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**Teach For America's Preferential Treatment: School  
District Contracts, Hiring Decisions, and Employment  
Practices**

*T. Jameson Brewer*

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



*Kerry Kretchmar*

Carroll University



*Beth Sondel*

North Carolina State University



*Sarah Ishmael*

University of Wisconsin-Madison



*Meghan McGlinn Manfra*

North Carolina State University  
United States

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**Abstract:** Teach For America (TFA) began in 1990 as an organization purportedly interested in working towards ameliorating a national teacher shortage by sending its corps members into urban and rural schools. In the decades that followed, especially during and immediately following a nationwide onslaught of teacher layoffs instigated by the 2008 Great Recession, teaching shortages no longer exist in many of the districts TFA continues to place corps members. In response to growing criticism, TFA has altered its public rhetoric, suggesting now that their "corps members" are better than traditionally trained teachers – including veteran teachers – and are hired only through equal hiring processes rather than being afforded preferential treatment. We analyze Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) between TFA and regional school districts, TFA's official literature, and public discourse to address the degree to which TFA is privileged in hiring practices. We provide evidence that school districts are contractually obligated to reserve and protect positions exclusively for corps members, jobs held by corps members are not a result of equal and open competition, corps member positions are specifically not limited to "so-called shortage areas," and TFA's partnership with charter schools and alumni of the organization have skewed hiring practices in favor of TFA over non-TFA teachers.

**Keywords:** Teach For America, teacher hiring practices, school district contracts, policy analysis

### **El trato preferencial de *Teach For America*: Los contratos de los distritos escolares, las decisiones de contratación y prácticas de empleo**

**Resumen:** *Teach For America* (TFA) comenzó en 1990 como una organización supuestamente interesada en trabajar para mejorar la falta de docentes mediante el envío de sus miembros a escuelas urbanas y rurales. En las décadas que siguieron, especialmente durante e inmediatamente después de una oleada de despidos de docentes a nivel nacional instigados por la Gran Recesión de 2008, la falta de docentes ya no existe en muchos de los distritos, pero TFA sigue colocando a sus miembros. En respuesta a las crecientes críticas, TFA ha alterado su retórica pública, sugiriendo que sus "miembros" son mejores que los docentes entrenados tradicionalmente - incluyendo veteranos - y que son contratados a través de los procesos de contratación en igualdad de condiciones sin tener un trato preferencial. Analizamos Memorandos de Entendimiento (MOU) entre TFA y distritos escolares regionales, la literatura oficial de TFA, y discursos público para investigar el grado en que TFA fue privilegiado en las prácticas de contratación. Ofrecemos pruebas de que los distritos escolares están contractualmente obligados a reservar y proteger posiciones exclusivamente para los miembros de TFA, puestos de trabajo ocupados por miembros del TFA no son resultado de una competencia equitativa y abierta, posiciones asignadas a TFA no se limitan a "las llamadas áreas de escasez" y la asociación de TFA con las escuelas charter y ex alumnos de la organización han sesgado prácticas de contratación a favor de TFA sobre docentes no TFA.

**Palabras clave:** Teach For America; prácticas docentes contratación; contratos con distritos escolares, análisis de políticas

### **O tratamento preferencial de Teach For America: Os contratos dos distritos escolares, as decisões de contratação e as práticas de emprego**

**Resumo:** *Teach For America* (TFA) começou em 1990 como uma organização supostamente interessada em trabalhar para melhorar a falta de professores, enviando seus membros para as escolas urbanas e rurais. Nas décadas que seguiram, especialmente durante e imediatamente após uma onda de demissões de professores em todo o país instigada pela Grande Recessão de 2008, a falta de professores já não existe em muitos distritos, mas TFA continua a colocar seus membros. Em resposta às crescentes críticas, TFA alterou sua retórica pública, sugerindo que seus "membros" são melhores do que professores tradicionalmente treinados - incluindo veteranos - e que são contratados por meio de processos de recrutamento em condições de igualdade, sem um acordo preferencial. Analisamos Memorandos de Entendimento (MOU) entre TFA e distritos escolares regionais, a literatura oficial do TFA, e discursos públicos para investigar até que ponto TFA foi privilegiada nas práticas de contratação. Nós fornecemos evidências de que os distritos escolares estão contratualmente obrigados a reservar e proteger posições exclusivamente para membros do TFA, empregos ocupados pelos membros do TFA não são o resultado de concursos justos e abertos os cargos para TFA não se limitam as " chamadas áreas de escassez" e TFA em parceria com escolas e ex-alunos da organização charter teriam influenciado práticas de contratação de professores TFA sobre não TFA.

**Palavras-chave:** Teach For America; práticas de contratação docentes; contratos com os distritos escolares, análise de políticas

## Introduction

Wendy Kopp founded Teach For America (TFA) based on her 1989 undergraduate thesis from Princeton University (See Barnes, Valenzuela, & Germain, in this special issue for description of this thesis). Since its inception, TFA has placed over 42,000 corps members nationally in low-income communities (Teach For America, n.d.-h). Its original mission was to ameliorate teacher shortages. According to Kopp, "members [of her cadre of teachers] would serve only as supplements to the normal faculty in schools experiencing shortages of certified, qualified teachers" (Kopp, 1989, p. 1). TFA has since grown from an organization concerned with filling teacher shortages into one that focuses increasingly on training "leaders to expand educational opportunity, starting by teaching for two years in a low income community" (Teach For America, n.d.-i). Rather than simply provide supplemental staffing, TFA now claims that its corps members are superior to traditionally trained teachers based on value-added measures (Teach For America, n.d.-j).

To date, the extant research on TFA has focused primarily on the impact of TFA corps members on student assessment data (e.g., Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wykoff, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010, 2014) and their retention rates (e.g., Brewer, 2014a; Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). More recently, researchers have begun to investigate TFA within the context of larger trends towards market-based education reform (e.g., Jacobsen & Linkow, 2014; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Lahann & Reagan, 2011; Trujillo & Scott, 2014).

As yet unexplored is whether TFA has impacted hiring practices at local levels. This issue has both short-term and long-term implications relevant to school district budgets, principal autonomy, and public oversight. At the same time, local hiring practices affect the livelihood and careers of both non-TFA and TFA teachers, as well as the experiences of students. In this article, we attempt to make sense of some of the possible outcomes and impacts that TFA has had on hiring practices through an analysis of contracts or Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) signed between TFA and school districts.

A starting point for our analysis was to determine TFA's impact on hiring practices at the district level, especially whether corps members were given preferential treatment in hiring decisions and if that preferential treatment resulted in the displacement of non-TFA and otherwise credentialed teachers. For example, the growth of TFA, especially during the most recent economic downturn that began in 2008, suggests that school districts are privileging TFA over traditionally certified teachers when it comes to staffing. Yet, TFA and its supporters contend that corps members do not displace (or replace) traditionally certified teachers, but rather are selected for employment through a process that places hiring decisions at the sole discretion of principals other human resources personnel at the district level (Cody, 2012). TFA (2015) argues that principals prefer corps members because they are "as effective – and in some cases more effective – than other teachers in the same schools, both novice and veteran" (para. 1).

Because this issue has so little empirical data to inform it, we set out to examine, describe, and discuss the hiring decisions being made by school districts in partnership with TFA. We focused our analysis on five regions with a historically significant TFA presence; that also represent diverse geographic and political contexts: Atlanta, Chicago, New York City, Eastern North Carolina, and New Orleans. Data available in the spring of 2015 indicated that Atlanta had 1,080 alumni and 220 active corps members; Chicago had 2,240 alumni and 600 active corps members; New York City had 4,110 alumni and 790 active corps members; Eastern North Carolina had 650 alumni and 320 active corps members; and New Orleans had 1,000 alumni and 300 active corps members (Teach For America, n.d.-b; n.d.-d; n.d.-e; n.d.-f; n.d.-g).

As mentioned above, TFA often employs two main arguments in promoting their brand: (1) their corps members ameliorate teacher shortages; and/or (2) their corps members compete fairly with traditionally certified teachers for their positions. However, our analysis of MOUs between TFA and school districts in the five regions we studied, alongside local documents and reports as well as state and federal budgets, demonstrate that TFA corps members do not compete fairly with otherwise qualified, traditionally-certified teaching candidates (novices or veterans). Instead, TFA's special contracts require that districts provide: (1) an allotment of reserved or protected positions for TFA corps members; (2) placement of TFA corps members in teaching positions not limited to "so-called shortage areas;" (3) reserved and protected positions for corps members in "no-excuses" charter schools; and (4) pathways to leadership that skew the employment "playing field" in favor of TFA corps members. Put together, these contractual requirements provide a potential advantage for TFA corps members over traditionally certified and veteran teachers in the hiring process.

The fourth finding regarding the pathway to leadership is particularly significant in light of current research which suggests that TFA alumni who enter into school leadership and policy making positions are more likely to support market-based reform agendas (Jacobsen & Linkow, 2014; Trujillo & Scott, 2014). We are only beginning to understand the manner in which the latter result likely reinforces the former ones. As TFA alumni enter into positions where they help shape educational policy decisions, they have the ability to renew, reinforce, and expand TFA's practices (Gordon, 2015).

