep our head down, keep focused, that our results will speak for themselves and the critics will go away,” says Villanueva Beard. That approach made sense when Teach For America was a relatively small organization. But as it grew, and as the debate over education reform became increasingly polarized, this approach was no longer sufficient.

Teach For America is accustomed to criticism. Since its founding, it has drawn opposition from critics who believe that teachers need much more intensive and rigorous pedagogical training prior to entering the classroom, and that placing corps members as teachers without such training devalues the profession. But the critics who emerged in the early 2010s were different: they didn’t just disagree with Teach For America’s approach; they considered the organization a symbol and driver of a farther-reaching reform and policy agenda—encompassing standards, testing, teacher evaluation based on test scores, the closure of low-performing schools, and the growth of charter schools—that they saw as a veiled attempt to privatize public education. “Teach For America has become a target for groups that are against changing the status quo for our kids,” says Executive Vice President Elissa Kim, who oversees recruiting staff that directly confront these attacks in their work on campuses. “People are realizing that Teach For America alums like Kevin Huffman and Kaya Henderson are driving key changes in places like Tennessee and D.C., and various groups have decided that the best way to stop the trend is to prevent people from joining Teach For America in the first place.”

*The critics who emerged in the early 2010s were different: they didn’t just disagree with Teach For America’s approach; they considered the organization a symbol and driver of a farther-reaching reform and policy agenda.*

Teach For America's growth and increasing influence on education—both organizationally and through its alumni—has contributed to the backlash. “Teach For America is now Goliath instead of David,” says Huffman. “When we started, we were the ones fighting against the establishment.” But now the tables have turned. Board member Steve Mandel concurs, “As the organization got to be larger, it has come under attack by those who feel threatened by it.”

The volume and vitriol of the attacks caught Teach For America off guard. “The organization has been woefully unprepared in every way to deal with” the new attacks, says Mandel. The advent of social media exacerbated these challenges. While some of Teach For America's critics, such as education historian Diane Ravitch, were highly adept in using social media to amplify their messages, Teach For America was slow to adopt a social media strategy. “We had lost touch with how this younger group of people were engaging with the world,” notes Aimee Eubanks Davis. “That allowed other people to define us and create a narrative about us in the social media space that we were shocked by.”

“*Teach For America is now Goliath instead of David.*”  
-Kevin Huffman

Teach For America was equally unprepared for the negative impact that the external criticisms would have on corps member, alumni, and staff morale. “If you're a brand new corps member and facing lots of challenges, the only thing that gets you through, especially the first year, is the belief that you are making a difference in the world,” says Ted Quinn. “If you struggle all day and then go on Facebook and Twitter and find reputable voices telling you that you're hurting kids, it is absolutely shattering. We hear this very directly from our corps members. They may not buy into it, but they feel battered.” In the absence of a strong public response to critics, corps members felt abandoned and alone. Alumni and staff members report a similar experience.

The impact of external opposition has been most evident, however, to Teach For America's recruiters. From 2013 to 2014, the number of applications dropped by 7,000. The number of first year corps members starting school in fall 2014 was smaller than the previous year—the first time that had happened since 2000—and the total number of corps members fell 800 short of the year's target. These recruitment trends have continued: in December 2014, Kramer and Villanueva Beard sent a letter to district and school placement partners informing them that, based on current recruitment projections, Teach For America's 2015–16 corps could fall far short of the number of teachers its placement partners had requested.

While a variety of factors have contributed to this trend—including an improving economy that increased employment options and competition for recent college grads—it is clear that the polarized education climate and external critiques have had an impact. As part of its continuous-improvement efforts, Teach For America conducts follow-up outreach to high-potential candidates who ultimately choose not to apply. This outreach indicates that negative criticism of Teach for America influenced nearly 70 percent of these candidates' decisions. Criticism of the education reform movement and Teach For America has been strong on certain college campuses—particularly within schools of education, where many professors oppose the movement's policy agenda—and this has impacted both recruiting and recruiter morale.

These hurdles created an urgency for Teach For America to strengthen its public engagement. Communication has always been a challenge for Teach For America. Part of this challenge has been a sense of uncertainty about when—and when not—to respond to external attacks. “Teach For America constantly faced the dilemma: Someone is saying something negative about you—do you answer or not?” recalls Huffman. “If you answer it, you magnify it, but if you don’t, it goes unanswered.” But the feedback from corps members, alumni, and staff convinced Teach For America leaders that they needed to more proactively respond to critics. Teach For America also faced challenges in finding and retaining communications staff who brought the right combination of specialized communications skills and commitment to the organization’s mission and core values.

To address these issues, the organization created a new Public Affairs and Engagement Team, pulling together previously scattered functions of communication, marketing, external research, and community partnerships into a single integrated team. To lead this team, Kramer and Villanueva Beard tapped Aimee Eubanks Davis, a highly respected internal leader whose leadership of Teach For America’s diversity efforts had demonstrated her capacity to deal directly and sensitively with thorny challenges.

Eubanks Davis and then-acting Senior Vice President of Communications Peter Cunningham put in place a set of systems that allowed Teach For America to respond much more rapidly to external events and attacks. Every day, key leaders from the Public Affairs and Communications Teams participate in a daily call to review events in the past 24 hours, including any misinformation or attacks that demand a quick response, and to plan response for events expected later in the day. To keep an eye on the longer-term picture, the Public Affairs Team meets by phone to review communications and marketing campaign plans for the upcoming month. To help with rapid response, Teach For America also created an “On the Record” web page, where it can quickly correct misinformation and share facts. This approach allows Teach For America to respond to breaking news stories much more rapidly than it could through more traditional means, such as requesting corrections or writing letters to the editor.

A more fundamental problem was that Teach For America had never developed a strong public-facing narrative about its work and values. While its Theory of Change is well understood within the organization and by its supporters, Teach For America has struggled to communicate its work to the broader public, resulting in widespread confusion and misconceptions about Teach For America’s philosophy, goals, and activities. “We didn’t have a narrative about who we are, what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it,” says Eubanks Davis. Over the past two years, she and her team have refined a set of core narratives and messages that explain the Theory of Change in relation to a broader narrative about educational inequity and social justice in the United States. “Effective marketing requires clearly articulating Teach For America’s Theory of Change,” says Grant Besser, senior vice president of partnerships and chief marketing officer. “We need to make sure that everyone in the organization is an ambassador for the brand by creating and using a core set of common messages.”

It is particularly important for Teach For America's recruiters, who are the group's most visible representatives in the field, to have and use a clear, consistent set of messages about the Theory of Change and how corps members and alumni are having positive impact in communities. The Recruitment Team has worked to both refine these messages and ensure that recruiters articulate them in every contact with prospective recruits. The team has also increased internal staff support to help recruiters maintain morale in response to external opposition.

### **Building Relationships**

Teach For America was more vulnerable to external attacks in part because it had not built strong relationships with the families and communities its corps members serve. Regional executive directors have been highly successful in building the community relationships that are directly essential to their work—with higher education institutions, districts, schools and principals, and funders. But Teach For America has devoted less effort to building deep relationships with families or with other community organizations. As a result, communities have come to see Teach For America as an outside force coming in, rather than as a partner in advancing common goals for children. "A lot of the backlash came from communities of color who didn't understand the movement," says Gigi Dixon, a Wells-Fargo executive who oversees the company's support for Teach For America. "They felt that their children were being used as an experiment." This lack of strong community relationships has made it difficult for Teach For America to correct common misperceptions about its work.

