

What Works Clearinghouse



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WWC Quick Review of the Report “Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School”†

What is this study about?

This study examined whether having a Teach For America (TFA) teacher instead of a non-TFA teacher affects the academic performance of high school students.

The study analyzed data from 23 North Carolina school districts that hired at least one TFA teacher from 2000 to 2005. The sample included 69 TFA teachers.

The authors examined data from a statewide database on standardized end-of-course tests administered to all North Carolina high school students. These data covered the school years 2000-01 to 2005-06.

The study measured effects by comparing student test scores in classes taught by TFA teachers to test scores from the same students in classes not taught by TFA teachers. Nearly 6,000 students in the sample had a TFA teacher during the sample period.

Features of Teach For America

TFA is a highly selective alternative teacher certification program. Many TFA teachers hold bachelors’ degrees from top colleges and universities.

TFA educators commit to teach for two years—typically in high-poverty schools—and receive seven weeks of training before they begin teaching.

In addition to their salary, TFA teachers receive help with student loans and funding for future education expenses.

What did the study authors report?

TFA improved student performance on standardized end-of-course tests in math and science—by about

one-tenth of a standard deviation. This is equivalent to moving a student from the 50th to the 54th percentile.

The WWC has reservations about these results because students’ ability in these subjects may have varied in ways not controlled for in the analysis and because study data do not identify students’ teachers with certainty.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards with reservations

Strengths: The estimated effects rely on comparisons of student test scores from courses taught by TFA teachers to test scores of these same students from courses not taught by TFA teachers. This technique adjusts for the fact that TFA teachers generally teach lower-performing students.

Cautions: Students may be placed in a course taught by a TFA teacher because of their ability in that subject—and not solely because of their general math and science ability. If so, differences in performance in TFA and non-TFA classes may be influenced by differences in student ability in specific subjects. As a result, the study may not accurately measure the effect of having a TFA teacher. In addition, the data do not link students directly to the teacher who taught their course. Instead, the study matches students to teachers based on test proctor and classroom demographics. This method is somewhat imprecise, and matching errors could lead to misleading results.

† “Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach for America in High School.” *Working Paper 17*. Zeyu Xu, Jane Hannaway, and Colin Taylor. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER), 2007.