## **Conceptual Framework**

Grounded in critical policy scholarship (Lipman, 2013), our inquiry seeks to understand TFA's impact on local hiring practices within social, economic, political and cultural contexts, especially the larger educational trend towards market-based reform and the privatization of public education (Boyles, 2011; Kovacs, 2011; Saltman, 2012). Since the 1960s, there has been a steady rise in public criticism surrounding public education due to perceptions of limited parental choice, management failure, lack of accountability, and uncooperative teachers unions (see Glass & Berliner;

Ravitch, 2010, for full discussion). In these examples, educational “reformers” focus on bureaucratic problems, rather than on resource neglect and racist public policy, effectively obfuscating the structural and historical root causes of our increasingly stratified society and schooling experiences. Rather than focus on alleviating poverty through community-based, social programs, neoliberal arguments appear to have led to the development of a new “common sense” that position managerial, market-based policies as the inevitable solution to improving schools. This has created space for the private sector to intervene and gain control of public services and resources and, subsequently, we see schools increasingly run and/or treated like for-profit companies (Apple, 2001; Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Hirsch, 2001; Lipman, 2013).

Although market-based reforms are often presented to the public in service of equity, there is a well-documented history of these reforms actually redistributing wealth upwards, ultimately benefiting wealthy elites and corporations, and diminishing the amount of public money put into social services (Harvey, 2005). Proponents of market-based reforms in education have increasingly utilized policy networks to navigate and, at times, circumnavigate traditional policy structures in education (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball & Junemann, 2012). These policy networks – self-organizing sets of interconnected organizations and philanthropic foundations that exchange a wide range of resources in order to accomplish shared policy objectives (Davies, 2005) – shift political power and governance away from the electorate. They lead to “the transfer of power and coordination from bureaucratic structures to informal social networks of private individuals and organizations working to transform public education by constructing new education markets” (Ball & Junemann, 2012, cited in Au & Ferrare, 2015, p. 9).

Researchers have already begun to address the ways in which TFA is central to a complicated network of educational entrepreneurial organizations, philanthropic foundations, and corporate elites serving to privatize public schooling (Kretchmar et al., 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). According to TFA, their alumni now include: 255 policy and advocacy leaders, 70 elected officials, 219 school system leaders, and 890 principals (Teach For America, n.d.-a). Many alumni have also risen to leadership within TFA, and within organizations founded by or in partnership with TFA, such as The New Teacher Project or “no excuses” charter school networks like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First (Kretchmar et al., 2014). At the same time, there is evidence that these alumni tend to understand educational change through managerial terms; believing that inequity is a result of resource mismanagement and a lack of accountability and that solutions lay in merit pay for teachers, increased autonomy for leadership, standardization of curriculum, and an end to collective bargaining (Trujillo & Scott, 2014).

Our research focused on understanding whether the MOUs signed between TFA and local districts provide insight into the ways in which these networks shift governance away from the public sector and state agencies toward private entities. From the outset we know that by engaging in contracts with TFA, districts circumnavigate traditional state and district procedures related to credentialing teachers. At the same time, although TFA has claimed that districts hire their corps members to fill shortages, there is evidence that districts hire TFA corps members over certified teachers (Hootnick, 2014; Strauss, 2013). Current research has not yet explored whether TFA corps members are given preferential treatment in hiring.

## Methods

### Research Design

We conducted a document analysis of MOUs and related documents in five regions in the U.S. with considerable TFA presence to examine whether TFA is given preferential treatment in hiring decisions (see Appendix for information on accessing the MOUs analyzed here). Document analysis is an iterative process that provides a systematic procedure for evaluating documents to gather facts and develop understanding about organizational agreements and structures. Document analysis combines content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret a wide variety of types of documents (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

### Data Collection

TFA has designated 47 “regions” across the country in which to place their corps members. While some of these regions serve a single school district, others have a TFA central office working across up to twenty school districts. To ensure a broad geographic and political representation for this analysis we focused on Atlanta, Chicago, New York City, Eastern North Carolina, and New Orleans. Several of the authors of this article were TFA corps members, previously working in these regions.

MOUs served as our primary data sources. We drew on additional contextual data, including TFA documents, national and regional websites, and promotional materials to better understand the MOUs. For each region we collected as many of the MOUs related to the hiring of TFA corps members as possible. To collect this data, we started by submitting requests with local districts for all MOUs with TFA dating back to the first year each region began a partnership with TFA. Across the regions, our multiple requests for these MOUs often went ignored or found the districts providing only a small amount of the requested information. From there we contacted the local and national TFA offices to request MOUs. Again we faced unreturned phone calls and unanswered emails from TFA. In some cases, authors had to threaten legal action in order to receive documents that fall under the category of public record. In most cases, we filed formal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests with the school districts’ information officer (or a similar position related to open records requests). In other cases, authors were told that in order to receive data about TFA, research projects needed to go through a process approved by TFA and fit into one of their designated research strands (see Appendix for details). Access to information regarding public hiring practices is critical to democratic oversight in our institutions, and the challenges in collecting data from TFA and school districts raises questions about a lack of transparency and openness in this process. After multiple failed requests to receive documents from New Orleans, we instead relied on blog posts by those who had obtained the documents through a public document request and then publicized them in 2013 (France, 2014; Schneider, 2013). Even after these attempts, we retrieved a total of 49 MOUs across the five regions. Atlanta area districts provided 13 MOUs spanning between 2007 and 2014. Atlanta Public Schools – the flagship district for TFA in the region – only provided contracts dating back to 2011, despite TFA being active in the district since 2000 (see Table 1). Following the threat of legal action, Chicago Public Schools provided 14 MOUs spanning from 2000 to 2014 thus representing each year TFA has been in the region. New York City Schools provided 10 MOUs ranging from 2006-2009 and 2012-2017 – leaving the MOUs related to 1990 through 2005 and 2008-2011 out of the response. Eastern North Carolina districts provided a total of six MOUs spanning between 2007 and 2014 with the majority representing the last two years of

2013-2014. And New Orleans provided a total of five MOUs covering 2009-2014, thus not providing MOUs related to 1990 through 2008.

## **Data Analysis**

Our document analysis of MOUs and corresponding documents included three stages. Each researcher completed a first-pass content analysis review of MOUs and identified relevant data related to our research aim. We then completed a thematic analysis across contracts and regions, looking for patterns in the data and determining categories of analysis (Bowen, 2009). Finally, we identified themes and categories of analysis in each local context. In some cases, these categories overlapped with our overarching themes and in other cases the categories were unique. In order to further develop our analysis, we referred to additional materials including TFA websites, promotional materials, and publicly available documents both related to TFA national and specific to the regions we examined.

## **Findings**

We found that the MOUs signed between TFA and local districts served to: (1) reserve and protect positions for TFA corps members; (2) place TFA corps member in positions that are not experiencing shortages; (3) reserve and protect positions for corps members in charter schools; and (4) create pathways towards leadership for TFA corps members. To support our assertions, we outline striking consistencies across the MOUs in the regions we studied and provide more details about the unique characteristics of the five selected regions.

Prior to placing corps members in districts, TFA and schools districts sign MOUs that determine the number of teaching positions that will be set-aside for corps members. It also includes the 'finder's fee' that the district will pay TFA for each corps member for each of the two years (usually between \$3,000 and \$5,000). Most of the MOUs are identical and include pro-TFA marketing; it is common to find some iteration of the following phrase in TFA MOUs:

Teach For America is a national leader in recruiting, selecting, training and providing ongoing professional development to individuals committed to closing the achievement gap by serving as effective classroom teachers specifically equipped to enhance student achievement in under-resourced school systems. (Atlanta Public Schools, 2012, p. 1)

Most MOUs contain this or similar claims despite a record that is mixed at best (see, for example, Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Kovacs & Slate-Young, 2013; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014). MOUs also require that teaching positions be set aside specifically for corps members. In setting aside positions for TFA corps members, instead of keeping these positions open to other, perhaps more qualified, candidates, TFA is having an overt impact on local hiring practices.

However, TFA's expansion is not limited to replacing individual teachers with individual corps members. In a "Supporting Partner" document submitted as part of Illinois' bid for Race to the Top funds, TFA outlined a proposal to the Illinois State Board of Education whereby TFA would "provide the entire teaching staff of a turnaround school in region 1-A" of Chicago (Anderson, n.d., p. 2). This would, in effect, constitute an entire school takeover including the firing of all non-TFA teachers while replacing teachers and administrators exclusively with TFA corps members and alumni.

These practices are contrary to TFA's rhetoric that its corps members are not guaranteed

teaching positions and that principals independently make decisions to hire corps members. Our analysis of MOUs illustrates that by setting an allotment of corps members to be hired in districts, TFA has effectively guaranteed teaching positions for its members. For example the 2012 MOU signed by Atlanta Public Schools and TFA dictates that the “School District will hire every [Corps Member] provided by [TFA], up to and including the Agreed Number, who meets [district eligibility] (p. 1). Another MOU states that:

Although [TFA] will work in good faith with School District to provide Teachers who meet specific grade level, subject matter or other criteria specified by School District, School District **shall hire every** qualified Teacher made available by TFA pursuant to this Agreement whether or not such Teacher meets such specific criteria, and School District shall use its reasonable best efforts to hire Teachers across the full range of grade levels and subject matters, including in non-critical or non-shortage areas. (emphasis added, Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2007, p. 2)

It is important to note that the school district is required to hire every corps member whether or not their credentials align with a district’s subject area needs. Additionally, many MOUs stipulate that the district “will hire each [Corps Member] for vacancies across the full range of grades and subject matters and will not restrict or limit any Teacher to so-called ‘critical’ or ‘shortage’ subjects or grade level vacancies” (Gwinnett County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2010, p. 2). And while traditionally certified, non-TFA teachers are given employment contracts on a year-to-year basis, TFA MOUs stipulate that the “School District will employ Teachers hired under [the] Agreement for a minimum of two (2) years” (Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2010, p. 2).

