



Stanford eCorner

Answering Teach For America's Critics

Wendy Kopp, *Teach for America*

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Wendy Kopp, CEO and founder of Teach For America, believes that many critics of her organization are misinformed about the thoroughness of the program. Kopp is willing to put Teach For America's pre-service teacher training up against that of any other organization, and she believes their recruitment process constantly improves. Rather than being a "band-aid" to the education crisis, Kopp sees Teach For America as answering an urgent need that the nation can no longer wait to address.



Transcript

How do I respond to critics that people from elite colleges are not necessarily the best teachers for kids in this context that the Teach For America corps members are not skilled enough, well prepared enough after summer training and that this is a band-aid program because people commit two years? And how can that solve the whole problem? Is that, OK? So let me just take each of these. So first of all, Teach For America recruits contrary to most perceptions, far and wider, our corps last year represented 500 colleges and universities across the country. But we do recruit most aggressively at the most competitive colleges in the country. So when you look at the U.S. News and World Report lists the top 350 colleges in the country, those are pretty much our recruitment priorities. I do think that that is critical. We need our most well-educated, most skilled folks to channel their energy into ensuring that the education of the next generation is as strong as it can possibly be. That is not the reality today. If you actually take a hard look at who decides to go into teaching on average, you will find that it's generally not the most capable people graduating from the most selective colleges. And I think we have to change that.

Now, there are exceptions to all those rules. There are definitely people we would die to have within Teach For America who were at college number 750 on the selectivity list. And there are definitely awesome people at some of the most competitive colleges going into teaching without Teach For America. So there are the outliers but in terms of where the lion's share of Teach For America resources should go I think we are doing a great service by making teaching a cool thing to do at these very selective colleges. We've also spent a lot of time though. I think our selection process is not what some perceived it to be. It's not like we think, "Oh great any Harvard or Stanford I should say since I'm at Stanford 3.5 GPA person should get in to Teach For America. No." We have spent enormous amounts of time and energy trying to understand what are the personal characteristics that are differentiating the teachers who are in fact transformational teachers. And we've developed a predictive selection model. No selection model is perfect.

Ours does get better and better each year based on the data. It gets more and more predictive. It's probably one of the most predictive selection models out there based on this is what selection experts tell us. What we found is that people who have track records of achievement across academics, extracurriculars, or work experience, people who demonstrate perseverance in the face of challenges, people who have the ability to influence and motivate others, who have a level of organizational ability, problem solving ability and who approach this with respect and humility in terms of how they work with others are more likely to be successful. So we've developed all sorts of different screens that try to identify those folks and they can come from anywhere but who demonstrate these characteristics. In terms of the preparation, there's first of all probably a lot of truth to the fact that I think there's no free service program that can eliminate the learning curve that comes along with being a first-year teacher in any environment let alone in the environments that we're operating in. But we've learned a lot

again about what not just what the characteristics of the transformational teachers are as they come in but how they teach. And we've seen quite extraordinary patterns across these folks and as a result have developed an understanding of what the kind of mindsets and skills and knowledge are that teachers need in order to be truly successful in this particular environment. So we've developed a very intense, very goal-oriented free service program. I would put it up against any free service program in the country by a long shot.

If what we're talking about is producing teachers who will be prepared to effect significant academic gains with their kids in low-income communities. And then, we know that actually the biggest issue is what kind of management and training on-going professional development do they get once they are as unique people in their unique environments? And we've done a lot to invest in that piece as well to do what any good manager would do. So we're doing a lot. The evidence would show that in fact I mean first of all the majority of the principals say that the Teach For America corps members are better trained than their other new teachers. Just opinion, just what they think. But more importantly, the data would show that these folks are in fact more successful as new teachers than other new teachers. And even in some cases, the more experienced teachers in their schools. So that's what I would say to those critics. And I would invite them in because I think people are completely shocked when they realized what Teach For America puts into the training and support of its teachers. And then finally to the band-aid question.

I think it's important and it's very easy to lose this in the holes of academia but to remember that the nature, the magnitude of the crisis we have, right? So 15 million kids growing up in poverty. By the time they're in fourth grade, the three-grade levels behind, half of them will not graduate from high school and the half who do will have an eighth-grade skill level. If you are a kid in a low-income community, you have a 10 percent likelihood of graduating from college. This is a crisis. It exists despite the efforts for decades of very well-intentioned policy makers, deans of teacher education, school superintendents. In the light of that challenge, we need out-of-the-box solutions. And this one is about saying, "You know what, let's make this the cause of our future leaders." Let's be sure that the most capable people. The people who Goldman-Sachs most wants and lot of other places most want channel their energy against this problem. Let's invest in those people to make sure that they're successful as they can be, that they learn as many of the right lessons as they can learn. And then, let's support them to go out and figure out what is the solution to that crisis.

We think a lot of those people are probably going to have to stay in education. No one would have predicted, 65 percent of these folks who were not going to go into teaching would stay a long term in education but they do. Sixty five percent of our 20,000 alums are working full time in education. Half of them is teachers, 600 of them is school principals, many others is district leaders. But honestly, some of them have to leave because all you have to do is work in schools to realize we're definitely not going to solve this problem from outside the system alone. And that's why many people have to stay but we can't solve it from within schools alone. We need policy makers and the people who most influenced them to understand this problem in a way that almost no one understands it today. So that's it's a counter intuitive theory of change.