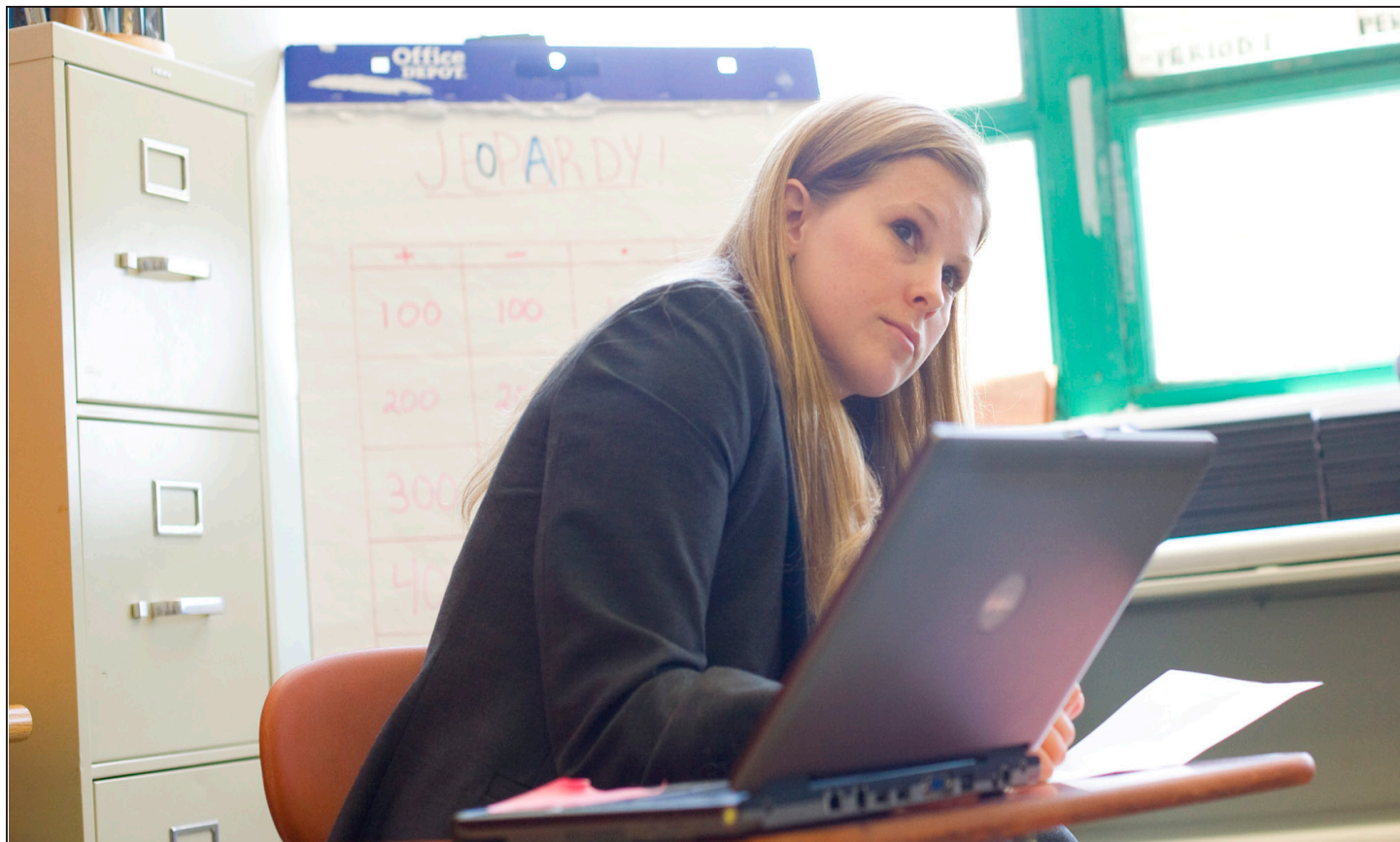


Growth Model



By Stephen Sawchuk

Photos by Christopher Powers

Lisa Stone, a program director, observes a TFA corps member's class. The directors are responsible for boosting teacher effectiveness.

Long criticized for the short duration of its training, Teach For America has invested heavily in the professional development of its teacher corps.

Washington

Lisa Stone is hard to interview as she walks down the halls of Ballou Senior High School. And that's for the simple reason that she's enormously popular.

"Ms. Guido! Ms. Guido!" call students, referring to Ms. Stone by her maiden name. She smiles apologetically at the reporter and photographer trailing her as she stops to listen to updates on the students' classes, new teachers, summer adventures.