These MOUs reveal that corps members do not actually compete equitably with non-TFA teaching candidates for open positions, providing a glaring contradiction to TFA’s claims that “corps members do not have special contracts with schools or districts” (Teach For America, n.d.-j). MOUs between TFA and school districts show that corps members are actually given preferential treatment through contracts as corps members must be “given **special consideration** for appropriate existing vacancies in the School District” (emphasis added, Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2007, p. 2). Additionally, our analysis of MOUs finds that in the event of a Reduction in Force (RIF), MOUs stipulate that:

While there is no guarantee that [corps members] will not be subject to a Reduction in Force (RIF), subject to its obligations under pre-existing labor agreements and applicable municipal and state laws and regulations, School District shall use reasonable efforts not to terminate any employed [corps member] or [principal fellow] from his/her teaching position in the event of a RIF, layoffs, “leveling” or other elimination or consolidation of teaching positions within School District. School District shall treat any [corps member or principal fellow] employed in connection with this Agreement whose position is eliminated at least as favorably as other employees with the same job classification, certification status, and/or seniority rights. (DeKalb County School District & Teach For America, 2011, p. 7)

Of interest here is that while the districts offer no legal guarantee that corps members would not be included in RIFs, the “reasonable efforts” extended to TFA have been documented as including “immunity towards leveling or layoffs given [a corps member’s] TFA status” (Brewer, 2013, p. 11) – immunity that is likely to be further reinforced as MOUs stipulate a 2-year position for corps



members rather than working on a year-to-year basis as is customary for non-TFA teachers. However, in the event that corps members are included in any RIF, MOUs stipulate that:

...in the event of a reduction in force, layoffs or other elimination of teacher positions within School District, (i) School District shall use its best efforts not to terminate the employment of any [corps member] assigned to School District pursuant to this Agreement, and in any event such [corps member] will otherwise be treated at least as favorably as other teachers with the same job classification, certification status and/or seniority rights, and (ii) School District shall use its best efforts to re-hire and/or reinstate to comparable or other suitable teaching positions [Corps Members] who have previously lost their teaching positions. (Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Thus, while job losses as a result of RIFs may ultimately include non-TFA and TFA teachers alike, MOU contracts require that districts include corps members in the considerations for re-hire – a contractual luxury not generally extended to non-TFA teachers. For example, during the massive teacher RIF in Chicago Public Schools in 2012, all of the city's corps members were included in the initial RIF, yet, according to TFA's Chicago Executive Director, all of the corps members included in the RIF were re-hired only some of the non-TFA teachers laid off were re-hired (Forum on the Future of Public Education, 2014). This practice, supported by MOUs, indicates that districts may utilize RIFs to not only reduce costs associated with teacher employment; but that RIFs and the replacement of traditionally certified teachers with TFA corps members represents an opportunity for further financial savings. At the same time, although TFA publicly asserts that its teachers are superior to traditionally trained teachers – both novice and veteran (Teach For America, 2015), many MOUs include a “no warranty” clause stating that:

School District[s] hereby agrees and acknowledges that Teach For America does not make and has not made any representation and warranty as to the fitness of any Teacher presented or provided by Teach For America and School District shall indemnify and hold harmless the TFA Indemnities from and against any Losses resulting from any claim related to the services provided by Teach For America, including, but not limited to, claims that any Teacher presented or provided by Teach For America was unfit for the position for which he or she was hired by School District” (Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2011, p. 7).

The no warranty clause is significant since MOU language stipulates that under no circumstances are refunds made to the district as “Teach For America has no obligation to refund to School District any amount paid by School District regarding any Teacher for any reason whatsoever” (Fulton County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2010, p. 3). By comparison, Georgia State University offers a “Teacher Education Warranty” for all of its traditionally trained teachers (Georgia State University, 2012, p. 117). The warranty “guarantees the quality of any educator that [is] recommended for initial certification” (p. 117). Moreover, the university's warranty states that any educator who “fails to demonstrate essential skills can receive additional training at no expense to the educator or the employer” (p. 117).

This synthesis of MOU language provides evidence of trends in TFA MOUs across districts. Despite TFA's claims, the language and clauses in contracts stipulate that corps members receive preferential treatment in the hiring process, they can take positions not limited to shortage areas, they are protected during RIF, and they enter into two-year contracts rather than the typical year-to-

year contract. TFA is guaranteed to keep the finder's fee charged to districts for each corps member, regardless of whether the corps members persist in their positions or are fit to teach.

Below we provide specific evidence from each of the regions we studied. Across the five regions the stipulations of the MOUs are consistent. What appears to vary is the context in which these MOUs are signed, including the varying rationales offered to promote partnerships between TFA and school districts.

## Atlanta

TFA has operated in Metro-Atlanta (TFA's designated term for the region) since 2000 and has produced 1,080 alumni and currently has 220 active corps members – 1,300 total (Teach For America, n.d.-f). Corps members in Metro-Atlanta are placed across six different school districts (Fulton County Schools, Gwinnett County Schools, Atlanta Public Schools, Clayton County Schools, Cobb County Schools, and DeKalb County Schools). Atlanta Public Schools (APS) being the first location of placement, APS is the largest recipient to date (and annually) of corps members. A recent history of corps member placement in Metro-Atlanta is shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*New CMs in Metro Atlanta (2007-2014)*

District	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Fulton	47	0	0	1	25	37	0	?	110
Gwinnett	0	0	0	0	75	75	0	0	150
Atlanta	*	*	*	*	75	51	51	*	177
Clayton	0	0	0	0	37	31	33	?	101
Cobb	0	0	0	2	?	?	?	?	2
DeKalb	0	0	0	0	75	75	?	?	150
Total	47	0	0	3	287	269	84	?	690

*Notes:* TFA has operated in Metro-Atlanta since 2000. FOIA requests were made of each district to supply documentation related the hiring of TFA corps members between the years 2000 and 2014 (representing 10 years of data at the time of the request). Zeros in the Table represent years of no relationship between the District and TFA. Asterisks (\*) represent years where a relationship did exist, however, documentation on the amount of CMs hired was not provided. Question marks (?) indicate a lack of direct response as to whether the hiring relationship was active or not.

We made FOIA requests to each school district in Metro-Atlanta to provide MOUs with TFA dating back to 2000. Table 1 reflects data reported by those school districts. In total, documentation was provided to account for 690 of the 1,300 alumni and current corps members in the region; thus, approximately 610 corps members and alumni are not reflected in this analysis. However, prior to 2007, all corps members were reportedly placed in either APS or Fulton County Schools. Atlanta represents a unique region where TFA has developed an influential relationship with local school districts. Namely, one-third of the School Board over the Atlanta Public Schools is TFA alums. Considering the role that the School Board has in approving MOUs – with TFA or otherwise – it is of little surprise that TFA continues to thrive in the city's schools.

An examination of TFA's financial impact on hiring practices provides an important understanding of TFA's impact at the local level. Financial considerations related to hiring include not only the salary of corps members but also the payment of 'finder's fees' for each corps member

to TFA (the average of which is \$4,000 per corps member, per year – again, a fee that has a no-refund clause). In total, for those 1,300 corps members that have been placed in jobs in Atlanta, Metro-Atlanta school districts have paid approximately \$10.25 million to TFA in finder's fees alone since 2000 whether or not those corps members quit or were defective as stated in the MOU no-warranty clause.

The impact that TFA has had on local hiring practices as they relate to financial considerations includes the costs associated with paying TFA their 'finder's fees' as well as the salary of corps members (see Table 3 for district salaries). While the most recent finder's fees required by TFA are \$4,000 in Metro-Atlanta, the following are the average finder's fees paid by the Districts for each corps member for each year of the corps member's two-year commitment: Fulton \$3,207, Gwinnett \$4,000; APS \$4,000; Clayton \$4,000; Cobb \$2,000; and DeKalb \$4,000. In total, for those 690 corps members included in this analysis, these Metro-Atlanta school districts have paid at least \$5,371,240 in finder's fees alone between 2007 and 2014 (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Finder's Fees Paid 2007-2014 from Metro-ATL Districts to TFA*

District	Finder's Fees
Atlanta	\$1,416,000
Clayton	\$808,000
Cobb	\$8,000
DeKalb	\$1,200,000
Fulton	\$739,240
Gwinnett	\$1,200,000
Total	\$5,371,240

Including the other 610 alumni from the region not accounted for in released documents and assuming a finder's fee of \$4,000, Metro-Atlanta districts have paid an additional \$4,880,000 in fees bringing the total cost of finder's fees paid to TFA to at least \$10,251,240.

In addition to finder's fees paid to TFA to offset recruitment and training costs, districts are responsible for paying the full salary of corps members. Table 3 below shows the salary for first year teachers in each of the districts TFA places corps members.

Table 3  
*District-Based First Year Salary for Teachers with Bachelor's Degree*

District	Salary
Atlanta	\$44,312.00
Clayton	\$39,555.00
Cobb	\$38,957.60
DeKalb	\$41,262.13
Fulton	\$40,308.00
Gwinnett	\$37,819.00

*Note:* Salaries reported are from the most recently available salary schedules. The following are the dates of those schedules reported in the Table above: Atlanta (2012); Clayton (2013); Cobb (2013); DeKalb (2014); Fulton (2014); Gwinnett (2013). Teacher salaries in Georgia follow a standard step-scale based on years of service and highest degree obtained; many districts/counties supplement those salaries creating a variance.

