

Texas Rural Best

Annual Award

Application

October 18, 2002

I. Contact Person and Organization

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II. Purpose of Organization

Teach For America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors and backgrounds who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools and become lifelong leaders in the effort to ensure that all children in our nation have an equal chance in life.

The fact remains that by the time they are nine years old, children in low-income communities are 3 to 4 grade levels behind nine-year-olds who are born in high-income communities in reading ability. Still, that gap only becomes wider from there until those who are born in low-income communities are seven times less likely to graduate from college than their more privileged peers.

Students in low-income communities achieve at far lower rates than their peers in more affluent areas. The Rio Grande Valley is one of the most poverty stricken areas in the country, and the effects are glaring. The children we serve face severe socio-economic disadvantages – disadvantages such as lack of quality pre-school programs or good nutrition or adequate housing that put them behind from the moment they arrive in kindergarten and that only continue to make their school careers more difficult as they grow older. Yet when we provide these students with the additional supports necessary to help them overcome these disadvantages, we see their true potential.

We know from experience that *all* students have the potential to achieve at high levels, regardless of background, which inspires us to work toward our vision of one day, all children in this nation will have an equal opportunity to attain an excellent education.

III. Teach For America's Mission and Impact

Description of Innovative Project

Currently we place corps members in elementary and secondary public schools in 10 school districts across the Rio Grande Valley (a full list of sites is attached). One hundred percent of the students we reach qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and all of the districts we serve are classified as “high-need” local education agencies by the Federal government. Over 95 percent of the students our corps members teach are Latino/Hispanic.

Teach For America has two main impacts:

- We provide this country’s most disadvantaged students with excellent teachers who go beyond traditional expectations to ensure that their students achieve academically; and
- We influence the career direction and civic commitment of our corps members, building an ever-expanding force of leaders and citizens who are committed to making the changes needed to ensure that all children in this nation have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.

These corps members are among the most highly sought-after graduating college seniors. Ninety percent of this year’s incoming corps held leadership positions on college campuses; their average SAT score (self-reported after matriculation) was 1310; and their average undergraduate grade point average was 3.5. Thirty-six percent of the incoming corps members are people of color, and 20 percent have majors or minors in math, science, or engineering.

In addition to improving quality of education for students growing up today in the lowest-income areas of the communities we serve, Teach For America is building a force of leaders and citizens with a lifelong commitment to addressing the issues they witness during their two years of service. An independent study, funded by the Surdna Foundation and conducted by the Collaborative Communications Group, found that Teach For America is a “critical catalyst to the civic engagement of its alumni.”

Description of Significant Problems Solved By Innovation

Immediate Impact

Teach For America corps members have a tremendous impact on students and schools during their two years of service. In August of 2001, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) released a study comparing the impact on student achievement corps members teaching grades 3-8 in Houston, Texas, with that of other new teachers across the system. CREDO found that corps members produced gains in student achievement as great or greater than other new teachers in every subject area and at every grade level.

Moreover, in a spring 2001 survey by Kane, Parsons & Associates administered in the Rio Grande Valley, 91 percent of principals reported that corps members are more effective than their other beginning teachers. An average of over ninety percent of these principals rated corps members as good or excellent on 22 indicators of effective teaching, including:

- 96% Achievement orientation and drive to succeed
- 100% Knowledge of the subject matter

- 100% Ability to think logically and critically
- 91% Integrating into the school community
- 91% Assuming responsibility for student achievement

Our success in recruiting and preparing exceptional classroom teachers has led education policy makers to highlight our impact. Reflecting on his tenure as Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, the new U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige noted, "Every year our best teachers came from Teach For America." The Department of Education's recent publication on teacher quality, "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality," also highlighted Teach For America as the type of high-quality alternate route program that others should emulate.

Long-term Impact

In addition to improving quality of education for students growing up today in the lowest-income areas of the city, Teach For America is building a force of leaders and citizens with a lifelong commitment to addressing the issues they witness during their two years of service. Education Week, a leading national journal of K-12 education, recently profiled Teach For America's alumni in an article entitled "Most Likely To Succeed," and called the organization a "leader-making machine." According to a survey of alumni conducted in the fall of 2000, our alumni are deeply influenced by their Teach For America experience:

- ❑ Sixty percent of alumni (dating back to 1990 corps members) are working full-time in education, 40 percent as teachers and another 20 percent in administrative and other positions in the field of education.
- ❑ Of the 40 percent working outside of the field of education, approximately 70 percent say some aspect of their jobs relates directly to schools and/or low-income areas. More than 70 percent of the alumni who are not working in the field of education volunteer for organizations related to education.

What is significant is not only the extent to which Teach For America alumni choose to continue working on expanding educational opportunities for students in low-income areas, but also the extent to which they are providing important leadership in this effort. Following are just a few examples of how alumni are working for positive change:

- ❑ Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg founded the nationally acclaimed KIPP Academies, featured on 60 Minutes and now expanding nationally, which are putting children growing up in low-income areas on a level playing field with children in more privileged areas.
- ❑ Tom Torkelson founded the IDEA Academy (Individuals Dedicated to Excellence and Achievement), a college preparatory school that provides a rigorous academic environment for three hundred and fifty fourth through eighth grade students in Donna, Texas. He was granted charter status in the fall of 2000 and is the youngest person to be granted charter school status in the state of Texas. Last year the students that attended the IDEA Academy made dramatic gains in their TAAS tests in all content areas.
- ❑ Aaron Brenner founded a community art center, Proyecto Derecho del Corazon in Donna, Texas. The goal of this center is to provide an opportunity for students to celebrate their

culture and heritage through art. Aaron has painted five murals around the town of Donna and has helped teachers integrate art into their curriculum in order to celebrate literature and history.