A former history teacher at this high school, located in a poor, mostly black neighborhood across the Anacostia River from the Capitol, Ms. Stone fi-

nally breaks free. She heads toward the classroom where English teacher Adam Janosko, a second-year Teach For America corps member, has begun reviewing with his sophomores an article on the benefits of attending college.

After ducking inside the classroom, Ms. Stone sits down, snaps open a laptop, and starts taking notes on an electronic chart. In the left-hand column, she records time stamps. In a middle column, she describes Mr. Janosko's words and actions. And in the right-hand column, she makes notes that will form the basis of feedback she'll provide to him over the next day or two.

Ms. Stone is one of 200 "program directors" for Teach For America, the selective program that takes

Teaching as Leadership Rubric

The Teaching as Leadership framework serves as a “common language” across TFA systems for promoting effective teaching. Corps members are taught the basics during their summer institute, program directors use it during their periodic observations of corps members, and the resources available on TFAnet align with the measures.

Program Directors

Each program director oversees a cadre of corps members. The directors observe each member in a series of periodic visits and offer feedback keyed to the Teaching as Leadership measures on candidates’ teaching practices. Corps members can seek additional help from program directors as needed.

Assessments

Each corps member, with help from a TFA program director, devises assessments to measure student progress. The assessments are used to benchmark corps members’ success in moving students forward and identify areas that need attention. The data also are collected by TFA headquarters and used to tweak training and professional-support processes.

TFAnet

This online portal responds to teachers’ needs for “on demand” help. Here, teachers can access:

- Videotaped examples of teaching practices that match the escalating levels of performance on the Teaching as Leadership framework;
- A resource exchange containing assessments, lesson plans, and curricula, each rated by corps members on its usefulness; and
- Blogs and networked communities.

Communities

These local communities of TFA corps members meet on a monthly basis. The communities are typically organized by region, subject, and grade level, and run by corps members in their second year.

SOURCES: *Education Week*; Teach For America



While Molly Smith instructs her 9th grade English class at Ballou Senior High School in the District of Columbia, Lisa Stone takes notes on her laptop that she’ll later share with the teacher to inform her practice.

The role of the program directors has changed dramatically over the past five years, even as the organization has boomed in size, to about 7,000 corps members.

At one time, program directors had more of a support role—“to keep corps members satisfied,” in Ms. Stone’s words. Now, they are charged with enabling the members to develop into highly effective teachers.

TFA’s shift over the past decade toward measuring and promoting its teachers’ ability to boost student performance has caused the organization to reconfigure not just program directors’ roles, but nearly all its other support components.

It has overhauled its five-week summer training, known as “Institute,” to incorporate the new focus. Program directors, who cover small regions, now have fewer corps members—typically around 30—to observe and have more time to respond to their needs. Most recently, TFA has added an on-demand system of Web supports.

Such changes have been informed by data that help the organization determine which aspects of its professional development appear to enhance teacher effectiveness and which don’t.

“Our vision of support has evolved as our understanding of teacher effectiveness, and clarity about what it is, has increased,” said Steven Farr, TFA’s vice president for knowledge development.

Changing Times

TFA corps members from just a few years ago can easily pinpoint how the training has evolved since their own time in the classroom.

Jonathon Stewart, a 2005 Oakland, Calif., corps member, recalls that the organization began to push forward on highlighting student-achievement data during his initiation and subsequent evaluations, but adds that “we weren’t talking about it in meaningful conversations then.”

Nevertheless, former corps members agree that TFA leaders have always been open to suggestions about how to improve their recruits’ training.

“TFA elicits a lot of feedback from corps members, and they take it seriously,” said Andrea Palmer, a 2006 Phoenix corps member who now teaches

graduates from top colleges and universities, trains them intensively over one summer, and places them in some of the hardest-to-staff schools in the country. Long famous—or infamous, depending on whom you talk to—for those features, the program is now attracting attention for the rapidity with which it refines its professional-development system and its commitment to helping its recruits exhibit effective teaching practices.



TFA elicits a lot of feedback from corps members, and they take it seriously.“

Andrea Palmer

Former TFA Corps Member

in a charter school in Denver. “If you have an opinion that’s well founded, and you take it to the correct person, things are going to happen, and they are going to happen quickly.”

In an interview this month, Wendy Kopp, TFA’s founder and chief executive officer, said the organization strove to become more nimble in providing support as it became clear that merely recruiting top talent would not ensure candidates’ success.