Unlike other alternatively certified teachers in Georgia who receive only 94.5% of a full salary (Georgia Department of Education, 2013), TFA corps members receive the same pay as a traditionally certified and fully credentialed teacher despite the provisional status of their teaching license (Teach For America, n.d.-c). As an initial result of being paid at the same level of a fully certified teacher, a TFA corps member costs a school district more money than a traditional first year teacher as a result of the costs of the finder's fees plus the teaching salary. The overall cost comparison between hiring a TFA corps member and a non-TFA teacher represents an important consideration for understanding the impact that TFA has had on local hiring practices. Because TFA does not place corps members in affluent districts, the additional costs associated with hiring TFA corps members in districts that serve students with high needs likely represents an unnecessary drain on resources that might otherwise be used for veteran teachers or support services.

For example, the cost to fill a single teaching position for 30 years in APS with a non-TFA teacher who holds a bachelor's degree is \$1,733,831, whereas the same position filled by a non-TFA teacher with a master's degree would cost \$1,915,445 (see Table 4). Filling the same single teaching position with a TFA corps member (replaced every two years) would cost \$1,464,345 in salary and finders fees over the course of 30 years. Accordingly, while it costs APS \$181,614 less over the course of 30 years to fill a teaching position with a non-TFA teacher who holds a bachelor's degree rather than a master's degree, it costs APS \$269,486 and \$451,100 less to fill the same teaching position with a TFA corps member rather than a non-TFA teacher with a bachelor's degree or a master's degree, respectively.

Table 4

*Annual Salary and Cumulative Costs of Staffing a Single Teaching Position*

Years	Non-TFA (w/ BS)	Non-TFA (w/ BS) Cumulative	Non-TFA (w/ MS)	Non-TFA (w/ MS) Cumulative	TFA	TFA Cumulative
1	\$44,312	\$44,312	\$48,743	\$48,743	\$48,312	\$48,312
2	\$45,311	\$89,623	\$49,843	\$98,586	\$49,311	\$97,623
3	\$46,334	\$135,957	\$50,968	\$149,554	\$48,312	\$145,935
4	\$47,380	\$183,337	\$52,118	\$201,672	\$49,311	\$195,246
5	\$48,449	\$231,786	\$53,293	\$254,965	\$48,312	\$243,558
6	\$49,542	\$281,328	\$54,497	\$309,462	\$49,311	\$292,869
7	\$50,660	\$331,988	\$55,726	\$365,188	\$48,312	\$341,181
8	\$51,804	\$383,792	\$56,983	\$422,171	\$49,311	\$390,492
9	\$52,972	\$436,764	\$58,269	\$480,440	\$48,312	\$438,804
10	\$54,167	\$490,931	\$59,583	\$540,023	\$49,311	\$488,115
11	\$55,390	\$546,321	\$60,929	\$600,952	\$48,312	\$536,427
12	\$56,666	\$602,987	\$62,333	\$663,285	\$49,311	\$585,738
13	\$57,973	\$660,960	\$63,770	\$727,055	\$48,312	\$634,050
14	\$59,310	\$720,270	\$65,240	\$792,295	\$49,311	\$683,361
15	\$60,676	\$780,946	\$66,744	\$859,039	\$48,312	\$731,673
16	\$60,676	\$841,622	\$66,744	\$925,783	\$49,311	\$780,984
17	\$60,676	\$902,298	\$66,744	\$992,527	\$48,312	\$829,296
18	\$62,075	\$964,373	\$68,282	\$1,060,809	\$49,311	\$878,607
19	\$62,075	\$1,026,448	\$68,282	\$1,129,091	\$48,312	\$926,919
20	\$62,075	\$1,088,523	\$68,282	\$1,197,373	\$49,311	\$976,230
21	\$63,506	\$1,152,029	\$69,856	\$1,267,229	\$48,312	\$1,024,542

22	\$63,506	\$1,215,535	\$69,856	\$1,337,085	\$49,311	\$1,073,853
23	\$63,506	\$1,279,041	\$69,856	\$1,406,941	\$48,312	\$1,122,165
24	\$64,970	\$1,344,011	\$71,467	\$1,478,408	\$49,311	\$1,171,476
25	\$64,970	\$1,408,981	\$71,467	\$1,549,875	\$48,312	\$1,219,788
26	\$64,970	\$1,473,951	\$73,114	\$1,622,989	\$49,311	\$1,269,099
27	\$64,970	\$1,538,921	\$73,114	\$1,696,103	\$48,312	\$1,317,411
28	\$64,970	\$1,603,891	\$73,114	\$1,769,217	\$49,311	\$1,366,722
29	\$64,970	\$1,668,861	\$73,114	\$1,842,331	\$48,312	\$1,415,034
30	\$64,970	\$1,733,831	\$73,114	\$1,915,445	\$49,311	\$1,464,345
Total	\$1,733,831		\$1,915,445		\$1,464,345	

*Notes:* Salaries based on Atlanta Public Schools. TFA costs include \$4,000 annual finders fee in addition to salary paid and are reset every two-years following TFA's two-year teaching commitment.

It has certainly become more commonplace for teachers (TFA or otherwise) to not remain in the classroom for 30 years or more (Keigher & Cross, 2010; Riggs, 2013; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999), as such, understanding the cost considerations for districts hiring TFA corps members becomes more dynamic and complex. Continuing the example of filling a single teaching position, we compared yearly cumulative costs for hiring TFA corps members. Assuming that a traditionally certified non-TFA teacher holds only a bachelor's degree, APS spends more on a TFA corps member during the course of a 9-year period of time when compared to the costs associated with hiring a non-TFA teacher. That is, through the ninth year of the position, the costs associated with hiring a traditionally certified, non-TFA teacher are \$436,764 while the costs associated with filling that same position with a TFA corps member (salary and finders fees each year) would amount to \$438,804. It is not until the tenth year of filling the position that hiring a non-TFA teacher becomes cheaper (\$490,931 for the non-TFA teacher compared to \$488,115 for the TFA corps member). However, in the case of Georgia and APS, the hiring of a TFA corps member versus a traditionally certified non-TFA teacher who begins teaching with a master's degree is cheaper in the first year (and each subsequent year) with a cost of \$48,743 for the non-TFA teacher and \$48,312 for the TFA corps member during the first year. However, while the hiring of a TFA corps member over a non-TFA teacher represents a significantly larger initial financial obligation for districts, the hiring of corps members eventually represents a significant reduction in overall costs associated with filling teacher positions as evidenced above.

Thus, despite TFA claims that their corps members compete even handedly for open positions (a claim that is refuted by the MOUs) the reality is that reserved positions for TFA corps members initially cost districts more money on an annual basis than not partnering with TFA – though the hiring of corps members becomes a significantly cheaper option after a few years of filling a position. Such a reality can have dramatic impacts on local school districts as some of the excess monies paid to TFA leave the district to fund TFA activities at the national level (Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014). Moreover, as initial costs are elevated, the collective ability of districts to hire teachers is thus reduced.

In addition to the overt financial impacts – which may explain the region's growing reliance on using corps members – TFA's requirements for hiring corps members also impact local school culture and composition as MOUs stipulate that “to the extent reasonably practicable, [the] School District will employ two or more [Corps Members per individual Partner School]” (Gwinnett County Public Schools & Teach For America, 2010, p. 11). In the case of Gwinnett County Public Schools, there are 33 schools within the four clusters identified in the MOU for corps member placement. As

such, the placement of 150 corps members across two years would require the placement of approximately 4.54 corps members per school.

## Chicago

TFA has operated in Chicago since 2000 and reports 2,240 alumni and 600 current corps members – 2,840 total (Teach For America, n.d.-b). Prior to its MOU in 2012, CPS paid TFA a lump-sum finder's fee per entering cohort of corps members in two separate installments rather than a specific amount per corps member. For example, CPS paid TFA \$337,500 for those corps members beginning teaching during the 2004-2005 school year. According to the contract, this lump-sum price equated to \$4,500 per corps member. Half of the lump-sum (\$168,750) was paid on July 1, 2004 with the remaining half paid on January 1, 2005. In 2012, CPS exercised its option to renew and extend the MOU with TFA. A result of that renewal, TFA dramatically increased the amount of money to be paid by CPS. In 2011, CPS contracted with TFA to provide 200 corps members at a price of \$600,000. The 2012 contract extension outlined an additional \$600,000 to be paid to support those 2011 corps members in their second year of teaching in addition to \$695,000 to pay for 265 new first-year corps members (a contract total of \$1,295,000)(Chicago Public Schools, 2012b). The finder's fee grew to \$1,587,500 in 2013 (Chicago Public Schools, 2013b). Since TFA began operations in Chicago, CPS has paid TFA \$7,484,000 in finder's fees alone. In addition to contracting with TFA for corps members, CPS has partnered with TFA's Principal Fellows initiative. As a result, CPS paid TFA \$229,812 in 2007 for consulting services related to overseeing two TFA alumni complete the 2-year program to become principals. In 2012, TFA was among four service providers (TFA, New Leaders, Inc, Loyola University, New Leader, and the University of Illinois at Chicago) working towards developing the TFA Principal Fellows initiative and was thereby eligible for a portion of the increased \$1,730,001 budget established to support the initiative (Chicago Public Schools 2012a) – a number that was further increased to \$4,215,001 in 2013 (Chicago Public Schools 2013a). The largest growth of TFA in Chicago took place in 2009 corresponding to the Great Recession (see Table 5) – a time in which TFA also experienced its greatest growth nationally (Mead, Chuong, & Goodson, 2015).

