

A good grade for Teach for America

High-schoolers taught by the program's novice instructors scored better on year-end exams, study says.

By *Stacy Teicher Khadaroo* | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*
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Reporter Stacy Teicher Khadaroo talks about Teach for America and a recent study of its teachers.

What makes a good teacher? Experience helps. But a new study of Teach for America (TFA) – education's version of the Peace Corps – shows that their novice high school teachers bring something to the classroom that trumps traditional training and experience.

The advantage of having a TFA teacher is particularly strong in math and science, the study finds.

The results are eye-opening at a time when teacher quality is a front-and-center issue. Good teachers are a key to closing achievement gaps for low-income and minority students, researchers say, but there's still much to be learned about how to get people into the classrooms where they're needed – and how to ensure their effectiveness once they get there.

"The fact that [this study] actually documents differences between different types of teachers ... is important as we consider the best ways in which to prepare teachers, the best ways to recruit them, the best ways to select them," says Heather Peske, director of teacher quality at The Education Trust, a Washington nonprofit that works to close student-achievement gaps.

TFA has sent about 17,000 elite college graduates into two-year stints in the neediest urban and rural classrooms since it started in 1990. They get intense training in the summer and then on the job – a crash course compared with the years of study and practice that most aspiring teachers undergo. That's drawn criticism from some corners.

But the first study to look at TFA teachers in high schools shows that their students do better on end-of-course exams than those of other teachers. TFA teachers' impact is even greater than that of teachers with three or more years of experience relative to new teachers.

Selectivity of potential teachers, in fact, is a big part of the TFA brand. Recruiters look for top college students who could land higher-paying jobs (but TFA members take entry-level teacher salaries averaging about \$36,000). Last year, only 21 percent of applicants made the cut. Criteria include perseverance, achievement, and respect for others, says TFA spokeswoman Amy Rabinowitz, but leadership is the most important.

"What [the study's] findings suggest is that we have to think a lot more about selection," says Jane Hannaway, coauthor of the study produced by CALDER, a research center at the Urban Institute in Washington. "TFA spends a good part of its efforts ... selecting people who they expect to be particularly effective in the classroom."

The analysis spanned from 2001 to 2006 in North Carolina, a state particularly advanced in gathering data that links teachers, students, and exam scores in a range of subjects. It controlled for a range of student, classroom, and school characteristics.

Traditional teacher-education programs at colleges and universities should see what lessons they can draw from TFA, says Ms. Peske. Most of those programs have not subjected themselves to analysis of their graduates' effectiveness, she says, so she credits TFA for wanting to know the impact it's having on learning.

Previous studies of TFA by various researchers looked at Grades 1 through 8 and yielded mixed results. Two found a TFA advantage in math but not in reading. Another found that TFA teachers in English classes did somewhat worse than teachers certified through university programs.

One challenge with a model like TFA is that it's hard to replicate, says Douglas Harris, an educational policy professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The study suggests more broadly, he says, that people should be open-minded about "all sorts of possible alternative routes to [teacher] certification."

Cognitive ability is an important predictor of worker effectiveness in complex occupations like teaching, Mr. Harris's research has found. So alternative programs could be useful, for instance, if they draw in candidates who "learn faster and learn better," he says.

In many urban and rural areas, students who have the most catching up to do are in the schools with the least experienced teachers (including TFA teachers). This is despite the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which attempts to push districts to ensure equitable distribution of high-quality teachers.

Some critics of TFA say it contributes to the inexperience and turnover at high-needs schools, since it only asks for a two-year commitment. But TFA officials say their teachers come back after the first year at a higher rate than other new teachers in high-poverty schools (91 percent versus 83 percent). Two-thirds of alumni are studying or working in the education field, even if not in the classroom, Ms. Rabinowitz says.