Over the past five years, Teach For America has intensified its efforts to build relationships with stakeholders and communities. From 2009 to 2013, it launched national partnership initiatives designed to build relationships with leaders and organizations in the African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander communities. In addition to building relationships with organizations that represent these communities, these initiatives work to create a community among corps members and alumni from these groups and support regions in building relationships with local civil rights and community groups. Because the most important relationship-building must happen at the regional level, Teach For America has invested in local capacity to do this work. The new operating model, which provides regions greater flexibility to customize their work to local contexts and work with local organizations to meet corps member and alumni needs, should also help with regional relationship-building. This is not a short-term project. "Relational work is definitely a long game," says Eubanks Davis. "It can't be transactional. The moment it feels transactional is the moment you lose people."

*“Relational work is definitely a long game. It can't be transactional. The moment it feels transactional is the moment you lose people.”*  
-Aimee Eubanks Davis

Even as Teach For America works to communicate more proactively and build relationships with stakeholders, it continues to struggle with its place in the broader public and policy debate on education. While it has always been engaged in advocacy and policy on bread-and-butter issues that affect its work—such as teacher certification requirements, alternative

certification, and public funding—it has been much more reluctant to engage in advocacy on other issues. “Teach For America’s focus has served it well over the years,” says Huffman, “but that has sometimes meant that it is perceived as not playing nicely in the sandbox with its friends, because it won’t support certain policy positions, sign onto letters and white papers, and so forth. But Teach For America’s mission is not to validate education reform.” In recent years, the organization has slowly become more engaged on policy issues beyond certification and funding—particularly issues related to diversity and inclusion. In 2012, it submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court in support of affirmative action in college admissions, arguing that diversity on college campuses is crucial to Teach For America’s ability to recruit and place diverse corps members. More recently, Teach for America has also taken positions supporting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and the DREAM Act, both because many corps members teach children who are affected by these policies and to support the 46 current Teach For America corps members who have DACA status. The range of policy issues on which Teach For America will take positions, or the degree to which it will engage in policy and advocacy on these issues, remains an open question.

## The Costs of Growth

As increased scale led to new external challenges, the rapid pace of growth since 2005 also created strain within Teach For America. For eight years, from 2005 to 2012, the size of the corps grew at least 12 percent a year, including four straight years of more than 20 percent annual growth (2007–10). But this pace of growth took a toll. “I think we may have grown too quickly in some years,” says Kopp. “We had layers of inexperienced people managing inexperienced people because of the growth rate, which conspired against institutional memory and made it really tough to maintain a strong culture.” Teach For America’s goal-oriented culture placed tremendous pressure on staff. Burnout was high and morale was low. “People constantly felt like they weren’t achieving or weren’t good enough,” says former Vice President of Human Assets Lora Cover. “It really motivated people to achieve, but then they got burned out. People worked nonstop until they just couldn’t do it anymore.”

Exacerbating the strain and sense of dissatisfaction, the national-regional structures put in place in 2005 no longer fit Teach For America’s scale. Today, many regions are significant, multimillion-dollar organizations in their own right; six of them are individually larger than the entire organization was in 2001. As both the national organization and the regions grew, the matrix model of strong centralized support and oversight became increasingly costly and inefficient, and regional executive directors felt disempowered. “There was a segment of EDs who felt like middle managers,” says Stephanie Morimoto, who led the Regional Development Team before leaving to join New Leaders in 2011. “That created a disconnect.”

These internal and external challenges are reflected in decreases in alumni and corps member satisfaction over the past five years. Teach For America uses several measures to track corps member and alumni satisfaction. The Corps Strength Index, a set of questions that assess corps members’ attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about their experience with

*“I think we may have grown too quickly in some years. We had layers of inexperienced people managing inexperienced people because of the growth rate, which conspired against institutional memory and made it really tough to maintain a strong culture.”*  
-Wendy Kopp



Teach For America, is administered before and after Summer Institute and twice during each year a corps member serves. Teach For America also collects data on net promoter score—a commonly used metric, across a range of industries, that assesses satisfaction based on whether the respondent would recommend an organization to someone else. Both indicators reflect declines in corps member and alumni satisfaction over the past five years.

Since Teach For America implemented the Corps Satisfaction Index, in 2008, Net Corps Strength, a figure that summarizes corps members' response to the index questions, has declined every year. During the same period, Teach For America's net promoter scores for both corps members and alumni have also fallen. In 2010, Teach For America had an alumni net promoter score of 50—meaning that the percentage of alumni who would strongly recommend Teach For America to a friend was 50 percentage points higher than the percentage who would not recommend Teach For America. Today, Teach For America's net promoter score stands at 8—still positive, and therefore better than the net promoter scores of many organizations—but significantly down from just a few years ago.

Teach For America leaders were understandably troubled by these trends, and have invested considerable effort in understanding the forces that are driving them. By comparing corps strength and satisfaction data across regions, Teach For America has identified a number of factors, at a regional level, that can appear to lead to a stronger or weaker corps culture. A strong regional vision, the quality of relationships between corps members and staff who support them, and clear expectations all contribute to stronger corps culture at a regional level. But while these factors explain the variation in corps satisfaction across regions, they do not explain the trend of declining corps satisfaction over time, nor has Teach For America been able to establish any correlation between corps strength and regional pace of growth or the age of a region.

Moreover, the trends in declining corps member satisfaction appear to mirror a broader national trend of declining satisfaction and morale among all teachers—not just Teach For America alums—as evidenced in other independent studies, such as the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher.<sup>12</sup> From 2008 to 2012, the percentage of teachers who told the MetLife Survey that they were “very satisfied” with their jobs declined from 62 percent to 39 percent. Mid-career teachers and teachers in higher-poverty schools tend to be less satisfied than other teachers, but the trend of declining satisfaction is consistent across demographics.

This creates a challenge for Teach For America leaders: they know that corps member and alumni satisfaction is declining, but they don't have a clear explanation of why; and they know that trends in corps member satisfaction mirror broader trends across the teaching profession—suggesting that external factors, beyond Teach For America's control, play a role. While leaders are concerned about the trends, they have chosen to respond by focusing on improving the things they can, rather than on factors they can't control. “We can't see anything in data that directly explains the decline, but we can see lots of things that affect corps culture,” says Ted Quinn, who leads Teach For America's work to measure

*Trends in declining corps member satisfaction appear to mirror a broader national trend of declining satisfaction and morale among all teachers—not just Teach For America alums.*



and learn from trends in corps member impact and satisfaction. “Our primary strategy is to make sure that everyone knows these things and is doing them. Then even if there are external factors [driving satisfaction down], we can counteract that and fight against the headwind. The most important thing is to do the things we know will work and not obsess over the fact that we can’t explain the decline.”

To that end, Teach For America has used corps strength data to encourage more regions to replicate the practices used by regions that have strong corps culture, and to inform efforts to improve support for corps members. Teach For America has also worked to address internal issues that regional and national staff have identified, strengthening its internal culture and creating a new operating model that it hopes will enhance regions’ ability to build a strong corps culture. In addition, its new public affairs and communications strategy seeks to address external factors impacting corps member, staff, and alumni satisfaction.

## New Operating Model

In 2012, Teach For America convened a task force to rethink the matrix operating model. “The basic impetus was: regions are becoming more mature, bigger, complex organizations in their own right,” says Chicago Executive Director Josh Anderson. “To get the most out of those regional organizations, a different governance and budgeting relationship was required.” The task force, chaired by Anderson and composed of staff from both national and regional offices, aimed to figure out what that relationship should look like. “Our major thrust has been to increase autonomy, clarify accountability, and clearly define what needs to be the same” across all regions, says Anderson.