Table 5

*New CMs in Chicago Public Schools (2000-2014)*

Year	New CMs	Year-to-Year Increase
2000	40	-
2001	60	+50%
2002	85	+41%
2003	75	-12%
2004	75	0%
2005	50	-34%
2006	60	+20%
2007	80	+33%
2008	80	0%
2009	225	+275%
2010	200	-12%
2011	200	0%
2012	265	+32.5%

2013	325	+22.6%
2014	325	0%
Total	2145	

*Notes:* TFA Chicago reports 2,240 alumni from the region in addition to 600 current first and second year corps members for a total of 2,840 alumni and corps members in Chicago (Teach For America, n.d.-b). However, Table 5 represents data collected from MOUs between TFA and the Chicago Public Schools. Accordingly, those MOUs do not account for where or when the other 695 corps members were placed into teaching positions. It is possible that some of those positions were in autonomous charter schools outside of CPS control.

As noted previously, TFA's growth in Chicago also coincided with dramatic budget cuts, school closures, and the laying off of thousands of teachers. Given the overt lack of a teacher shortage in Chicago, questions about TFA's growth as evidenced by the increased hiring of corps members despite the laying off of traditionally certified and veteran teachers raises questions about TFA's claims of fair competition for open positions. And, as noted above, while many TFA corps members were included in initial RIFs as a result of budget cuts and school closings, all of the TFA corps members affected were rehired, while thousands of non-TFA teachers remained jobless (Forum on the Future of Public Education, 2014).

## New York

TFA has operated in New York City since 1990 and reports 4,110 alumni and 790 current corps members—4,900 total (Teach For America, n.d.-g). Since that time, New York has been among the largest TFA placement regions. Themes related to placement trends, tuition subsidies and marketing shifts emerged in an analysis of MOUs from 2006-2009 and 2012-2017 and supporting documents. The organization has had a significant influence on local school configurations and organizational structures given TFA's increased involvement in supplying corps members for staffing in charter schools rather than traditional public schools—an example best seen in New York City.

TFA's impact on hiring practices in New York City (NYC) cannot be untangled from the interconnection between TFA and 'no-excuses' charter schools. An analysis of the MOUs and publicly available documents illustrates that TFA corps members play an important role in staffing the 183 charter schools in NYC. In particular, many TFA corps members are placed in schools that subscribe to the 'no excuses' model, or charter schools that primarily serve low-income students and often feature an extended school year and day, a highly authoritarian environment, and an exacting focus on improving standardized test scores (Goodman, 2013; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Sondel, 2015).

Table 6  
*New York TFA placements (2006-2015)*

School Year	CMs in DOE Schools	CMs in Charter Schools	Minimum Cost to DOE
2005-2006	488	17	\$2,672,500
2006-2007	493	40	\$2,787,500
2007-2008	492	39	\$2,850,000
2008-2009	536	64	\$2,948,000
2009-2010	230	100	?

2010-2011	216	?	?
2011-2012	160	?	?
2012-2013	180	?	\$630,000
2013-2014	200	?	\$1,020,000
2014-2015	200	450	\$1,020,000

*Notes:* This cost represents the minimum cost to DOE based on the cost range provided per corps member for each year. Question marks (?) represent unavailable data, which was requested but not supplied by TFA. Corps members abbreviated as CMs.

The number of TFA placements in charter schools has increased significantly since 2005-2006, while the number of corps members teaching in Department of Education (DOE) public schools has declined (see Table 6). In 2005-2006, 488 corps members were in DOE schools and 17 were in charters. In 2013-2014, only 200 corps members were in DOE schools and 450 corps members were in charter schools (New York City Department of Education & Teach For America, 2006; New York City Department of Education & Teach For America, 2012). Further, many of the charter schools in which corps members are placed are affiliated with TFA either through formal partnerships, and/or because they are led by and heavily staffed by some of the 4,900 alumni and corps members in the region. TFA, a self-proclaimed human capital developer, serves key organizations that promote charter school reform including many charter management organizations and ‘no excuses’ charters (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014) – most notably seen in the foundation of and culture of the KIPP charter network founded by two TFA alums (Mathews, 2009). This connection is further reflected in the NYC context where TFA corps members are heavily placed in charters. Charter schools currently serve roughly 10% of the 1.1 million students in NYC Public Schools, yet in 2013 65% of corps members were placed in charters and just under 50% in 2014-2015 were placed in charter schools (New York City Charter School Center, 2014; New York City Independent Budget Office, 2013; Teach For America, 2014c). In 2010-2011, one of the twenty-six charter schools TFA placed corps members in was unionized.

In addition, the number of corps members in special education placements in New York is noteworthy. In 2014-2015, 330 corps members across charter schools and DOE schools were in special education placements. In 2010-2011, close to 80 percent of incoming TFA corps members were placed in special education classrooms 2010-2011 (New York City Independent Budget Office, 2013) despite having only a few hours of training in special education (Brewer, 2013).

In New York, TFA teachers must earn a Transitional B certificate, which requires that candidates matriculate in a University Program. The 2006-2009 MOU between TFA and the NYC DOE stipulated that the DOE subsidize part of the tuition for the university component of the TFA certification program (a similar stipulation was also found in MOUs from Chicago). The 2006-2009 contract notes that the amount of the tuition subsidy has “decreased from \$12,000 per person to \$8,000 to the proposed \$3,000 (with an additional \$1,000 for math and special education teachers)” (New York City Department of Education, 2006).

The MOUs reflect noticeable shifts in language. In 2006, the “recruitment and selection” section of the proposal to the DOE cited the intensive and rigorous selection process, and the number of applications from leading colleges and universities. It did include some statistics about the diversity of the corps. In 2012, the first two points were notably different as the “recruitment and selection” section highlighted the number of corps members who identified as people of color and the number of corps members who came from low-income backgrounds. These changes in TFA NYC perhaps reflect shifts in the TFA brand as the organization responded to increased critique of how it placed corps members as well as the lack of diversity within its cadre of teachers.



The sizeable New York City TFA corps and more recent shifts towards increased placements in charter schools align with the market-based, accountability driven reforms enacted under the mayoral control of Michael Bloomberg. From 2002-2014, more than 109 schools deemed “chronically underperforming” were replaced with small schools and charters schools. In addition, system leaders mandates a uniform curricula, created a privately funded Leadership Academy to train and mentor principals, and the DOE implemented a yearly school grading system and merit-pay initiatives that emphasized standardized test scores as indicators of successful teaching (Ravitch, 2010). Thus, the MOUs that commit the DOE to hire 488 to 536 TFA corps member in 2005-2008 and the subsequent shift to corps members staffing charter schools is reflective of the enactment of market-based reform throughout the district, an in particular, it is tied to the expansion of charters and parental choice initiatives.

### **Eastern North Carolina**

TFA has been placing corps members in North Carolina since the organization's first year of operation in 1990 (Teach For America, n.d.-d). There are currently three specified regions in the state; Eastern North Carolina (ENC), the Piedmont Triad (the area within and surrounding the three major cities of Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point), and Charlotte. While the number of districts in ENC fluctuates, in 2015 there were 650 alumni and 320 current corps members (970 total) across fourteen school districts in this region (Teach For America, n.d.-d).

ENC provides a unique case wherein a district may partner with the organization to help fill teaching shortages. In fact, TFA often uses ENC as an example to represent how the organization still aims to fill teaching shortages. TFA's [former] ENC Executive Director Robyn Fehrman was quoted in a local newspaper article stating, “We [TFA] serve 48,000 kids who are living in poverty. We decide where we work based on where we are needed” (Stephens, 2012). Similarly, the Superintendent of one of the rural districts that partners with TFA, Warren County, has asserted both in a personal blog and in *The Washington Post* that:

Like so many rural districts, mine faces a true teacher-shortage—particularly in subjects like math, science and special education. Teach For America helps to address this—offering our principals access to a national pipeline of diverse, accomplished candidates committed to excellence. (Mathews & Spain, 2013)

The districts that are targeted by TFA in ENC experience some of the highest teacher shortages and turnover rates, as well as rates of child poverty and racial segregation in the state. Each of the districts included in the ENC region, except for Durham Public Schools, suffers from chronic impoverishment and the same brain drain endemic in most rural regions across the country.

While this region has historically struggled to maintain an adequate pipeline of trained teachers to fill all of its classrooms (Bidwell, 2014; Moutray, 2009), the teaching shortage has been exacerbated as the climate for teaching in the state has worsened in the past five years (The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2001; University of North Carolina, 2012). The restructuring of the state income tax code, which initiated a flat tax of 5.8%, dramatically cut the state's revenue (some estimates suggest it cost the state \$1 billion per year) and had profound implications for funding the state's public education budget (Fiske & Ladd, 2014). At the same time, the General Assembly initiated a series of acts including removing career status for teachers, eliminating additional pay for teachers who complete a graduate program, capping teacher salaries, reducing funding to schools for teaching assistants, and reducing funding for textbooks. In addition, the Governor's educational advisor, TFA alumni Eric Guckian, promotes merit based pay programs for

teachers and an aggressive charter school expansion. As a “Right to Work” state, North Carolina teachers have no collective bargaining rights. Further, in 2013 the General Assembly defunded and ultimately terminated the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program, which had been nationally recognized since 1986, as a high quality pipeline to teaching. This program selected 500 high school seniors each year to receive a full tuition scholarship to attend a four-year college or university-based teacher education program in exchange for a promise to teach for four years in a public school within the state. The combined effect of these legislative and budgetary changes in North Carolina has created a climate that seems unfriendly to teachers thus creating a pipeline of teachers that is “leaking” at both ends.