- Bill Norbert, Majority Whip in the Maine House of Representatives, is working to impact his state's funding for education, requirements for teachers, testing standards for children, teacher recruitment strategies, and other policies.

Length of Time Innovation Has Been Operational

History of the Organization

Wendy Kopp proposed the creation of a national teacher corps in her undergraduate thesis at Princeton University in 1989. Her idea was simple: to recruit the most talented and accomplished recent college graduates to teach our nation's most underprivileged students. Although these graduates had many other options, Wendy believed that these young leaders would embrace the opportunity to assume a leadership role and have an immediate impact in low-income communities. And she believed that by teaching for two years, these young leaders would become invested in expanding educational opportunity and ultimately would advocate for necessary reforms through many different fields.

TFA in the Rio Grande Valley

The Rio Grande Valley has been a Teach For America placement site since 1991 and since that time, nearly 400 corps members have taught nearly thirty-five thousand students across Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr County.

This year, we doubled our corps by providing the Rio Grande Valley with 70 new teachers who joined thirty-five second year teachers. We have a total of 105 excellent teachers completing their two-year commitment, teaching in 38 schools, 10 school districts, and 3 counties.

Evidence Project Is Unique

Teach For America's Program

Teach For America's programmatic focus is on the following: recruiting and selecting a corps of more than 80 new teachers for the Rio Grande Valley by 2005; preparing them to teach through our national pre-service institute; and coordinating an ongoing support network among the 160 corps members (in their first and second year of teaching) across the Valley.

Recruitment

We seek the nation's most talented and driven young leaders, competing with top graduate schools and corporations for the most sought-after candidates. We aggressively recruit at more than 50 targeted campuses across the country. Our regional recruitment directors build relationships with key contacts on campus who provide us with access to the schools' most outstanding student leaders. By building these relationships, we identify the avenues, such as student organizations and classes, that involve the top students and leaders on campus and access opportunities to speak directly with these students. We have seen that it takes this level of cultivation to recruit the highest achieving individuals on campus, who often have the greatest

wealth of post-graduation options available to them. Nationally, we aim to reach potential applicants at hundreds of additional colleges and universities through public service announcements, email campaigns, and through our centralized marketing efforts.

Selection

Candidates apply through an intensive process that includes a written essay application, a personal interview, a sample teaching session, and a discussion group. We select those candidates who demonstrate a record of high achievement; excellent critical thinking skills; a drive to learn constantly; commitment to teaching and working in low-income communities; and possession of high academic expectations for students in these communities.

Training

Corps members accepted to Teach For America attend a national five-week Institute in Houston, followed by a local orientation in the Valley where they will be teaching. At the Institute, corps members work in teams to teach a class while receiving feedback from experienced teachers. In the afternoons, they participate in professional development activities coordinated by a faculty of Teach For America alumni. Our training and support programs are designed specifically to ensure that our corps members internalize the critical elements needed to ensure that their students achieve at high academic levels.

Ongoing Professional Support

Our local office fosters a support network to ensure that corps members excel in their teaching responsibilities. In addition to providing access to workshops, seminars, resources, and other professional development opportunities, the Valley's program directors work one-on-one with corps members to devise individualized approaches to positively impacting student achievement.

IV. Evidence Project May Be Duplicated In Other Rural Areas Of The State

Teach For America's program model may be duplicated in other areas by closely examining the 4 components that makes this project unique and successful in working to close the achievement gap: recruitment, selection, training, and providing ongoing professional support.

Recruitment

Any region can aggressively recruit at their local universities and pursue strong candidates that have been identified as potential strong candidates to teach in their schools. With active cultivation of appropriate administrators and various student leadership groups at the local university, a school district can experience immense success in recruiting talented recent college graduates that meet the criteria they are pursuing.

Selection

Teach For America's selection model and rubric hones in on specific skills that have created the most successful teachers in low-income communities. These qualities can too be duplicated by any school district by modifying their interview process and creating a rubric that seeks

individuals with high achievement; excellent critical thinking skills; a drive to learn constantly; commitment to teaching and working in low-income communities; and possession of high academic expectations for students in these communities.

Training

The training that a school district provides can be altered so that it incorporates deliberate guidance to all its teachers in approaching the critical elements necessary to ensure gains in student achievement. During Teach For America's five-week training every component of the curriculum has a clear link to how the learning directly impacts student achievement. Taking a critical look at a district's model for training new teachers can inform what adjustments need to be implemented in order to create the clear goals necessary to put teachers on the right track in making academic strides with their students.

Ongoing Professional Support

While many of the school districts across the state of Texas already provide opportunities for teachers to develop professionally, this model would require that districts critically examine the approach in which they take. Every workshop or seminar must be presented with a clear goal and connection to how it leads to student achievement. Mentors for new teachers must have the ability to give critical and constructive feedback in order to continue to develop the new teachers. Finally, schools must work relentlessly to provide the appropriate resources necessary for teachers to reach the level of success expected of them.

Attachments

- Current Fiscal Year Budget
- Letter Of Recommendation
- List Of Teach For America Partnerships With School Districts In The Rio Grande Valley
- Not For Profit Status