As Teach For America grew, several clear pain points emerged with the matrix operating model. Regions were responsible for raising funds to cover the costs associated with corps members and alumni in their regions—85 percent of Teach For America’s revenue came from regional fundraising—but had very limited control over how those funds were spent. Both regional fundraising goals and regional staffing ratios were determined by a formula based on the number of corps members and alumni in the region, with little flexibility for regional executive directors to make changes. As the organization grew and matured, a handful of sites had experienced staffers who craved greater autonomy. The results that these experienced executive directors produced, along with increasing external challenges, convinced Teach For America that it needed more seasoned, sophisticated leadership across all regions. “We needed a different ED profile because we wanted people who would stay in the role longer, build community partnerships, and manage the complexity of the regions,” says Elisa Villanueva Beard. But the constraints imposed by the matrix made it difficult to attract or retain leaders with these skills. “Tight central coordination allowed Teach For America to rapidly scale up, but it was at the expense of local talent,” says Chris Nelson. “They needed to create more autonomy to bring top talent into ED roles.”

“The basic impetus was: regions are becoming more mature, bigger, complex organizations in their own right. To get the most out of those regional organizations, a different governance and budgeting relationship was required.”

-Josh Anderson

The matrix model's "belt and suspenders" approach was designed to be inefficient—duplicating capacity at the regional and national levels to ensure a safety net for regions. As the organization grew, however, so did the costs of this duplication. From 2005 to 2014, Teach For America's cost per corps member (including recruitment, selection, and support over two years) nearly doubled, from \$26,774 to \$51,467 (in constant 2014 dollars). Much of the increase in cost was driven by program changes designed to better support corps members and increase their impact, such as a 2006 increase in the number of coaches that Teach For America employed to support corps members. Other investments that raised costs in the late 2000s—such as building out the internal Human Assets Team, increasing national staff focused on teacher support and development, and expanding the national Alumni Affairs Team—were also designed to support growth or deepen impact. But these activities did not necessarily affect the level of support EDs saw on the ground—even as EDs had to raise funds to pay for them.

Beyond costs, splitting responsibility between regional and national teams also led to confusion about roles and responsibilities, frustrating staff on both sides. "We reached a gridlock point because regional people felt micromanaged and the national team felt frustrated they weren't able to affect what was happening on the ground," says Jeff Wetzler, who had helped design the matrix model in 2005 and served on the operating model task force.

In 2013, the task force proposed a new operating model. Under this model, which Teach For America is phasing in over the next two to four years, regions will have greater control over their own budgets and staffing levels, and will be able to select varying levels of nationally provided services from a "menu" of options. In designing this model, the task force devoted considerable thought to identifying the core elements that make Teach For America a coherent, unified organization and that must remain the same across all regions. These include Teach For America's vision, mission, Theory of Change, core values, commitment to diversity, and belief in Teaching as Leadership. Building on this foundation, the task force then articulated a set of "freedoms and mutual responsibilities," or FMRs, that outline the flexibility regions have to customize their work to local needs as well as the areas in which regions must implement a common approach or utilize shared resources.

Within the context of the FMRs, regions will have the ability to select to receive more or less support from national staff. Each national team that previously supported regions—Human Assets; Alumni Affairs; Teacher Preparation, Support, and Development; Public Affairs and Engagement; and Development—will offer a range of services from which regions can choose. Regions that choose to receive less support will retain more resources within the region. Recruitment and admissions will remain national functions, as will core operating infrastructure such as technology, finance, and the Office of the General Counsel. This approach allows Teach for America to continue to support regions at varying stages of development. While some regions, such as Chicago and the Bay Area, are well established,

with significant in-region capacity and experienced leadership, other regions are much newer, with smaller staffs and less experienced leaders. Teach For America needed a model that could support both types of sites.

*The new operating model will give regions both greater autonomy and greater responsibility to customize their work to local needs.*

The new operating model will give regions both greater autonomy and greater responsibility to customize their work to local needs. “Our historic model didn’t allow the ED or program managers to say ‘Let me see what my landscape is’ and use that to inform the charge for this specific region,” says Susan Asiyambi, executive vice president of teacher preparation, support, and development. “Our goal is no longer to drive consistency in the same way but to understand each region’s context and provide a range of support services to help regions meet the vision. We want to partner with other community members that have expertise.” The Chicago and Washington regions, for example, partnered with the University of Washington on new approaches to training corps members.

This approach increases quality-related risks. “There was variation under the matrix model,” says Jeff Wetzler, “and while we are putting in place guardrails in the areas where consistency is most important to our shared assets and key programmatic elements, the new operating model will allow for greater variation in regional approaches.” The hope is that this approach will allow regions to innovate in ways that generate even stronger corps member and alumni impact. The risk is that it may now be possible for regions to fail. But Teach For America ultimately decided that the potential benefits—the ability to attract and retain experienced regional leaders, build deeper relationships with community partners, foster innovation, and ultimately increase corps member and alumni impact—outweighed the risks.

Realizing these benefits, however, will require a significant culture shift. Regions will need to build internal capacity to work without a national safety net and to customize their work to local demands. National staff will have to shift from viewing their work as driving regional outcomes, to supporting regions in achieving their own goals. Eventually, the structure and work of many national teams may evolve significantly in response to regional demand. Teach For America has only begun this transition, which will continue to unfold and shape the organization’s development and growth over the coming years.

### **Shifting from the 2015 Plan**

As Teach For America has worked to strengthen its internal structure and external engagement, it has stepped away from pursuing the growth goals in its 2015 growth plan. “The priorities of the 2015 plan were in many ways an extension of the 2010 plan and were written before we changed our operating model and core values,” explains Jeff Wetzler, and before the education reform landscape changed. Teach For America has continued to grow over the past four years—and to do so at a relatively rapid rate. From fiscal year 2010 to fiscal year 2015, the size of the corps increased from 7,352 to 10,500. The pace of growth has slowed, however, and Teach For America will not meet the five-year goal of 15,000 corps members in 2015. Because the goals in Teach For America’s i3 grant were based on the 2015 growth plan, the organization is also falling short of those goals.

This slower pace of growth is due, in part, to recruitment challenges. In fall 2014, 800 fewer corps members started teaching than Teach For America would have liked, and recruitment numbers have continued to fall short in the 2014–15 recruitment season. But slower growth also reflects a conscious decision to focus on internal and external challenges rather than on continued expansion. “There were places where Teach For America needed to get its house in order,” says the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund’s Chris Nelson. “If that comes at the expense of rapid growth, that’s okay.” In Philadelphia, for example, Teach For America shrank the incoming corps from 141 in 2011 to 129 in 2012. An extended ED vacancy, evidence of poor regional corps culture, and a looming district budget crisis made slower growth the right decision, despite availability of resources and placements to support a larger corps.

Although Teach For America needed to step away from the 2015 growth goals to focus on its long-term health and sustainability, doing so created a strategic void within the organization. “When we set the 2015 plan aside, we didn’t reprioritize to identify and rally the organization around the most important things we’re trying to accomplish,” says Wetzler. “That led to a lack of focus for a period of time.” Wetzler leads a team that is working to identify to develop a new strategic plan that Teach For America will launch in early 2015.

*Longer term, Teach For America will need to decide how it plans for growth and makes growth decisions under a new, more regionally driven operating model.*

Longer term, Teach For America will need to decide how it plans for growth and makes growth decisions under a new, more regionally driven operating model. “[The matrix] structure was set up to help us maintain the quality and consistency of our program,” says Vice President of Strategy and Organizational Development Latricia Barksdale, who served on the new operating model task force. “Now that we’re at a place where there’s so much differentiation in terms of both how communities are approaching solving the problem and how much and what type of support a regional team needs in light of this, we need to rethink our approach to supporting and enabling local progress.”