Meanwhile, despite defunding public education and public teacher preparation programs, the General Assembly apportioned \$12 million of the state budget to TFA in 2013 (Appropriations Act, 2013). In addition to running their normal program, TFA took over operation of the North Carolina Teacher Corps in 2014. This program, largely modeled after TFA, was started in 2013 as an effort to increase teachers from the state, by recruiting lateral entry teachers who had either attended high school or college in North Carolina. TFA is being funded by the state as a solution to the lack of a teacher pipeline in highly impacted regions, providing policy makers in the state an opportunity to fill teaching positions without addressing the systemic defunding of schooling and increasingly negligent treatment of teachers.

Similar to the regions described in the sections above, across the four district-level MOUs analyzed for this paper (Duplin County School District, 2013; Granville County School District, 2014; Nash-Rocky Mount School District, 2007; 2011; 2014; and Washington County School District, 2011), each district provides a finder’s fee to TFA, ranging from \$3,000 to \$4,000 per corps member, per year, up through their two-year commitment. This sum is relatively high for this region considering that the starting teacher salary in some of these districts is just over \$30,000; hiring a TFA corps member costs a district an additional 10%-13% of the teacher salary to be paid directly to TFA. At the same time, the counties listed here (Duplin County School District, Granville County School District, Nash-Rocky Mount School District, and Washington County School District) all qualify for “Low Wealth Supplemental Funding” from the state. According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction (2014),

North Carolina provides supplemental funding to systems whose ability to generate local revenue per student is below the state average. Some of the factors used to determine eligibility are county adjusted property tax base, square miles in the county, and per capita income. There are 69 “Low Wealth” counties (79 LEAs) in 2013-14. (p. 18)

That these districts apportion their funding towards TFA finder’s fees is significant, especially considering that, as in other school districts, finder’s fees are non-refundable even if the TFA teacher is found unfit or quits at any time prior to the completion of their two-year agreement.

However, the cost of finder’s fees pale in comparison to the state funding it would take to create the conditions to systemically alleviate the teaching shortage. It is exceptionally cheaper for the state to continue to rely on and give preferential treatment to TFA, effectively pushing the costs of teacher recruitment down to the districts, rather than it would be to address the root causes of the teacher shortage in the state. In light of current statistics demonstrating that 75% of TFA corps members in the state leave before three years, whereas only around 20% of in-state prepared teachers leave after three years (Henry, Bastian, Smith, 2012) – it would also be more expensive to pay higher teaching salaries for teachers with more years of experience (see also North Carolina

Department of Instruction's (2014, p. 12) description of difficulties comparing average daily membership (ADM) costs).

Durham Public Schools (DPS) is the only district in TFA's ENC region that is not rural. It is located in the rapidly growing city of Durham, North Carolina. In 2014, DPS's School Board decided to end their contract with TFA effective in the 2015-2016 school year. Chairwoman of the Board, Heidi Carter, explained that, "We want to build a strong teacher workforce that's made up of career educators. Our job is to look long term and make decisions that will benefit the most students over time" (Clay, 2014). Another board member claimed that putting inexperienced teachers for two years in "high-needs schools" disrupts school culture (Childress, 2014). This board decision parallels findings from a survey of teachers and administrators in North Carolina that indicated that districts may resolve to partner with TFA only when they lack a pipeline of qualified teachers, but would prefer other solutions (Smith & Imig, 2013).

### **The Greater New Orleans-Louisiana Delta Region**

TFA has operated in New Orleans and the surrounding parishes since 1990, yet their influence has increased significantly in the past decade since Hurricane Katrina and the resulting flood in 2005. According to their own records, there are currently 300 corps members and 1,000 alumni living in the region. Together, these 1,300 TFA affiliates "comprise a full 20% of the New Orleans teaching force, and over 50 alumni serve as leaders at the school or school systems level" (Teach For America, n.d.-e).

In the months after the storm, with much of the voting population displaced, a series of rapid-fire legislative changes redefined what qualified as a failing school. This allowed the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) to take over a majority of the schools previously controlled by the Orleans Parish School Board (OSPB) (Buras, 2015; Vaughn, Mogg, Zimmerman & O'Neill, 2011). This created an opportunity to restructure the school system with leaders who believed that charter school expansion and market-based policy would facilitate progress, bring in money, and improve the state of education in Louisiana (Buras, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2011). In the words of then Superintendent Paul Vallas, "We used Katrina as an opportunity to build – not rebuild, but build a new school system" (Vaughn et al., 2011, p. 10).

The RSD takeover also coincided with the mass termination of 7,500 predominantly Black teachers and staff members who worked for OPSB (Buras, 2015). According to OPSB, financial troubles and a decline in enrollment purportedly necessitated the dismissal of these teachers (Buras, 2015). Despite the availability of veteran teachers who taught in the New Orleans area before Katrina, after the storm, the state sought to increase its contract with TFA. To that end, TFA served as one of the main organizations that the RSD used to staff their schools in the years immediately following Katrina (Buras, 2015; Kretchmar, et. al, 2014; Vaughn et. al., 2011). In fact, the RSD worked *with* TFA and New Schools for New Orleans (a non-profit organization created by TFA alumni Sarah Usdin) to mount aggressive recruiting campaigns like the one in the summer of 2007 that brought in more than 500 new teachers to teach in the RSD (Vaughn et. al, 2011).

It is probable that the state saw more benefit in contracting with TFA than working with veteran teachers from the area. RSD direct-run schools, RSD charter schools, and OPSB charter schools were not legally required to hire displaced veteran teachers terminated after the storm (Vaughn et. al, 2011). This provision was important for teacher career pathways, as new teachers were not eligible for tenure in the newly expanded RSD – thus providing the incentive to fill teaching positions with new teachers by way of TFA and other alternative certification organizations. Unlike the displaced veteran teachers, new TFA teachers were not eligible for, did not expect, and would not fight for state pensions and tenure.

Today, TFA's influence in New Orleans extends far beyond the classroom walls. The organization describes their pervasive reach as follows:

Teach For America – Greater New Orleans began with just 45 corps members in 1990, and now has a corps of over 300 serving the parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard. Additionally, there are over 1,000 alumni living in the region. Today, TFA corps members and alumni comprise a full 20 percent of the New Orleans teaching force, and over 50 alumni serve as leaders at the school or school systems level. (Teach For America, n.d.-e).

Of those alumni TFA estimates are living in the region, many have taken leadership positions in the educational sector including State Superintendent of Education John White, State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) board member *and* Executive Director of Teach For America – Greater New Orleans Louisiana Delta Kira Orange Jones, and Sara Usdin, creator of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) and member of the Orleans Parish School Board (Kretchmar et al., 2014). The presence of TFA alumni at every level of leadership in New Orleans likely adds to the power the organization already has in determining hiring practices and educational policy. For example, as a member of BESE, Orange Jones is tasked with determining and overseeing contracts between BESE and TFA while simultaneously serving as the regional Executive Director of the organization. Despite strong arguments that this presented a conflict of interest, the Louisiana Board of Ethics ruled that it was acceptable for Orange Jones to be in a position to approve contracts for an organization in which she holds a leadership position (Esker, 2012; Schneider, 2013; Williams, 2012).

While TFA stresses that they do not have special contracts with school districts that favor corps members over non-TFA affiliated job applicants (Teach For America, n.d.-j), an analysis of the contracts between TFA and the RSD from 2009 to 2014 shows that the organization entered into agreements with the RSD that explicitly reserved teaching jobs for corps members and provided an advantage for corps members and alumni seeking positions within the RSD. The original contract between TFA and the RSD reserved spaces for up to forty corps members for the 2009-2010 school year and specified a non-refundable 'finders fee' of \$5,000 per corps member, per year; for a total fee of \$400,000. Also included in this contract, like those from the regions described above, is a guarantee of two years of employment. The contract also states that TFA was to arrange "at least four opportunities for principals to interview prospective teachers during the hiring season" (Louisiana Department of Education, 2009, p. 1) and directs TFA to work with the principals of the RSD to present candidates for hiring, thus building relationships between principals and TFA corps members and providing additional privilege to TFA candidates.

This original contract shifted through an amendment process signed by Patrick Dobard (former Superintendent of the RSD), Michael Tipton (former Executive Director of Teach For America South Louisiana region), and John White (State Superintendent of Public Education) in June 2013. In the new contract, only 25 corps member positions were reserved for RSD direct run schools, yet if more corps members were hired in direct run schools, they would be placed with no additional cost to the RSD.

