

TEACH FOR AMERICA

CORPS MEMBER

TEACHFORAMERICA

“I had never before had the opportunity to be surrounded [by] and work with people that were all determined to be successful and wanted to achieve that success for the betterment of others and the society as a whole. It really was a life-changing experience for me.”

The Big Picture

Teach For America's goal is straightforward: to “eliminate educational inequality.” The organization strives toward this goal “by building a highly selective national corps of outstanding recent college graduates—of all academic majors and career interests—who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools in our nation's lowest-income communities.” Corps members say that “the opportunity to have a significant and direct impact on such an important issue right away” is what makes Teach For America so unique and appealing. One first jobber says, “After my two years as a Teach For America corps member, I had so many more doors open to me both inside and outside the organization. So many of our nation's top graduate programs and employers actively seek out Teach For America alumni because of the level of challenge and ability required to be a successful teacher in the challenging situations in which we teach.”

LOCATION(S) WHERE ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYEES WORK

Teach For America sends corps members to 25 locations, ranging from New York City to rural South Dakota to New Orleans.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS EACH YEAR

In 2006, Teach For America received around 19,000 applications. Organization officials note, “Over the last few years, applications for Teach For America have increased significantly.” They expect this growth to continue as the corps size will strategically expand through the year 2010.

AVERAGE NUMBER HIRED PER YEAR OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS

Numbers vary annually. This said, Teacher For America officials “anticipate placing a corps of 3,100 in the fall of 2007.”

ENTRY-LEVEL POSITION(S) AVAILABLE

Recent college grads join Teach For America as corps members (AKA teachers). Each day, corps members serve as teachers in low-income pockets of the nation. Corps members rank Teach For America locations in terms of “highly preferred,” “preferred,” and “less preferred.” In 2005, Teach For America was “able to place 96 percent of accepted applicants in one of their highly preferred sites and 99 percent in one of their highly preferred or preferred sites.”

AVERAGE HOURS WORKED PER WEEK

Teach For America officials say, “In addition to the more than 40 hours a week that corps members spend in the classroom, they spend extra hours on the weekend and in the evenings preparing lessons, tutoring students, and/or attending graduate school courses.”

AVERAGE STARTING SALARY

Annual salaries range from \$25,000 to \$44,000. Corps members in urban settings typically earn higher salaries.

BENEFITS OFFERED

All corps members receive medical benefits commensurate with other teachers in their school district. Additional benefits include AmeriCorps education awards and loan deferment/forbearance.

CONTACT INFORMATION

To learn more or to apply to the corps, visit www.teachforamerica.org or e-mail admissions@teachforamerica.org.

Getting Hired

If you want to join Teach For America, you have to first buy into its mission. After all, working in one of America's most hard-luck schools is no walk in the park. Successful applicants are typically recent college graduates “who have a proven leadership record (whether in school, work, or extracurricular activities) and who demonstrate leadership qualities such as the ability to influence and motivate others and the ability to persevere through difficult challenges.” Becoming a corps member begins by submitting an online application; if Teach For America officials like what they see, they invite the candidate to participate in a phone interview with a member of the Teach For America selection team. The most promising candidates are then invited to a full-day, in-person interview which includes teaching a sample lesson, completing a problem solving activity, participating in a group discussion, and interviewing one-on-one with a Teach For America staff member.” The entire day lasts about six hours.” Teach For America officials add, “Although our program is selective, applicants are not competing against other applicants for a fixed number of positions. . . . Given the enormity of the problem we're addressing, we feel a moral imperative to grow.”

Money and Perks

At Teach For America, “corps members teaching in urban sites typically have higher [annual] salaries, starting at \$28,000 and reaching a high of \$44,000. Corps members in rural sites, who make between \$25,000 and \$33,000 [a year], tend to have more discretionary income because the cost of living is disproportionately lower in these sites.” Corps members, who tend to be driven more by social conviction than salary heft, offer no complaints about the paychecks. The job comes with perks, too. A former corps member notes, “It was nice to receive \$9,400 [in AmeriCorps education award funds] to pay back loans—in addition to my regular salary.” Loan deferment, too, is nice. But by the far the biggest “perk” is the work itself. One corps member tells us, “I had sixty kids who treated me like I was famous every day.” Another adds, “Teaching children how to read—there is no better feeling.”

The Ropes

Teach For America operates “rigorous five-week summer preparation institutes in Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia,” which offer “practice, observation, coaching, and study” in the art of teaching. Thinking back on her orientation in Los Angeles, a corps veteran says, “I had a curriculum specialist train me on all of the basics of teaching: classroom management and culture, literacy, etc. for part of the day. For the other part of the day I worked with a corps member advisor who coached me individually to improve my lesson plans and my actual performance in the classroom. In the evenings there were a variety of other staff members who provided workshops and small-group learning opportunities to develop specific skills that I was working to improve.” While orientation gets two thumbs up from most of the participants, corps members say that you can’t “fully prepare yourself until you actually get into the classroom.” One veteran of the program suggests that the best way to prepare for the Teach For America experience is to “visit a corps member’s classroom before” joining the organization.

Day in the Life

The life of a corps member is the life of a school teacher, which often means early to work and late to arrive back home. Here’s how one former corps member describes his daily routine: “A typical day involved arriving at school at 6:45 A.M., tutoring in the morning, teaching from 7:45 A.M. to 2:15 P.M., tutoring after school, coaching until 4:30 P.M., grading papers or attending classes/workshops in the late afternoon, [and] calling parents or talking with students to help with homework in the evenings.” Another corps member says, “My job was to take fourth-grade students that were at a first- or second-grade level and ensure that they progressed at least a year and a half to two years in the one year I had with them. To do this, I had to work long, exhausting hours.” Initially, it’s not unusual for corps members to feel a little overwhelmed. But an old hand assures, “By October I felt that I knew what I was doing and by December everything was smooth sailing.”

Peers

Corps members tell us they are “inspired and humbled by the incredible people [they have] the opportunity to work alongside.” One corps member even gushes, “I had never before had the opportunity to be surrounded [by] and work with people that were all determined to be successful and wanted to achieve that success for the betterment of others and the society as a whole. It really was a life-changing experience for me.” Just because the days are so busy doesn’t mean corps members can’t find time to hang out together. “I interacted with other corps members constantly,” insists a veteran. “Nearly all of my friends there were corps members, and we socialized together all the time.”

Moving on

Sixty percent of Teach For America alumni “have remained in the field of education as teachers, principals, education-policy advisors, and leaders and staff of education reform organizations.” Graduate school, professional school, and careers in business, law, medicine, and journalism are other avenues alumni pursue. Whatever field they ultimately pursue, alums remain dedicated to tackling critical issues surrounding school systems within low-income communities.

Attrition

Corps members that do not complete their two-year commitment typically discover that they’re not cut out for the challenging circumstances and ambitious goals associated with the job. That said, the overwhelming majority (between 85 and 90 percent) of corps members return for the second year. Corps alums note that the “deplorable state of education” for “children growing up in low-income communities” can make “the everyday challenges and realities of a teacher often overwhelming and frustrating.” But Teach For America administrators add, “Some of our corps members tell us that, although there are certainly days that are extremely difficult, the commitment that they make to their students to help them receive the education they deserve compels them to persist.”