“One big question is how we think about growth given that regions are driving,” says Elisa Villanueva Beard. “Nationally, we still need to decide how many new sites we open. There are big strategic questions, and the way we think about those questions is changing.”

Wetzler, who leads the strategic planning committee, notes that the group is split between regional and national leaders. “We’re getting significant input from regions together with national team leaders into national strategic planning,” he says. “The way decisions will be approached is less ‘National teams have made it and everyone needs to comply’ but rather is ‘We’ve made decisions together about how collectively we’re going to focus and apply our resources.’”

Over the past 15 years, Teach For America’s efforts to expand its impact have focused on three strategic areas: growing in scale, increasing corps member impact, and deepening alumni impact. While all three of these strategies have been crucial, growing in scale has been a powerful force driving both staff goals and funding over the past decade. In the future, the balance of those strategies may change. Already, some more established Teach

For America regions, such as Chicago, have reached a saturation point that limits further expansion. Going forward, these regions will seek to grow their impact through deepening the impact of existing corps members and alumni, as well as through public leadership and engagement in their communities. The new operating model provides the space and opportunity for these regions to do this—and in the process to develop new strategies and lessons for other regions and the national organization. While Teach For America as a whole is nowhere near a saturation point, the evolution currently under way in regions like Chicago may provide insight into the future of the organization. Because each year's corps eventually adds to the number of existing alumni, the alumni base will continue to expand rapidly even if the pace of corps growth slows. Over time, this will naturally drive an evolution in the balance of resources and strategic energy that Teach For America devotes to corps members or to alumni—as well as in the impact both groups have.

## What Others Can Learn from Teach For America's Experience

*Teach For America's experience over the past 15 years—both its successes and its missteps—offers a variety of lessons for these organizations.*

In our work at Bellwether Education Partners, where we advise and support education organizations that seek to scale their impacts, we often find these organizations struggling with challenges and decisions similar to those that Teach For America has faced as it has grown to scale. Teach For America's experience over the past 15 years—both its successes and its missteps—offers a variety of lessons for these organizations. Some of the specific strategies and approaches that Teach For America has developed as it has grown offer models that other scaling organizations can use. Often, however, Teach For America's experience highlights themes and considerations that other scaling organizations should be aware of—without necessarily pointing to clear answers.

These lessons are not only for other scaling education organizations, however. They also have implications for funders who invest in education programs, for the education reform movement writ large, and for public policy. In general, we find that Teach For America's experience offers several different types of lessons for scaling organizations and the broader field. These include:

- **General lessons about scaling impact in the education sector** that should inform both scaling organizations and outside groups that invest in them
- **Specific, concrete strategies and lessons that other scaling organizations can use** to address some of the most significant challenges
- **Implications for the education reform movement** as it responds to the same external landscape challenges that Teach For America has faced in recent years

- **Lessons for education funders** seeking to scale high-impact strategies to improve educational outcomes
- **Lessons for policymakers** seeking to support education innovation and scale effective organizations
- **Lessons for policymakers** seeking to transform the teaching profession.

## General Lessons about Scaling Impact

### **A strong Theory of Change is the foundation for scaling impact.**

Nothing has been more important to Teach For America's growth than the power and stability of its Theory of Change. Having a clear, powerful Theory of Change allowed Teach For America to maintain focus on its core work and goals and to make the case for its work to funders and partners. The Theory of Change has informed major decisions at every step in Teach For America's growth.

*Implications for other scaling organizations:*

- **Ensure that you have a clear Theory of Change before growing**, as well as a clear explanation of how growth—and your particular strategy or approach to growth— will advance that Theory of Change.
- **Develop a clear narrative and messages to communicate your Theory of Change to internal and external stakeholders.** Although Teach For America has always had a clear and powerful Theory of Change, it has not always effectively communicated that Theory of Change to external audiences. This has allowed both opponents and supporters to project their own assumptions onto Teach For America, contributing to some of the organization's recent external challenges.

*Implications for funders:*

- **Pay attention to the Theory of Change in making investment decisions.** Look for evidence that potential grantees have both a clear Theory of Change and a clear rationale for growth rooted in that Theory of Change.

### **Scale and quality aren't necessarily countervailing forces—but maintaining quality while growing requires intentional focus matched by resources.**

Conventional wisdom holds that scaling an educational model or organization necessarily leads to reductions in quality or fidelity. Teach For America's experience contradicts that assumption. In fact, growth has enabled Teach For America to improve quality by attracting additional resources and talent and building internal systems and capacity. But this positive relationship between growth and quality was hardly automatic. Teach For America was able to maintain and improve quality while growing because of an intentional focus on continuously improving quality, coupled with matching investments in capacity to support quality improvement.



Two factors were particularly important:

- 1 **Teach For America's five-year growth plans set explicit goals and targets for both increasing scale and improving the quality of Teach For America's core programs—and placed equal priority on both sets of goals.**
- 2 **Teach For America was able to raise sufficient funds to support investments in additional capacity, staff, and systems to support quality improvement while growing.**

*Implications for scaling organizations:*

- **Prioritize scale and quality improvement equally while growing.** Set explicit goals for both scale and quality improvement, and allocate resources for both sets of goals.
- **Plan for increased capacity to support growth.** Simply extrapolating current operations to a larger scale is likely to underestimate the added capacity needed to support increased scale. “When you’re small, you’re going after the lowest hanging fruit,” says Kevin Huffman. “Each increment after that will be harder to get and more labor-intensive.” This means that organizations may need to invest additional resources and capacity to scale their impact.
- **Never stop trying to get better.** Teach For America's core activities—recruitment, admissions, preparation, corps member support, and alumni programs—are all significantly better today than they were 15 years ago. But Teach For America still is not satisfied with the quality of its programs across these areas—and continues working to improve them. This isn't just about perfectionism. Teach For America knows that delivering on its mission requires improving the quality of its programs. Moreover, it recognizes that seeking to improve—not simply maintain—quality is the best way to guard against declines in quality while growing. As it looks forward to its next stage of growth, Teach For America is committed to continuing to improve quality.

*Implications for funders:*

- **Be willing to invest in capacity to support growth.** Teach For America was able to maintain and improve quality while growing in large part because funders were willing to invest up-front growth capital, which enabled the organization to scale its central systems, capacity, and staffing as it grew, rather than waiting until after it had grown to increase capacity. Funders, however, are often reluctant to make up-front investments in centralized capacity and systems-building for scaling organizations.
- **Don't push for economies of scale at the expense of quality.** There is a common assumption that growth will lead to economies of scale that reduce per-unit costs, and funders often expect scaling education organizations to demonstrate economies of scale as they grow. Teach For America's experience, however, does not bear out this assumption as it relates to human-capital-intensive organizations. In particular, it is very difficult for organizations to achieve economies of scale while also maintaining or seeking to increase quality. Funders should recognize the tensions and trade-offs that

exist between improving quality and achieving economies of scale, and should not push scaling organizations to seek economies of scale at the expense of quality.

### **Maintain focus on people and culture while growing.**

From 2000 to 2011 Teach For America scaled its program rapidly while maintaining quality. But this growth eventually took a toll on the organization's culture and staff sustainability. The urgency to improve education for disadvantaged children can make focusing on issues like staff culture or lifestyle sustainability feel self-indulgent. But achieving long-term impact at scale requires concerted attention to both organizational culture and staff well-being and sustainability. This is even more true in a rapidly scaling organization, which is frequently adding new staff and placing significant demands on both new and existing staff. "When you grow quickly," says Jeff Wetzler, "you need to put a tremendous focus on culture and talent. We were not laser focused on those things during our period of rapid growth." Through its re-articulated core values, five commitments, new operating model, and ongoing diversity work, Teach For America is working not only to repair the damage to its culture during the period of rapid growth but to emerge with a stronger and healthier culture—but it still has progress to make. Teach For America's experience offers both a cautionary lesson for other scaling organizations and some specific strategies that may help build and sustain a strong culture while growing.