Unlike the contracts in other districts, this amendment included a specific section dedicated to "Local Alumni Retention," which directs TFA to "work to retain as many current TFA corps members and alumni as possible, directing these corps members and alumni towards opportunities within RSD schools" (Louisiana Department of Education, 2013, p. 3). In the contract, TFA specifically discusses recruiting TFA alumni for positions in RSD direct run schools as well as RSD affiliated charter schools; thus providing a contractual foundation for job networks between TFA

and charter schools across New Orleans. The MOU lists eleven “deliverables” that focus on tracking corps members into internship opportunities and educational leadership positions within the RSD – positions with the potential to impact hiring practices in schools. Provisions of that section of the contract include directives to conduct one-on-one meetings with second year corps members for the purpose of retaining them as third year teachers or “educational leaders” in the RSD and encourage them “to deepen ties within RSD schools and make connections for long term leadership” (pp. 3-4). This amendment also asked TFA to “actively recruit” alumni from outside of the region for leadership positions. By the same token, TFA agreed to partner with RSD authorized charter schools for recruitment purposes. Finally, this amendment directed the state to pay TFA a maximum fee of \$1,202,500 – a large difference from the original maximum fee of \$400,000 or \$5,000 per corps member.

The RSD does not directly run schools in New Orleans anymore. As of May 2014, the last five RSD direct run schools were shut down. More than 700 students had to apply to the OneApp system in order to transfer to other schools (Sims & Vaughan, 2014). Instead, RSD contracts with - and is the governing body for – twenty-four charter school operators, which account for 70% of all schools in New Orleans. The remaining schools are run by BESE, the Louisiana Legislature, or OPSB (Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.). However, the need for a formal contract between TFA and the district may not be present as the deregulation of the school system in New Orleans allows for school administrators to pursue their own contracts to fill their employment needs. Given that many TFA alumni have advanced to positions of leadership in charter management organizations (CMO) and other schools, the privileging of TFA corps members and alumni no longer necessarily requires formal contracts. For example, in a series of interviews with KIPP leadership in 2012, members of the leadership reported that over 60% of instructional staff are current or former TFA corps members, a regional administrator with significant power over hiring at KIPP-New Orleans explained this disproportionate representation as follows:

I'm trying to think of a good analogy here. So if you go shopping and you are looking for a little black dress, if you have in your mind what that looks like, it is easier to find... The ideal candidate that our school leaders look for, it is easier to see that shape in someone who has been through Teach for America... They speak the language very easily, but I also think that *mindsets* are similar, they definitely worked in a low-income school, they talk about success based on how their kids do, and they have a history of reflection. I don't think it is a free pass, but it is easier to see what a principal is looking for when it comes in that package. (Sondel, 2013, p. 126)

In additional interviews by Sondel (2013) with two school leaders and a CEO of another ‘no excuses’ CMO, it was expressed that TFA corps members are privileged in hiring given their “mindset” and willingness to do “whatever it takes,” (work long hours) to make educational gains for students.

The market-based reforms in New Orleans are undergirded with the assumption that school leaders have the autonomy to hire and fire personnel, free from district oversight and union contracts, will best serve students. However, the original contracts with the RSD included spaces reserved for TFA corps members while the amendments created opportunities for networking and plans to advance TFA alumni into leadership positions. It is overwhelmingly clear that the networks created by these original RSD contracts endure. Ultimately, this situation warrants additional empirical research to address the ways in which autonomous TFA alumni privilege TFA affiliates in the hiring process.

## Analysis

Answers to our question of “how has TFA impacted hiring practices at local levels?” reveal how TFA is given preferential treatment in hiring decisions across all regions examined. It also reveals the financial impact of hiring TFA corps members on school district budgets – often providing districts with the long-term financial incentive to privilege TFA in hiring decisions as the organization represents a significant cost reduction over time. Furthermore, it demonstrates the manner in which TFA’s rhetoric becomes self-fulfilling – as TFA purports to hire TFA corps members, and in five-weeks’ time create ‘better’ teachers, the organization is then able to use that rhetoric as a recruiting platform in addition to a selling point when seeking to garner political support while extending its fundraising campaigns, particularly with large philanthropic donors (deMarrais, 2012; deMarrais, Lewis, & Wenner, 2013). The subsequent increase in political clout and the injection of more money reinforces TFA’s ability to build and promote its brand.

Ultimately, the findings of this analysis contrast with the recruiting, fundraising, and public rhetoric of TFA. That is, while TFA explicitly states that, “corps members do not have special contracts with schools,” the exact opposite is true. Corps members’ positions are outlined in MOUs between TFA and school districts and are contractually reserved for TFA.

From its inception, TFA has employed a message of sending corps members into hard-pressed districts to attenuate teacher shortages. Specifically, Kopp suggested in her undergraduate thesis that “[TFA] would bill itself as an emergency response to a shortage of experienced, qualified teachers and would therefore not be telling the nation that its inexperienced members were preferable to, or as qualified as, experienced teachers” (Kopp, 1989, p. 50). However, TFA now suggests that the organization’s corps members are, in fact, superior to traditionally trained teachers (Teach For America, 2014, n.d.-j). In fact, recent teacher layoffs as a result of the Great Recession has increasingly forced TFA to shift its rhetoric away from ameliorating teacher shortages to one that “explicitly advertises its corps members as more effective than veteran teachers” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 201). As a result, TFA claims that the hiring of any corps members in school districts not experiencing teacher shortages is a result of principals being presented with equal opportunity to hire corps members or non-TFA teachers and ultimately choosing TFA corps members for employment. This, according to TFA, is because corps members are able to produce 2.6 additional months of learning (Clark et al., 2013; Teach For America, 2014b) and thus positions corps members as more attractive to principals in the hiring process. However, the 2.6 additional months of learning claim has been widely challenged (see for example, Jersey Jazzman, 2013a, 2013b; Rubinstein, 2013; Vasquez Heilig, 2013; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014). As such, TFA’s rhetoric suggests that corps members are either hired out of desperation to fill empty positions caused by teacher shortages or that the hiring of corps members outside of shortage areas is a result of principal choice (Shibata, 2013) and not an artifact of TFA being given preferential treatment. On their website, TFA responds to the frequently asked question of “Do corps members take jobs from veteran teachers?” as follows:

TFA is one source of candidates for open teaching positions. **Corps members do not have special contracts with schools or districts.** They apply for open jobs, and they go through the same interview and hiring process as any candidate. Our approach is to bring the best possible people into the field, but no one is obligated to hire our teachers. [emphasis added] (Teach For America, n.d.-j)

In 2012, Heather Harding – then TFA’s director of research – claimed that corps members are not “forced upon a school or principal,” and in fact, “[t]he decision to hire Teach For America corps members is made by school districts and individual principals, alone” (Cody, 2012). TFA’s claim about corps members going through the same interview and hiring process is easily challenged considering that TFA not only brokers special hiring fairs for corps members (Brewer, 2013) but also partners with districts to host “exclusive recruiting event[s]” (TFA email communication, February, 2015). At the same time, the regional MOUs discussed above stipulate that teaching positions be set-aside for corps members resulting in a special contract and special considerations for hiring not extended to non-TFA teachers.

MOU language and the resulting implications, however, are not solely the result of TFA. That is, each school district that enters into an agreement with TFA has ample opportunity to debate, alter, and amend the language that results in the amount of reserved positions. The question then, is what do districts gain by entering into these MOUs with TFA? There are a few possible rationales: (1) districts realize the long-term savings potential that comes from converting open teaching positions to positions held exclusively for TFA (or otherwise short-term, not fully credentialed teachers); (2) districts are willing to pay additional up-front costs not only for the long-term savings but in the quest for increased test scores that can result from pedagogical practices of teaching-to-the-test that characterize TFA pedagogy; (3) school board leaders have bought into the rhetoric of the ‘bad’ teacher and TFA represents a political opportunity to address that perception; or (4) in the case of a genuine teacher shortage, cost impacts become less important than filling positions.

While each rationale – or a combination of them – may explain why districts continue to honor and expand MOUs with TFA, we suggest that it is the long-term savings potential that is the most plausible. For example, while the Chicago Public Schools closed 49 schools and laid off thousands of teachers – citing budget deficits – the doubling of TFA’s MOU contract fees and subsequent amount of corps members does not align with budget deficits. However, such actions do become justifiable if the school district is aware of and in favor of the long-term savings represented by TFA. As such, the expansion of TFA at a time of budget crisis is likely an effort to further expand the long-term savings represented by reserving teaching positions for TFA corps members.

And while additional interviews with principals, school board leaders, and TFA representatives would bolster the findings presented here, we recognize this analysis as an integral first step in the process of building a robust understanding of TFA’s influence on local hiring decisions. Contextual and geographic realities inform varying decisions and manifestations of TFA’s relationship in regions; however, this analysis indicates that MOU language, stipulations, privileges, requirements, and caveats exist across districts and therefore become the foundation upon which all regions find common practice.

## **Conclusion**

The work of examining TFA and the organization’s impacts on schooling and education is a multi-faceted undertaking. Indeed, many studies have sought to understand TFA’s impact on student achievement, teacher retention, teacher dispositions, and other notable facets. However, little investigation has been done to examine the impact that TFA has had, and continues to have, on local hiring practices – this paper begins to fill in that gap. We began by laying out the varying sides of this debate from those who suggest TFA is given preferential treatment to TFA’s argument that corps members receive no special treatment as they do not have special contracts. As explicated above, contrary to TFA claims that corps members do not have special contracts for hire and that corps members compete fairly with non-TFA teachers for open positions, the legally binding MOU

contracts between TFA and school districts tell a far different story. That is, despite TFA rhetoric, an examination of MOUs and district-level practices suggests that TFA has dramatically impacted hiring practices as teaching positions have been, and continue to be, reserved solely for corps members as a result of special contracts.

