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EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB


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Teacher Corps' Tough Regimen Tasks Recruits

By [Jeff Archer](#)

Houston

For five weeks this summer, James Savage lived and breathed education in a kind of teacher training boot camp.

He rose at dawn at the University of Houston campus to help team-teach 1st graders at a city school. In the afternoons, veteran educators helped him see what he did right and what he did wrong.

The 22-year-old from Michigan spent his evenings in workshops on such topics as classroom management and parent involvement, often staying up past midnight to plan the next day's lessons.

The goal was to transform Mr. Savage and some 500 other college graduates, who came here with little or no education experience, into teachers ready to tackle their own classrooms this fall as members of the Teach for America program.

The evolution of the organization's summer training program in many ways reflects a similar transformation of TFA itself.

Since Princeton University graduate Wendy Kopp founded TFA in 1989 to enlist volunteers to teach in districts where educators are sorely needed, the nonprofit organization has been a lightning rod for complaints from many in the education establishment. Critics have charged that sending ill-prepared college graduates into some of the toughest jobs in education did little to help the fledgling teachers or their students.

Hands-on Emphasis

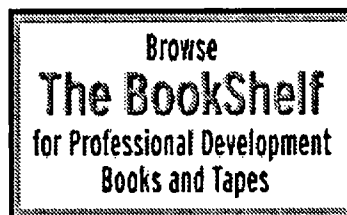
But TFA has sought to learn from its critics as it has also gained confidence in fine-tuning its program.

The summer institute has evolved into an intensive crash course in teaching that places a heavy emphasis on hands-on experience. Recruits are assigned classes of summer school students, and their studies are grounded in practicalities like goal setting, classroom management, and lesson planning.



Read a [brief history of TFA](#). This Week's News.

More information on [Teach for America](#).



"You don't really get much time to think of other topics other than teaching your kids," Mr. Savage said. The recent University of Michigan graduate completed the summer program last month and has been assigned to a Phoenix elementary school this fall.

TFA leaders and some education experts say the group's efforts to hone its primary preservice training program demonstrate a new wisdom and maturity for the New York City-based organization.

"I have never met a group that's more responsive to getting criticized than this one," said Edith Tatel, a former director of teacher training at American University in Washington who is TFA's director of professional development. "That's not always true of this profession."

Yet changes to the institute, and to the organization as a whole, have yet to quiet Teach for America's loudest critics. Concerns persist that even a well-intentioned effort over the course of a summer cannot take the place of an academic training program.

"Each year I hear that the summer institute is supposed to be getting better," said Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, who has been a leading critic of Teach for America. (["Teacher Education Tiff Playing Out in Print,"](#) Nov. 9, 1994.)

"But when I talk to people who went through it," she added, "they continue to feel inadequately prepared to go into the classroom."

Learning From Experience

Officials at TFA say the summer institute represents just one element of the organization's efforts to improve the way it recruits, trains, and provides ongoing support to corps members.

And they note that the training workshops have come a long way since the first one held in 1990 at the University of Southern California. That year, TFA worked with the year-round school program in Los Angeles, teaming recruits as student-teachers with professional educators from the nation's second-largest district.

When they weren't in class, the new corps members attended workshops on education issues, and got feedback from educators from around the country.

The results were mixed. Although appreciating the chance to observe veteran teachers, many graduates complained they still didn't feel ready to begin teaching on their own. Some added that the material covered seemed diffuse or lacked relevance.

"When I got to my assignment, there was an incredible disconnect

between what I learned at the institute and the challenges I faced in the classroom," recalled Karolyn Belcher, who became a corps member in 1990 and who now directs the summer institute.

Gaining Confidence

TFA scrapped that model in 1994 in favor of having new members teach their own summer school classes. Teams of three or four recruits are now responsible for about 20 students.

The change was made possible by a deal with the Houston schools: TFA's 500 recruits allow the district to double the number of students served in its nine summer school programs, and the district provides professional educators to observe and coach the trainees. Mentoring also comes from experienced corps members.