#### *Implications for other scaling organizations:*

- **Focus on culture while you grow.** Scaling organizations need to proactively foster a strong culture while growing, and to prioritize culture alongside other scale and quality goals.
- **Use core values to support culture.** Teach For America's core values have played a key role in shaping the organization's culture over time and are deeply embedded in the organization's day-to-day life, personnel evaluation system, and key management decisions. Regularly reviewing and "re-articulating" core values has helped Teach For America maintain its culture and support the organization's own evolution, changing cultural pressures at different stages of growth, and a shifting external landscape.
- **Track data on staff engagement and satisfaction.** Teach For America regularly tracks data on staff engagement and satisfaction, and includes these data in its key indicators of overall organizational performance. The data have informed both Teach For America's ongoing diversity work and its efforts to strengthen staff culture since 2011.
- **Prioritize staff sustainability.** Education organizations tend to attract highly mission-driven individuals who are willing to prioritize achieving impact for kids above other organizational or life considerations. But achieving the "one day" goal—and similar goals driving other education organizations—is a marathon, not a sprint. And as organizations scale, they often need to expand their talent beyond a small pool of highly mission-driven individuals. Scaling organizations need to develop approaches to culture and human capital that enable staff members to sustain and build careers over time, avoid burnout, and maintain a level of work-life balance.

## Specific Strategies and Lessons for Other Scaling Organizations

In addition to the general themes and considerations outlined above, Teach For America's experience offers specific lessons to address common challenges facing scaling organizations:

### Cultivate and engage a diverse staff

Many education organizations struggle to recruit a diverse staff or to build an inclusive culture that engages and retains staff from diverse backgrounds. Teach For America's experience demonstrates that it is possible to build a diverse staff while scaling. Although our national public dialogue around race often betrays an implicit assumption that increasing diversity means lowering the bar (see: the ongoing debate over affirmative action), Teach For America's experience demonstrates the falsehood of that assumption. Teach For America has adopted several practices that may be particularly useful for other organizations:

- **Make diversity a priority.** Teach For America has been able to cultivate a diverse staff in large part because it has made diversity an organizational priority and placed an intentional focus on recruiting, retaining, and engaging diverse staff.
- **Set clear targets related to diversity, and track indicators of progress toward those targets.** Managers within Teach For America have targets to develop diverse talent, and the organization tracks data on diversity-related indicators, including the rates at which diverse staff members with potential for greater leadership roles are being identified, and satisfaction and engagement data for different staff populations. These data help Teach For America identify trends or differences in staff satisfaction and engagement levels, and ensure that managers are supporting the development of a diverse staff.
- **Engage staff in dialogue around issues of identity, race, class, bias, and privilege.** Teach For America has learned that simply having a diverse staff is not enough—organizations must work intentionally to create an inclusive culture in which all staff members feel valued for who they are and feel that they can bring their “whole selves” to work. Creating this culture requires engaging all staff—not just staff from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds—in frank and respectful dialogue around issues of identity, race, class, bias, and privilege, and creating an environment where staff from all backgrounds can safely raise these issues with colleagues and peers. Staff from privileged or majority backgrounds must take ultimate ownership of recognizing their own identities and biases and creating an inclusive culture.

### Build a sustainable approach to funding

Teach For America has had tremendous success in raising funds to support its work. Although some of this success stems from the exceptional fundraising abilities of Teach For America's founder and its unique place in the education landscape, other organizations can learn from some of its strategies:

- **Develop clear multiyear plans to grow impact, rooted in a Theory of Change.** Teach For America's five-year growth plans have played a crucial role in enabling the organization to raise funds to support its growth. By providing a clear picture of Teach For America's priorities and goals for the coming years, tied to measurable outcomes, these plans have enabled Teach For America to raise general operating funds from individual, corporate, and philanthropic funders, rather than relying on project-specific grants.
- **Distribute responsibility for fundraising.** One of the core lessons of Teach For America's first decade is the need to balance fundraising and programmatic work within an organization. Models in which a few people within an organization are responsible for raising the funds to support everyone else's work are not sustainable.
- **Prioritize local fundraising.** Because the vast majority of education philanthropy is local, long-term sustainability for education organizations requires identifying local funding sources and cultivating relationships with them. Local funding has played a key role in driving Teach For America's growth to scale. Conversely, by linking growth, strategy, and development, Teach For America has also been able to use its growth to leverage local funding.
- **Diversify funding sources.** Building a diverse funding base, including both philanthropic funds and public funds from multiple levels of government, has also contributed to Teach For America's funding sustainability.

### Effectively structure regional and national teams

National organizations that operate at multiple local sites face challenges in allocating roles, responsibilities, and decision-making among national and regional teams. Teach For America cannot offer one "right" answer for other organizations. In fact, the right answer for Teach For America's national-regional structure has evolved over time based on the organization's work, stage of growth, talent pipeline, and external context—the same factors that should inform other organizations' structural decisions. These lessons from Teach For America's experience may be helpful for other organizations:

- **Articulate a clear value proposition for the national/central function.** Teach For America's model, in which recruitment and admissions are a necessarily national function, creates a clear value proposition for the national team. But all multiregion organizations must identify a clear value proposition for the central role, which should then inform decisions about national-regional structure, respective responsibilities, and degrees of autonomy.
- **Create a dedicated national team or role focused on managing local site leaders.** Throughout multiple iterations of Teach For America's national-regional structure, the Regional Operations Team has played a key role in ensuring regional quality and making the structure work. In the matrix model, the Regional Operations Team served as a central coordinator and point of contact for multiple national teams that provided

support to sites. In the new operating model, which gives sites much greater autonomy, the Regional Operations Team will play an even more crucial role in monitoring quality across increasingly diverse and autonomous sites. In both models, the Regional Operations Team's most crucial role has been managing and supporting regional executive directors, providing them with coaching and support to set and achieve goals, and holding them accountable for results. Other national organizations that directly operate on a local level should ensure a similar, dedicated central role focused exclusively on supporting and managing local directors.

- **Use geographic dispersion to hedge against risk.** Teach For America's dispersion across multiple sites has created an effective hedge against risks at individual sites, allowing the organization to weather political and budgetary shocks in individual regions without significant harm. Groups whose ability to advance their work relies on partnerships with states or districts, state or local discretionary funding, or state or local political contexts may wish to learn from this experience.
- **Hold local staff leaders accountable for fundraising.** As noted above, long-term sustainability for education organizations at scale requires building a base of local funding. Teach For America's experience shows that cultivating a base of local funders is an important way to build local champions who will support an organization's work in other ways. Teach For America has been able to build this local funding base because it has made securing local funding a key priority of the regional executive director's job. Multi-site national organizations should organize both their national-local structure and local leadership roles to prioritize building a local funding base at each site.

### **Set and measure progress toward goals**

Setting and measuring progress toward goals is baked into Teach For America's DNA. Across all major areas of its work, Teach For America consistently uses metrics and data—on corps member impact, staff engagement and satisfaction, fundraising progress, and recruitment—to track progress toward goals and inform changes and actions to achieve those goals. Teach For America's experience with goals and metrics offers several lessons for other scaling organizations:

- **Track, analyze, and use data to understand how your organization is performing and to inform continuous improvement.** Over the past 15 years, Teach For America has collected data on a range of indicators of both its programmatic effectiveness and its internal organizational health. These data enable Teach For America to monitor its overall impact and to identify teams and regions that are struggling or producing exemplary results, informing continuous-improvement efforts. Other scaling education organizations should also define and regularly track data on key indicators of organizational health, program quality, and external impact. These data can help these organizations evaluate the results they are producing and improve the quality of their work.

