

## Teach for America: How to Inspire Future Leaders

**TEACH FOR AMERICA** describes itself as heading the movement of leaders who work to ensure that youth growing up in poverty get an excellent education. Teach for America (TFA) is a nonprofit organization that recruits college graduates and professionals to teach for two years in economically disadvantaged communities in the United States. The idea behind Teach for America was developed by then-21-year-old Wendy Kopp as her senior thesis at Princeton (in 1989). Kopp was convinced that young people generally search for meaning in their lives by making a positive contribution to society. In the first four months after creating TFA, Kopp received more than 2,500 applicants. Her marketing consisted of flyers in dorm rooms. Corporate America donated \$2.5 million in seed grants during TFA's first year. In 2014, TFA's operating budget was \$360 million.

The genius of Kopp's idea was to turn on its head the social perception of teaching—to make what appeared to be an unattractive, low-status job into a high-prestige professional opportunity. Kopp established a mission for the organization she had in mind: to eliminate educational inequality by enlisting the nation's most promising future leaders in the effort. Her underlying assumption was that significant numbers of young people have a desire to take on meaningful responsibility in order to have a positive impact on the lives of others. To be chosen for TFA is a badge of honor. Initially, TFA applicants came from Ivy League colleges; in 2014 the top TFA contributors were the University of Michigan, University of California-Berkeley, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Texas at Austin, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Today, TFA corps members represent more than 850 colleges and universities throughout the United States. The applicant profile also has changed a bit over time: While initially targeted at college seniors, today, one-third of all TFA corps members applied as graduate students or professionals.



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In 2014, TFA received more than 50,000 applications for only about 5,000 positions across the country. This translates to a mere 10 percent acceptance rate. TFA corps members receive the same pay as other first-year teachers, ranging from \$30,000 to \$51,500 a year. Since each TFA cohort teaches for two years, in the 2014–15 school year, more than 10,000 corps members taught over 600,000 students. TFA's teaching cohort is also much more diverse than the national average: While less than 20 percent nationwide are teachers of color, about 50 percent of TFA corps members are people of color.

Persuading highly qualified teachers to take up jobs in some inner cities and rural areas has been an elusive goal for many decades. Making TFA highly selective changed the social perception of teaching in underprivileged areas. It is now an honor and great résumé builder to be chosen for TFA. Some notable TFA alumni are now U.S. district judges, state senators, co-founders (of KIPP, Knowledge is Power, college-preparatory schools in disadvantaged communities; and Manhattan GMAT), Olympic medal

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winners, chancellors of large public school districts (including the District of Columbia), senior adviser to Hillary Clinton, journalists, actors, and writers. More than 80 percent of TFA's more than 37,000 alumni, however, are still working in the field of education, with the vast majority in public school districts.

Most importantly, TFA makes a significant positive impact on the students. Some 95 percent of all school principals working with TFA members say that these teachers make a positive difference. A detailed and rigorous study commissioned by the U.S. Department for Education finds that students being taught by TFA corps members showed significantly higher achievement, especially in math and science.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did an undergraduate student accomplish what the Department of Education, state and local school boards, and the national Parent-Teacher Association could not achieve despite trying for decades and spending billions of dollars in the process?
2. Applying the Level-5 leadership pyramid, do you believe Wendy Kopp is an effective leader? Why or why not?

3. What are your personal leadership take-aways from Wendy Kopp and the TFA MiniCase? Would you want to apply to be a TFA teaching fellow? Why or why not?
4. How can the frameworks and concepts you studied in strategic management help TFA achieve its mission "to enlist, develop, and mobilize as many as possible of our nation's most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equality and excellence"?
5. Apply a triple-bottom-line assessment of TFA's performance. How is TFA doing? What are its strong areas, where could its performance be improved? See the TFA site for more information at [www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org).

Sources: This MiniCase is based on: 2014–2015 Teach for America press kit; Simon, S. (2013), "New study finds Teach for America recruits boost student achievement in math," *Politico*, September 10, 2013; Kopp, W. (2011), *A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education for All* (Philadelphia, PA: Public Affairs); Xu, Z., J. Hannaway, and C. Taylor (2008), "Making a difference? The effect of Teach for America on student performance in high school," *Urban Institute*, March 27; [www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org); <https://www.teachforamerica.org/tfa-on-the-record/>; "Wendy Kopp Explains Teach for America," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLWb\\_gDIFNk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLWb_gDIFNk) (4.05 min); and Kopp, W. (2001), *One Day, All Children . . . : The Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned Along the Way* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Book Group).