The traditional student-teacher model, where recruits step into someone else's classroom, didn't give the new members enough responsibility, said Jill Keegan, who attended the Los Angeles institute in 1992 and this summer helped supervise TFA recruits at one of the Houston summer schools. "It's not hard to teach a class that already has someone else's classroom management in place," she said.

And rather than overwhelm new members with voluminous and seemingly disconnected readings, this year TFA gave them a comparatively slender guidebook, "Teaching for Student Achievement."

Based on the group's observations of which recruits from prior years were most effective in the classroom, the 76-page document focuses more on setting and adjusting goals, lesson planning, and assessing student progress.

"Before, we weren't necessarily taking a stand about what made an effective teacher in an urban and rural school," said Ms. Kopp. "Our confidence level has gone up considerably."

The program emphasizes setting high expectations for all students, engaging parents, and getting to know the community served by a school. It's no coincidence that those ingredients are among those most often cited by mainstream researchers and policymakers as a recipe for school improvement.

The guidebook has "really honed the most recent literature in the field of education and put it in the most practical terms," said Lindsay Reichstein, a Houston teacher who worked as an adviser at this year's institute. "I wish I'd had something like that to mentor other teachers."

Regaining Focus

Evolution has taken place throughout Teach for America, not just at its

summer institute.

In 1994, the organization's leadership decided it was time to refocus on TFA's founding mission of running a stable program that provides struggling districts with a corps of new teachers.

As a result, Teach for America let go of two relatively new programs. One was an effort to help districts use TFA's expertise in recruiting and coaching new teachers; the other was a summer school program called the Learning Project. Both efforts continue, but no longer under TFA's umbrella. ("Bright Lights, Small City," March 8, 1995.)

In its early years, the organization also hired dozens of educators to work as full-time "support directors" in regions where corps members were assigned. That program, which was inefficient and expensive, has been dropped.

Instead, TFA's regional offices now craft their own professional-development efforts, making greater use of local schools of education, experienced corps members, educators from the local districts, and even retired teachers.

Efforts to build a more sharply focused organization haven't quieted persistent concerns about TFA's overall concept. Some experts remain convinced that no matter how efficiently the summer institutes are run, five weeks is not long enough to train new teachers.

Though TFA has improved its training programs, said Frank Murray, an education professor at the University of Delaware, "there's too much material now even for the usual four-year program."

But Mr. Murray and some other educators say that doesn't mean the program is without merit.

"What I see as their greatest contribution is getting people into teaching who would not have thought of it otherwise," he said.

But Ms. Kopp says TFA's objective never was to create a competing alternative to more traditional models of teacher education. Instead, the organization provides a less-than-ideal answer to an emergency situation.

"If urban and rural schools were able to find enough qualified teachers," she said, "then Teach for America wouldn't exist."

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Proposals:

- universities not get desired pool of applicants -
- Higher Ed'n Act
- Urban Partnerships Program.

Univ.

Partnering w/schools

- Bus - schools
 - Oregon SMILE
 - Upward Bound
 - Summerbridge
 - School-college Partnership Program
 - Charter schools
- Band-aids / vs. systemic
or system?
- Pueblo Superintendent → seniors get credit for at least sophomore level of college. College kids help high school.

Competitive

grant

Academic links →

"Direct"

Band-aids

- Teacher Recruitment and Preparation initiative proposed under Title V of HEA.

C. HIGH SCHOOL

D. ACCESS OPPORTUNITIES

POSSIBLE TIME TABLE

SF-Chronicle - article to stop Def Ed's
investigation in CA.

Teach For America Survey

Survey by Kane, Parsons & Associates in 1995 of 302 principals and superintendents with experience with TFA members found:

- 76.7% of principals rated TFA teachers as above average **compared to other beginning teachers**
- 88.7% of principals rated the **intellectual ability** of TFA teachers as above average
- 84.4% of principals rated TFA teachers as above average in their **ability to motivate students**
- 60.5% of principals rated TFA teachers as above average in their **ability to discipline students**
- 65.2% of principals rated TFA teachers as above average in their **ability to create and manage a classroom environment conducive to student learning and growth**