- **Ambitious goals are sometimes easier to achieve than modest ones.** Teach For America's experience demonstrates that ambitious goals capture internal and external stakeholders' imagination and force organizational staff to change practices and thinking in ways they might not if faced with a more incremental goal. The counterintuitive lesson for scaling organizations: don't be afraid to set ambitious goals.
- **Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.** While Teach For America's significant gains measure of corps member impact was far from perfect, the data it produced have played a valuable role in helping Teach For America refine the Teaching as Leadership framework, its selection model, and its approach to teacher support and development. Teach For America has made far more progress by working with imperfect metrics than it would have if it had waited to get the measures exactly right. Organizations must be thoughtful about how they use imperfect metrics; for example, such metrics should not drive major programmatic changes or high-stakes personnel decisions without support from additional evidence. But that does not mean imperfect data can't be used to inform ongoing improvement, particularly when better metrics are not available. The next two recommendations can help organizations use data thoughtfully.
- **Balance goal orientation and measurement with the human element.** At some points in its history, Teach For America's culture has emphasized pursuit of goals at the expense of staff culture and relationship building—and the organization has paid a price, both internally and externally. Results-oriented organizations should not let a focus on outcomes prevent staff from paying attention to the relational elements of their work that shape both internal staff culture and external relationships and perceptions.
- **Distinguish between “must meet” goals and those that are more aspirational in nature.** Over time, Teach For America has set both “must meet” goals, such as annual fundraising and recruitment targets, and more aspirational goals, such as targets for total corps size, corps member impact, and transformational change. These different types of goals play very different roles in an organization. Must-meet goals establish clear expectations for staff and ensure that the organization achieves the tasks that are essential to near-term success, impact, and survival. Aspirational goals help align staff around a common vision and keep them focused on it as they work to achieve near-term goals. Most organizations will need to set both types of goals, but should clearly differentiate between them. Failure to do so can lead, on the one hand, to lack of accountability and clear expectations around must-meet goals and, on the other, to demoralization if staff members feel accountable for aspirational goals they cannot achieve.
- **Adjust goals when circumstances change.** One of Teach For America's strengths over the past decade has been its ability to adjust goals in the face of changing circumstances—accelerating its pace of growth in response to opportunities in 2008, and slowing in response to internal and external needs from 2011 to 2014. Scaling organizations should maintain flexibility to adjust goals and targets when circumstances change.

## Implications for the Education Reform Movement

Teach For America has grown alongside the education reform movement over the past 15 years, in a largely symbiotic relationship. The external challenges Teach For America has faced in recent years reflect similar challenges facing the larger education reform movement. Several themes from Teach For America's recent experience have implications for the broader movement:

- **Strengthen the talent pipeline for education organizations.** Teach For America's experience illustrates the extent to which talent remains a major challenge for education reform organizations. Teach For America has a strong internal talent pipeline, a strong Human Assets Team, and a reputation for attracting top-quality talent. Yet even with these significant advantages, Teach for America has struggled to attract the talent it needs, and the lack of a deep talent bench has often been a major challenge to growth. Across the sector, the supply of talent remains a major barrier to the growth of education reform organizations—one that Teach for America is helping to address but cannot address on its own.
- **Develop clear narratives and messages.** Just as Teach For America has struggled to clearly articulate its Theory of Change to audiences beyond its immediate stakeholders, the broader education reform movement has also struggled to craft a clear narrative and messages that communicate its Theory of Change to broad public audiences, including parents, communities, and many educators. As a result, other voices—who oppose the policies associated with education reform organizations—have been able to define the movement for key audiences. Education reform organizations must develop clear narratives and strategies to communicate their Theory of Change to stakeholders beyond funder, policy, and elite media audiences.
- **Value diversity.** Teach For America's experience illustrates the importance of diversity to education organizations, particularly those that seek to improve outcomes for low-income and minority students. Any organization or movement that seeks to address issues of equity in education must have leadership from individuals who have themselves been affected by issues of race, class, bias, and privilege. This is particularly true for education organizations, where the relationship between educators and their students, families, and communities plays a significant role in mediating learning outcomes. Too often, families and communities feel like education or education reforms are being done to them, rather than in partnership with them. Diverse leadership and a respect for varied perspectives enable education organizations to address and reverse this perception.
- **Prioritize community relationships.** It can be challenging for a rapidly scaling organization to prioritize relationship-building. But education is an inherently political, community-based enterprise, and making relationships with the broader community—not just funders and partners directly involved in your work—is important for the long-term sustainability and impact of education organizations.



- **Pay attention to context.** In the early years of the Obama administration, a relatively young education reform movement was highly successful in driving changes in federal, state, and local policies. But these legislative successes spurred a backlash from teachers' unions and others that opposed new reform policies. Flawed policy implementation in some states, combined with teacher layoffs and school closures due to state funding cuts, further exacerbated the backlash. While reformers were not directly responsible for teacher layoffs, budget cuts, or stagnant teacher pay, they failed to recognize the combined impact these factors would have on teacher morale—or how the concurrence of these factors with new evaluation systems and standards would lead many educators to view reform policies as yet another attack on their jobs and schools. Paying greater attention to the broader economic, historical, and educational context in which reforms were occurring, and how that context shaped the perceptions and reactions of key stakeholders, might have enabled education reform organizations to avert the backlash that has since impacted both Teach For America and other organizations.
- **Invest in independent evaluations—but be realistic about what they can accomplish.** Teach For America is one of the relatively few education organizations that have rigorous independent evaluations demonstrating the effectiveness of their models. The lack of more rigorous independent evaluations is a major barrier to scaling effective strategies, but many education organizations are reluctant to undertake such evaluations, due to both their costs and their risks. Teach For America's experience illustrates the value of independent evaluations: the organization's early investments in independent evaluation, and its willingness to subject its results to independent scrutiny, have yielded dividends in terms of external credibility, political support, and ultimately a \$50 million Investing in Innovation grant. At the same time, continued outcry from critics who oppose Teach For America's model illustrates the limits of independent evaluations in shaping public or stakeholder opinion—particularly in a highly polarized education landscape where many observers lack a sophisticated understanding of research methods and many participants tend to treat research as a tool for reinforcing their own opinions.

## Lessons for Philanthropy

Teach For America's experience also offers implications and lessons for philanthropic funders seeking to invest in improving education for disadvantaged children or scale the impact of effective education models. Some of these lessons are highlighted in the first set of general lessons and implications. But a few lessons emerge that are specific to funders:

- **Be open to investing in innovative but unproven models with a clear Theory of Change and potential for transformative impact.** Teach For America would never have achieved the results it has to date if its early funders had not been willing to take a risk on an unproven model. Most innovative education organizations and ideas must depend on support from philanthropic funders to provide seed funding for their development and initial implementation. This support enables organizations to craft

effective models and accumulate a sufficient track record and evidence of impact in order to merit public funding. In selecting innovative models, funders should pay particular attention to the clarity of an organization's Theory of Change.