As we have shown, while teaching shortages continue to exist in some regional areas like those in Eastern North Carolina, TFA seems to both capitalize on and exacerbate rather than advocate for systemic remediation. Moreover, aside from the organization's founding claim of attenuating teacher shortages, TFA as an organization has shifted its public message of equal competition for jobs in an effort to justify its growth – though, as of early 2015, that growth is now on the decline given the increased critique and criticism of the organization's practices including, for example, questions surrounding the organization's funders as well as concerns about a lack of a teacher shortage (Rich, 2015; Strauss, 2014).

The analysis of MOUs across regions also illuminates the ways TFA has made it difficult for graduates of university-based teacher preparation programs to compete with TFA corps members for open jobs due to the significant benefits provided to corps members within TFA contracts with school districts. Contractually evidenced advantages offered to corps members over traditionally trained teachers include guaranteed hiring, tuition subsidies, and leadership opportunities.

Such a disparity between TFA's rhetorical positioning and the actual legal contracts that bind school districts to reserve teaching positions, guarantee hiring and continued employment, provide two-year teaching contracts rather than contracts on year-to-year basis, and other special considerations (including, but not limited to, rehiring due to any reduction-in-force policies) that are not extended to non-TFA teachers, presents the need for closer examination as TFA continues to expand. Because TFA serves as a proxy for prospective teachers in the hiring phase, the organization is uniquely different than other alternative certification programs where individual teachers often serve as the sole representative to prospective hiring districts. That is, while each region has guidelines for individuals seeking to enter teaching by way of an alternative program, satisfying those requirements and securing a position are the sole responsibility of the individual teacher. Moreover, those alternatively certified teachers must interview for job vacancies that are open to the general field of teachers. In the case of TFA, the MOUs stipulate that not only does TFA serve as a representative for corps members but also that the positions they are being hired for are exclusively reserved for TFA's alternatively certified teachers. This reality is evidence that MOUs between districts and TFA represent a skewed privilege for alternatively certified teachers coming from TFA. The disparities between the organizational rhetoric that elicits philanthropic donations, federal support and financing, as well as its public support should be examined as the organization's impact is quite extensive.

TFA's impact is so extensive Labaree (2010) argued that traditional teacher education programs are at a loss when it comes to competing with TFA because of the organization's marketing and prestige. Students are attracted to the opportunities that the TFA offers for members to “do well,” or secure their own career trajectory, and simultaneously “do good,” have a positive impact on society. TFA corps members are paid a full teachers' salary, provided an AmeriCorps award towards tuition, offered extensive opportunities for leadership advancement, and often receive subsidies for university tuition from the DOE. As future teachers weigh their options, TFA financial benefits are substantial when compared to a University-based teacher preparation program, which does not guarantee a job placement, requires tuition, and typically includes a minimum of two years of training before a candidate could apply for teaching jobs.

Finally, the regional examples illuminate the unique implications of TFA hiring practices in local contexts. As shown in the example of Atlanta, while TFA costs more in the short run, those exuberant costs are seen, by many, as a justifiable expense given TFA's purported ability to raise test



scores (e.g., provide an additional 2.6 months of learning). And while this is seen as a justifiable expense, the filling of a teaching position with a TFA corps member eventually represents a cheaper option than the hiring of non-TFA teachers. In Chicago, TFA's growth and influence on local hiring practices amid the far reaching impacts of the Great Recession are clearly seen as the organization grew exponentially while thousands of non-TFA teachers found themselves jobless. The example of New York illustrates the critical role TFA is playing in staffing 'no excuses' charter schools. In Eastern North Carolina, the organization is capitalizing on and potentially exacerbating a teacher shortage. In New Orleans, TFA's impact on hiring practices is evidenced not only in the positions reserved for corps members, but it is also seen in the pervasive extent that TFA alumni have entered into policy and hiring decision that likely further influence the hiring of TFA corps members. Together, these regional examples demonstrate some of the powerful ways TFA is shifting the hiring landscape depending on the local context.

TFA's influence on the hiring landscape has serious implications for education policy in the United States. In addition to demonstrating the inconsistency between the organization's rhetoric and their practices, the analysis of MOUs between TFA and districts in this paper also serve as an illustration of current shifts in educational policy to support organizations and policies that provide 'better' (i.e. high test scores) – and 'cheaper' in the long run – results within the education market. The systematic placement of TFA alumni inclined to support market-based policies into state and policy-making positions will likely not only further entrench TFA into the field, but also promulgate more education reform that ultimately delivers 'cheaper' results. Here, we have provided a preliminary analysis of TFA's impact on hiring practices in local contexts. TFA's impact is vast, multifaceted, and not without consequences. Therefore we urge researchers to continue the conversation and ask further questions about these consequences and the overall impact of these hiring practices on students, schools, communities, and teachers.

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## **Appendix**

We have created a public Google Drive folder where we have uploaded all Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) between Teach For America and the various school districts examined as part of this work. All MOUs, TFA's "Guidelines for Conducting Research in Partnership with Teach For America," and a preserved copy of TFA's "On the Record" website including their claim that "corps members do not have special contracts with schools or districts" can be viewed or downloaded with the following link:

<https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B-WKrLcgo1LMbzNrdWNsOHBkMFU&usp=sharing>



## About the Authors

### **T. Jameson Brewer**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
[tbrewer2@illinois.edu](mailto:tbrewer2@illinois.edu)

T. Jameson Brewer is a Ph.D. candidate of educational policy studies and O'Leary Fellow at the University of Illinois. His research focuses on the impact of marketization and privatization on public education and educator preparation by way of school vouchers, charter schools, and Teach For America. His work has been published in the *Peabody Journal of Education*, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *Educational Studies*, *Critical Education*, and the National Education Policy Center. He is co-editor of the book *Teach For America Counter-Narratives: Alumni Speak Up and Speak Out* (edited with Kathleen deMarrais; Peter Lang, 2015). Jameson was a 2010 Metro-Atlanta Teach For America Corps Member.

### **Kerry Kretchmar**

Carroll University  
[kkretchm@carrollu.edu](mailto:kkretchm@carrollu.edu)

Kerry Kretchmar is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Carroll University. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include examining the way market-based reforms are impacting teachers, teaching, and teacher education. Her work has been featured in *The Urban Review*, *Journal of Educational Policy*, and *Education and Urban Society*. Kerry was a 2004 New York City Teach For America Corps Member.

### **Beth Sondel**

North Carolina State University  
[blsondel@ncsu.edu](mailto:blsondel@ncsu.edu)

Beth Sondel is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Learning Science at North Carolina State University. Her research partners critical theory and qualitative methods to investigate the impacts of market-based reform on public education. More specifically, she is interested in how teachers come to understand, attempt to implement, and advocate for equity and justice within their given socio-political context. Her research has been published in *Educational Policy*, *The Educational Forum*, *Journal of Education Policy*, *Theory of Research in Social Education*, *Jacobin*, and multiple edited volumes. Prior to entering academia, Beth was a middle school Language Arts and Social Studies teacher. Beth was a 2002 Southern Louisiana Teach For America Corps Member.

### **Sarah Ishmael**

University of Wisconsin-Madison  
[sishmael@wisc.edu](mailto:sishmael@wisc.edu)

Sarah is a first-year doctoral student at University of Wisconsin-Madison in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. Her research focuses on school choice policies and how they operate differently across racially and economically varied communities. Sarah holds a M.Ed. in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at Austin and a B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Western Washington University and she taught upper elementary and middle school special education in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Sarah was a 2010 South Louisiana Teach For America Corps Member.

**Meghan Manfra**

North Carolina State University

[mmmanfra@ncsu.edu](mailto:mmmanfra@ncsu.edu)

Meghan Manfra is an associate professor of social studies education at North Carolina State University. She is a former high school history teacher and holds an MA in history from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a Ph.D. in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on the integration of technology in social studies teacher education and action research for teacher professional development. She is currently the Chair of the Executive Board of the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). She also serves as the co-editor of the technology section of *Social Education* and is the editor of the social studies section of the *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education (CITE) journal*. She has published numerous journal articles and book chapters focused on social studies education and is the editor of the forthcoming *Handbook of Social Studies Research* (Wiley Press, 2016). Meghan is an alumna of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program (Elon College, 1994-1998).

### About the Guest Editors

**Tina Trujillo**

University of California, Berkeley

[trujillo@berkeley.edu](mailto:trujillo@berkeley.edu)

Tina Trujillo is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education. She earned her Ph.D. in Education from UCLA and her M.A. in Education from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She uses tools from political science and critical policy studies to study the political dimensions of urban educational reform, the instructional and democratic consequences of high-stakes accountability policies for students of color and English Learners, and trends in urban educational leadership. Her work is published in a range of journals, including *American Educational Research Journal*, *Teachers College Record*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

**Janelle Scott**

University of California, Berkeley

[jtscott@berkeley.edu](mailto:jtscott@berkeley.edu)

Janelle Scott is a Chancellor's Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Graduate School of Education, Goldman School of Public Policy, and African American Studies Department. She earned a Ph.D. in Education Policy from the University of California at Los Angeles' Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley. Before earning her doctorate, she worked as an elementary school teacher in Oakland, California. Scott's research investigates the politics of elite and community based advocacy, the politics of research utilization, and how market-based educational reforms such as school choice and privatization affect democratic accountability and equity within schools and districts. She is currently working on a William T. Grant funded study of the politics of research utilization and intermediary organizations in Los Angeles and New York City with Christopher Lubienski and Elizabeth DeBray.

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