“Initially, we probably underestimated what it would take to train and support our teachers to truly succeed with their students in some of the most challenging teaching situations in the country,” Ms. Kopp said. “We have spent years trying to understand what the most successful teachers in underresourced communities do to obtain great results.”

The turning point, Mr. Farr said, occurred in the early 2000s, when the group conceived of teaching as embracing five types of leadership traits, and then worked over several years to translate those traits into a set of professional standards. Known as the Teaching as Leadership, or TAL, framework, it spells out how successful teachers grow to embody those traits in their teaching.

TAL has something in common with other popular teaching frameworks, such as the one created by teacher-evaluation consultant Charlotte Danielson. Where it differs, though, is in its penetration across TFA’s training program.

Measuring Effectiveness

Teach For America now unabashedly defines effectiveness in terms of how its teachers’ students perform. All corps members are expected to reach at least one of these goals: move student learning forward by 1½ grade levels, close achievement gaps by 20 percent, or ensure that 80 percent of students have met grade-level standards.

During the first few months of school, in what TFA calls “round zero,” corps members and program directors select the assessments that will be used to gauge that progress and determine the areas that the teachers themselves must work on to meet their goals.

For each of three successive improvement “rounds,” the program directors review the data generated from the assessments, observe the teachers, and take detailed notes about teachers’ instruction. Then, they review the instructive practices with the corps members and make plans for improvement using TAL as the basis of their discussions.

“It is a co-investigation process, a problem-solving approach,” Ms. Kopp summarized.

The feedback, corps members say, often exceeds the utility of district-mandated development and principals’ evaluations because of its ongoing nature, its basis in data, and the pathway to improvement spelled out in the TAL framework.

“It’s hard to go from TFA professional development, where every single minute of your time is effectively used, and then go to district meetings that are usually not as effective,” said Ms. Palmer, the onetime Phoenix corps member.

Mitchell London, a 2008 corps member in Arkansas, recalls sitting through mandatory district sessions in which teachers were taught how to log on to

the district’s e-mail system and warned not to send chain messages.

“To compare the TFA support and that provided in my high school would be like comparing the greatest crème brûlée you’ve ever had to a piece of French toast wrapped around a stick of butter,” he said. “Our [district’s] development was in name only. It was so erratic. There was very little in the school structure that fostered holistic teacher development.”

The data from the assessments also are used for program improvement. Analysts at TFA headquarters in New York City pore over the information to determine which teachers appear to be getting the greatest gains, and then investigate what those teachers are doing differently in their classes. The results are fed back to inform continuing refinement of the summer training and the periodic evaluations.

TFA is also beginning a study with financial backing from the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to determine which strands and components of the Teaching as Leadership guidelines are most highly correlated with student achievement, said Ted Quinn, who oversees the group’s data-analysis efforts as its vice president of strategy and research.

Online Support

The continual revision and improvement of professional training of this sort does not come cheaply. TFA now spends some \$20,000 developing each corps member, double the cost just a few years ago.

The creation of TFA’s newest support mechanism, a Web portal known as TFAnet, accounts for some of the added expense. A version of the Web site has existed since the early 2000s, but corps members from even a year or two ago described it as “Web 1.0”—not interactive, not well organized, and not particularly helpful. That has since changed.

One of the site’s most popular features is a resource exchange that helps teachers find assessments, lesson plans, tips, and strategies so they’re not constantly reinventing the wheel. It debuted in 2008 with 6,500 materials; now, there are more than 20,000.

A feature officials are still improving is an online version of the TAL framework. It allows users to locate materials related to each strand and each proficiency level, and corps members can download videotaped examples, both weak and exemplary, depicting teacher instruction on a particular skill.

Aside from supplementing program directors’ personalized feedback, those videos serve as handy references for teachers in isolated locales, where few colleagues may exhibit best practices in person.

Parallel System?

The group’s commitment to supporting and constantly improving the quality of its training has attracted kudos from outside observers.

The director of Education Sector, a Washington think tank, said that this focus sets TFA apart from other teacher-training and -development efforts that have not yet institutionalized the use of data to continually adjust practice.

“We’re still having this enormous fight about whether we should link this data. There isn’t a big appetite for it,” said Andrew J. Rotherham. “TFA is

much further ahead of where most folks are on this.”

Others, though, harbor reservations about the group’s system from a conceptual standpoint. One thing that worries Stephanie Hirsh, the executive director of the Dallas-based National Staff Development Council, is that in some cases, TFA’s system operates parallel to, rather than integrated within, a school’s culture.