- **Consider allocating more giving to unrestricted, rather than project-based, grants.** Many funders award only project-based grants aligned to a narrow set of priorities. This is particularly the case in recent years, as more sophisticated education funders have developed their own Theories of Change and impact metrics, and funded only organizations and projects that clearly fit their priorities. While a move toward greater strategic grant-making in education is on the whole a positive trend, this approach can push organizations to take on projects that do not fit their mission or Theory of Change in order to secure funding. Both Teach For America's experience and independent research on high-impact philanthropy in other sectors suggest that funders can have greater impact in the long term by identifying organizations whose Theory of Change they support and that have a demonstrated track record of success, and by providing grants of unrestricted funding to help these organizations grow their impacts.
- **Use philanthropic investment to leverage public funds.** Although foundations and other philanthropic funders donate roughly \$1.5 billion to education causes every year, these funds are a drop in the bucket compared with the more than \$500 billion that federal, state, and local governments spend each year on education—meaning that philanthropic funds can have the greatest impact when they drive changes in how public funds are spent.<sup>13</sup> Teach For America's experience offers one illustration of this. Over the past 15 years, as school districts and policymakers have seen the impact of Teach For America corps members and alumni, philanthropic funders' initial investments have leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars in local, state, and federal education funds—and these public funding sources now play a key role in sustaining Teach For America's work at scale.
- **Develop long-term strategies to support education organizations that require ongoing philanthropic funding to sustain impact.** Over the past decade, philanthropists have made major investments in supporting the growth of new education organizations, including charter school networks and advocacy organizations such as Teach For America. Teach For America's experience illustrates that growth can create a compelling case for funders—but what happens after organizations achieve their intended scale? It is reasonable to expect some types of education organizations—such as charter school networks that receive per-pupil funds—to become sustainable on public funds alone once they achieve scale (and, in this case, address inequities in state and local charter funding). But other organizations that lack access to guaranteed public revenue streams—including both advocacy organizations and many new human capital organizations—will continue to require philanthropic funding to sustain their impact, even if they are not growing. Philanthropic investors in these organizations must recognize this reality and develop long-term strategies that support the continued impact of their investments, while also helping these organizations build a diverse and sustainable funding base.

## Lessons for Public Policy

Teach For America's experience offers the greatest lessons for other education and nonprofit organizations that seek to scale their impact. But as an organization that operates in public schools and receives significant public funding, Teach For America is also heavily influenced by public policies—as are most organizations seeking to scale impact in the education space. Teach For America's experience offers lessons about how public policies can support the growth to scale of high-impact education organizations—as well as how existing policies create barriers to scaling effective models.

These lessons are particularly important given the recent federal policy focus on fostering education innovation and scaling effective models. Through the i3 grant program, the federal government has invested \$1.2 billion over the past five years to support education innovation and scale models with solid evidence of effectiveness, awarding grants through a highly competitive process. Other federal grants, such as the Social Innovation Fund, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, also provide funding to foster innovation and scale effective models. These programs have several promising characteristics:

- **They recognize of the need for innovation in education**, and federal investment in supporting the development and testing of new models.
- **They link funding to evidence of impact**, through a tiered framework that requires solid evidence of effectiveness as a condition for larger grants, sets high standards for the quality and rigor of evidence, and mandates that programs undertake a rigorous, independent evaluation as a condition of funding.
- **They provide significant funding to scale the impact of organizations** with a proven track record of effectiveness.

This approach, which stands in stark contrast to the formula-based programs through which most federal education funds are distributed, offers real potential to support the development and scaling of effective education models. Federal policymakers should continue to invest in innovation and tie more federal funding to evidence of effectiveness.

At the same time, Teach For America's—and other grantees'—experience with the i3 program suggests that there are opportunities to improve it. The i3 grant has been shoehorned into the parameters of more traditional competitive grant programs, when in fact a new form altogether is needed to support its goals. The next iteration of federal support for innovation could strengthen i3 by implementing the following recommendations:

- **Decouple investments in innovation from investments in scaling models with evidence of effectiveness.** The existing i3 grant program tries to do two very different things—support the development of new, innovative (but by definition unproven) approaches, and support the growth to scale of proven models. But these different purposes would be

better served by different programmatic structures. Rather than continuing to combine the two in one program, the federal government should create a dedicated program to support innovation in education—similar to the ARPA-ED model proposed by Senator Michael Bennet (D-Colorado)—and a separate funding stream to support the growth and ongoing work of organizations with a demonstrated track record of effectiveness.

- **Create a dedicated pool of federal funding to scale and sustain effective organizations and models.** The vast majority of the \$25.7 billion in annual federal K–12 education spending supports activities with no demonstrated evidence of effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> To increase the percentage of federal funds that support effective educational strategies, the government should set aside a portion of federal education funding exclusively for grants to organizations or models that have rigorous empirical evidence of their effectiveness in addressing national education needs. Such organizations should be eligible to receive term-limited grants of one to three years that could be renewed based on evidence of continued effectiveness and impact. Program design should minimize the emphasis on grant writing, or “plans,” and instead focus on evidence of prospective grantees’ effectiveness and the number of children, teachers, or schools that they currently serve. This approach is similar to the Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools, which were created within the federal Charter Schools Program in 2010 and have provided nearly \$90 million to support the scale-up of high-performing charter schools. Federal policymakers could create a similar set-aside within Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to support the growth and replication of teacher preparation, professional development, and leadership preparation organizations with evidence of effectiveness. The Supporting Effective Educators Development program created in the 2011 appropriations bill sets aside a portion of Title II funds for national organizations, but at \$30 million, it constitutes less than 1.3 percent of all federal Title II funding and is narrowly targeted to award grants for specific activities historically funded with line-item funds (including Teach For America). Creating more robust set-asides for proven models within existing formula-based federal education programs would allow more national organizations with a track record of results to secure national resources through a transparent, competitive process, rather than by manipulating the political process.

This paper is primarily focused on scaling education organizations. There is an extensive literature on public policies related to improving teacher quality and modernizing the teaching profession—issues largely beyond the scope of this paper. That said, public policies related to teacher quality have shaped Teach For America’s growth over the past 15 years in a variety of ways. While Teach For America has had considerable success in overcoming state policy barriers to placing corps members as teachers, its experience highlights several more subtle implications for local, state, and federal policies related to teacher quality:

- **Be intentional about talent.** Teach For America’s own corps member recruitment and selection, alumni leadership development, and internal human assets practices illustrate the importance of being intentional about recruiting, selecting, and developing talent—but this intentionality about talent is lacking in many public education organizations. Policymakers can learn from and replicate components of Teach For America’s approach to cultivating talent.
- **Use data to improve hiring decisions.** Over time, Teach For America has improved its corps member selection process by comparing data on corps member impact to data collected at admissions, and using this analysis to refine selection criteria. Using a similar approach would enable school districts to significantly improve the quality of their hiring practices and decisions. Since districts have much greater access to teacher and student performance data than Teach for America does, they could significantly accelerate the pace of learning about the characteristics of effective teachers that can be discerned at hiring.
- **Identify and cultivate leadership talent.** School districts should also be much more intentional about identifying and cultivating potential leadership talent, adopting strategies such as the “talent trackers” that Teach For America managers use to track team members’ desire and readiness to take on roles of greater leadership. Districts’ failure to invest in building their leadership pipelines is one of the reasons that Teach For America has invested significant resources over the past decade in supporting and developing alumni who wish to become school leaders. In essence, Teach For America has taken on this role because districts have not.
- **Invest in state and local talent ecosystems.** The majority of state funds for public education flow through formulas to local school districts and schools—as they should. Policymakers in a number of states and cities increasingly recognize that expanding access to quality education for all students requires not just schools and districts but a larger ecosystem—including human capital and tool providers—to support schools. As a major provider of human capital to high-needs urban and rural school districts, Teach For America is an important part of that ecosystem, and has effectively lobbied to secure public funds for its work in many states and districts. But in this respect it is something of the exception that illustrates the rule. Going forward, policymakers need to think about how to create sustainable funding pools and mechanisms to create the ecosystem of human capital and other supports that high-poverty schools need.
- **Rethink the highly qualified teacher requirement.** No Child Left Behind’s highly qualified teacher requirement was intended to ensure that low-income students have equitable access to qualified teachers and that teachers have training in the subjects they teach. But, as numerous policy analyses have documented, HQT has not achieved these goals.<sup>15</sup> Teach For America has secured legislative changes that enable corps members to be considered highly qualified teachers. But the HQT

provision imposes significant costs on corps members: requiring them to complete higher education coursework that evidence suggests does little to make them more effective in the classroom, placing further burdens on their time during the already stressful first year of teaching, and forcing some to make significant out-of-pocket expenditures—up to \$15,000 a year in some regions—or take on large student loans to pay for coursework. These costs are particularly burdensome for potential corps members from low-income backgrounds. Any future reauthorization of Title II or of ESEA should carefully balance the costs and benefits of the HQT provisions, including those that apply to alternative-route teachers.

