

NYS Education Reform Commission
Testimony: Jemina Bernard, Senior Vice President, Regional Operations
Teach For America – New York
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Thank you to CUNY for hosting us today and thanks to the Commission for inviting us to be a part of this hearing. My name is Jemina Bernard, and I am honored to be here on behalf of Teach For America. I am currently a Senior Vice President of Regional Operations which means that for the last two years, I've managed the executive directors of 6 of Teach For America's 46 regions, including NY, NJ, Detroit, DC, Delaware and Philadelphia. The NY region is particularly near and dear to me, however, as I'm a South Bronx native, Harlem resident and a product of New York City's public and private schools. Additionally, prior to taking on this national role, I was the Executive Director of Teach For America's New York Region for three years and prior to that I served at the New York City Department of Education, where I ran the central parent office for two years and also worked in the Office of New Schools.

Many of us in this room are well aware of the realities of the achievement gap faced by New York's students and so I'm not going to rattle off the statistics. Instead, I want to call out that the reason we work relentlessly at Teach For America to ensure that one day, all children in our city and across the nation are able to attain an excellent education is because we don't believe that poverty is destiny and we think that it is simply morally reprehensible and economically unviable that a child's zip code, skin color and family income are far too often the predictor for whether they have a shot at life choices and options that set them up to live the American dream.

Therefore, in an effort to help change the outcomes that all too often are reality for black, brown and poor kids across the city and country, Teach For America has been working for over 22 years to recruit, train and support mostly recent college graduates who are both committed to closing the achievement gap for the students they teach during their initial corps member experience and committed to fighting the causes of the achievement gap over their lifetime, as alumni of our program.

In an effort to inform the perspective and direction of the Commission's ideas, today, I'm going to talk about three specific aspects of our program:

1. How we prepare our teachers to be effective in helping their students reach high levels of achievement from their first day in the classroom;
2. How we support them throughout their two year commitment to continuously improve their effectiveness in this work; and
3. The powerful roles our alumni play in the movement to eliminate educational inequality.

The recruitment & selection of our corps is deeply related to our confidence in their ability to be effective teachers. We use a data-driven selection model to identify top candidates: we examine what our most successful teachers hold in common, and then using a standardized rubric, measure the strength of candidates in these competencies – such as previous achievement, perseverance, and experience working in diverse settings. Each summer, we

compare the data from our corps members' results with their students to the data from selection and use this comparison to continuously improve our selection model. In fact, a recently completed study examined our selection model from 2003-2009 and found that overall, Teach For America's model successfully identifies teachers who will have a positive impact on student achievement, and also helps to predict who will be most successful from the beginning of their time in the classroom in year one.

We also make a concerted effort to ensure that the candidate pool we're selecting from is as diverse as possible – our diversity core value centers around the idea that the movement to expand educational opportunity will succeed only if it is diverse in every respect. In particular, we value the perspective and credibility that individuals who share the racial and economic backgrounds of the students with whom we work can bring to our organization, classrooms, and the long-term effort for change. Accordingly, our recruitment team works with special emphasis on recruiting individuals who share the racial and/or socioeconomic backgrounds of our students. We also work to reduce financial barriers to matriculation through transitional financial assistance by providing grants and loans to all incoming corps members who demonstrate need.

Once they accept our offer and join the corps, the work of ensuring they are prepared to face the challenge of leading high-needs students to academic success begins. Our teachers participate in an intensive, five week summer training institute where corps members gain classroom experience teaching at summer school sites across New York City and receive feedback from veteran teachers. Because there is so much that needs to be done to prepare corps members, days are scheduled for 14 hours, which means they actually pack in about 9-10 weeks of learning in this 5 week period.

Institute is where they first engage with our “Teaching As Leadership” model – designed by studying those teachers who realize dramatic, life-altering academic achievement for their students. The Teaching As Leadership model is an approach to teacher development rooted in increasing student achievement outcomes, and has three main parts: First, the desired outcomes we are seeking for students – are they emerging from this classroom on a path of truly expanded opportunities in life? Second, the observable actions we see students taking to reach these outcomes – are they invested and excited about learning and their own success? Are they engaging with rigorous content? Third, the actions and mindsets that need to be true for our teachers to lead to these actions and outcomes for students.

We are submitting a copy of this model for the record, so to be mindful of time, I won't review each of the actions we've seen our most successful teachers take, but I want to emphasize that we have found that the mindsets held by our teachers are just as important to reaching high levels of student achievement as their actions, and are a key part of what differentiates our good teachers from our transformational ones: they must hold *truly* high expectations for every student in their classroom. They must view themselves as the leader responsible for their students' success, and they must feel a true connection with their students, really caring for them and their families – to help their students be empowered to seek a life path that is wholly different from what statistics suggest should be true. We spend significant time during institute working to instill these mindsets in our corps members.

Once the school year has begun, our corps members receive direct support from a coach on staff known as a Manager of Teacher Leadership Development. These coaches typically support an average of 34 corps members in a given school year, and work with corps members to set classroom goals, guide decision-making, assess student progress, and fuel continuous improvement. They do periodic lesson observations and provide feedback to help our teachers improve their craft. Corps members also have access to classroom resources, advice and community support, video models, and self-directed online learning on our private, secure website for corps members and alumni, TFANet.

We are proud of the impact our corps members have had on the students they serve – according to our internal metrics, in the 2010-11 school year, nearly 60 percent of our first-year teachers in New York led their students to achieve a year or more of growth, and nearly 70 percent of our second-year corps members achieved this level of growth. As proud as we are of the accomplishments of our corps members over the past 20 years – with several rigorous, external studies demonstrating the positive impact of our corps members, as well as the growing number of our teachers who have had transformational impact on students, garnering national, state, and local teacher awards – we know that to truly ensure that all children have the opportunity to attain an excellent education, we need our teachers to get better, and we are working to continuously improve in this field.

We also recognize that Teach For America corps members are not going to fix this problem themselves in two years. We believe that ending educational inequality for good is going to require systemic changes over the long-term, and that leadership will be at the core of the solution – people who pursue change as teachers, principals, policy leaders, and advocates, which is why we believe that the efforts of our alumni are also critical to our mission. We are proud to share that over two-thirds of our alumni continue to work in the education field today. In New York City we have a base of over 3,200 alumni, including over 900 teachers, 93 principals, and over 35 officials impacting policy decisions at the New York City Department of Education. The work of our alumni is informed by their experience in the classroom– namely, they have seen that students in low-income communities absolutely can achieve at the same levels as any other student when given the right support and resources – and as an organization, we are focused on accelerating their leadership as a force for change.

We look forward to working with the Commission and exploring ways that we can partner in the effort to expand educational opportunity for all New York students. Thank you for your time. To that end, we are open to and interested in serving high-need schools across the state. Currently our program is centered in New York City; our corps members worked in nearly 200 schools across the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens this past school year; we also have a small cohort of teachers in the Greenburgh-Graham school district, which serves 100 percent at-risk, low-income youth. 95 percent of the students our teachers serve are African-American or Hispanic; approximately 80 percent qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

We see the evidence of the achievement gap and the need for high-quality teachers in low-income communities across the state, and are open to the idea of expanding our program to other regions in New York. However, our ability to do this successfully would depend on both local financial support and local partnerships with school districts, unions, and universities. We view the district and charter schools we work with in New York as true

partners in this work, and our success is deeply connected to the partnerships we've established over two decades. In order to balance the need across the state with the demand for our teachers we have here in New York City, we would need to establish these partnerships and build an infusion of both private and public local champions to support this potential growth. This is a conversation we look forward to continuing in the future.