“If you build the strongest possible induction model for people that come with this background, and equip them with the technology of teaching, will that help individuals improve? Yes, and I think TFA shows evidence of that,” said Ms. Hirsh, whose group promotes school-based learning teams for professional development. “But is the process one that could be replicated to all teachers in a school and produce schoolwide change? I don’t think so, because it has [teachers] working on isolated instances of practice.”

Ms. Kopp agrees that creating communities of practice for school improvement is vital to reform, but for TFA, views the issue of as one of limited resources. “Ultimately, our schools and districts should be taking that on,” she said. “It’s simply a question of what we have the bandwidth to do.”

Mr. Farr, the TFA vice president, added that the organization has stressed the importance of humility and encouraged corps members to form relationships with veteran teachers in their schools.

“We think of this as layers of support, not carved-out niches,” he said.

Corps members add that the presence of a critical mass of TFA teachers in a school can catalyze the establishment of learning communities.

Ms. Stone, who taught history during her tenure here at Ballou, was so horrified after a year in which only 6 percent of students passed the district reading exam that she and other corps members set up a “10th grade academy” to home in on problem areas. Scores jumped about 20 percentage points the following year.

Today, Ms. Stone’s classroom visits as a TFA program director are fairly informal, as the teachers she’s here to observe haven’t yet finished “round zero.” But she’s already pleased with what she sees.

She notes that Mr. Janosko has set strong behavior expectations for his English students early in the year, and he’s holding them to it. “Expect a phone call home,” the no-nonsense instructor says to a student who’s acting up in the back of the classroom.

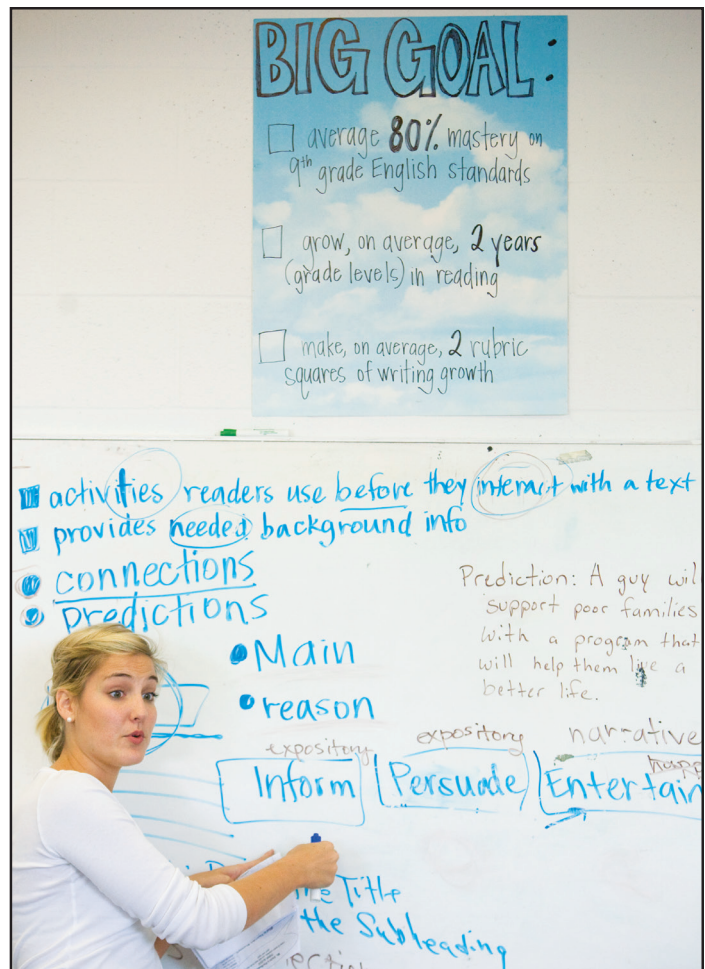
Around the corner and up two flights of stairs, Molly Smith is instructing students to think about an author’s purpose in writing. When Ms. Stone finishes her observation, she writes a note complimenting the young teacher for asking her students lots of open-ended questions—and reminding her not to give away the answers too quickly. She leaves the note on Ms. Smith’s desk, along with two oatmeal cookies.

As Ms. Stone departs Ballou to visit her other charges, a young man walking past the school calls out the familiar refrain: “Ms. Guido!”

It’s clear from Ms. Stone’s response that despite her transition to a mentor, she will always, at heart, be a teacher.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she replies. Then she frowns. “Shouldn’t you be in class?” ■

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Molly Smith reviews a lesson on the purposes of writing. The placard reflects goals she’s set for the school year. All TFA teachers must set specific student-achievement goals.

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