- **Track and publish data on the outcomes of teacher preparation programs.** Teach For America is one of very few educator preparation programs that has been subject to a rigorous, independent evaluation of its impact on student learning. Many teacher preparation programs make little or no effort to track what happens to their alumni after graduation. This means that, despite positive evidence of Teach For America corps members' impact compared with the impact of other teachers working with similar students, it is not possible to compare Teach For America's results to those of most other teacher preparation programs. Given the significant amount of money spent on teacher preparation—much of which comes from federal student aid or state subsidies for public universities—and the fact that teacher preparation programs typically must obtain state approval, it is unconscionable that we do not know more about their results. Recently, states—including Tennessee, Louisiana, and North Carolina—have begun linking data on teachers' employment and student learning outcomes back to the institutions at which they were prepared, and producing public reports on the rate at which graduates of different preparation programs obtain jobs as teachers, the schools in which they work, and their impact on students' learning. Increasing the number of states that link and publicly report this data would increase our knowledge about the results of different teacher preparation programs, enable prospective students and employers to make more informed decisions, and accelerate the pace of learning and continuous improvement in the sector.

## Conclusion

*Teach For America has improved the educational experiences of millions of students and produced leaders who are playing crucial roles in transforming public education to better serve historically underserved students.*

Over the past 15 years, Teach For America has grown dramatically and produced impressive results by maintaining an intensive focus on the core activities within its Theory of Change: recruiting, preparing, and supporting corps members to have immediate impact in classrooms, and cultivating and supporting alumni leadership to drive long-term systemic impact. Through these activities, Teach For America has improved the educational experiences of millions of students and produced leaders who are playing crucial roles in transforming public education to better serve historically underserved students.

But these activities alone are not sufficient to produce the impact that Teach For America ultimately seeks to have on the world. Getting to the “one day” when “all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” requires changes beyond those that Teach For America can drive on its own.

To achieve that goal, Teach For America must learn how to work more collaboratively with families, communities, and other organizations in the educational and social justice fields, while maintaining its focus on its core activities—and continuing to perform those activities with even higher levels of quality. This is both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity of Teach For America’s next 10 to 15 years.

Teach For America’s leaders have recognized this challenge. The re-articulated core values and the five commitments voiced by Co-CEOs Matt Kramer and Elisa Villanueva Beard demonstrate this. The new operating model is designed to foster



innovation and deepen relationships between regions and their communities. And the new communications and public engagement strategy is designed to move Teach For America beyond its historic insularity to greater engagement with both its local communities and the broader media and education landscape. At the same time, through TAL X.0 and ongoing research and continuous-improvement efforts, Teach For America is working to better support corps members and increase their impact on student learning.

These changes are not without risks, particularly the shift to a new regional operating model that will allow greater variation in approach and quality across sites. And Teach For America will continue to operate in a polarized and sometimes hostile public education landscape that creates new challenges for its work. Collectively, however, these recent changes position Teach For America to transform the way it engages corps members, alumni, families, communities, policymakers, and the public over the coming years, in pursuit of greater impact at the student, school, and broader school systems level.

Over the past 25 years, Teach For America has played a crucial role in transforming the education reform landscape in ways that no one imagined when the organization launched. The choices that Teach For America has made over the past 15 years, and those it is making today, will continue to shape the education landscape well into the middle of the 21st century.

## Endnotes

- 1 The 2011–12 school year is the most recent year for which the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reports data on the number of graduates produced by higher education–based teacher preparation programs in the U.S. According to IPEDS data, the institution that awarded the largest number of education degrees in 2011–12, the University of Phoenix, produced 4,932 graduates that year. In the same school year, Teach For America placed 5,031 corps members in their first year as teachers. These numbers likely radically understate the extent to which Teach For America is the nation's largest source of new teachers, however. IPEDS data report the number of students receiving an education degree from a preparation institution in any given year, but not whether those individuals went on to receive state certification or obtain employment as teachers. Data from states that collect data on job placement rates for graduates of teacher preparation programs suggests that a significant percentage of students who complete these programs do not immediately obtain employment as teachers. In contrast, all 5,031 Teach For America first-year corps members began working in schools as teachers in fall 2011.
- 2 Wendy Kopp, *One Day, All Children: The Unlikely Triumph of Teach For America and What I Learned Along the Way* (New York: Public Affairs. 2001)
- 3 *Ibid.*, page 70.
- 4 See, for example: Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, *Evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Program Implementation and Outcomes: Third-Year Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. 2008)
- 5 *Impacts of the Teach For America Investing in Innovation Scale-Up* (Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research. Forthcoming).
- 6 No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Public Law 107–110, 107th Cong. (Jan. 8, 2002), Sec. 9101.
- 7 For a full accounting of the debate over NCLB's highly qualified teacher provisions and the impact of these provisions on Teach For America's engagement in federal advocacy and policymaking, see Alexander Russo, *Left Out of No Child Left Behind* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, October 2012) [http://www.aei.org/files/2012/10/10/left-out-of-no-child-left-behind-teach-for-americas-outsized-influence-on-alternative-certification\\_145912598416.pdf](http://www.aei.org/files/2012/10/10/left-out-of-no-child-left-behind-teach-for-americas-outsized-influence-on-alternative-certification_145912598416.pdf).
- 8 Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Public Law 110–315, 110th Cong. (August 14, 2008).
- 9 See Office of Postsecondary Education, *Preparing and Credentialing the Nation's Teachers: The Secretary's Ninth Report on Teacher Quality* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. 2013) <https://title2.ed.gov/Public/TitleIIReport13.pdf> Table 1.1. Because not all teacher preparation programs provided complete demographic data, the report was missing data for 8 percent of the sample. We calculated this percentage based on the data provided.
- 10 *Impacts of the Teach For America Investing in Innovation Scale-Up* (Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research. Forthcoming).
- 11 Huffman and Rhee divorced in 2007.
- 12 Dana Markow, Lara Macia, and Helen Lee, “Challenges for School Leadership: A Survey of Teachers and Principals,” conducted by Harris Interactive for MetLife, Inc. (2012) <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf>.
- 13 Jay P. Green, “Buckets into the Sea: Why Philanthropy Isn't Changing Schools, and How It Could,” in Frederick M. Hess, ed. *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy Is Reshaping K–12 Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2005).
- 14 New America Foundation, Federal Education Budget Project, “No Child Left Behind Overview,” feb. newamerica.net. Figure reflects fiscal year 2014 appropriations for federal education programs authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and does not include spending on special education programs authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or K–12 education spending by other federal agencies.
- 15 See, for example: Christopher O. Tracy and Kate Walsh, *Necessary and Insufficient: Resisting a Full Measure of Teacher Quality* (Washington, D.C.: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2004).



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