GETTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE CLASSROOM

TEACH FOR AMERICA'S APPROACH TO SELECTING CORPS MEMBERS

In 2013, more than **57,000** individuals applied to Teach For America — the largest, most diverse and highly-qualified applicant pool in our history. Of these individuals, only **14 percent** were admitted. Given each applicant's passion for improving education, outstanding accomplishments, and vast and varied skills, how did we choose? Each decision was made with a focus on what's best for kids — grounded in more than a decade of research into what is most predictive of a teacher's success with students.

OUR STUDENT–CENTERED APPROACH

We believe that teachers are in a position to transform their students' lives. Given the weight of that responsibility — heightened in low-income communities where the average student is two to three grade levels behind his or her peers — we consider the selection of teachers to our corps to be a high-stakes endeavor with real consequences for kids.

On one hand, if our decisions are made poorly, corps members may be unable to climb the steep learning curve to success quickly, leading to the further loss of opportunity for their students. At the same time, poorly-made decisions can cost us candidates who would have been exceptional in the classroom.

On the other hand, when decisions are made well, our corps members can grow to be transformational teachers — putting classrooms full of students on a new educational and life trajectory.

THE RESEARCH

Since our founding in 1990, leaders at Teach For America have been thinking deeply about the attributes of excellent teachers. After 10 years on the job, we had enough experience and data to test our theories. In 2000, we launched an effort to find out what makes our best teachers unique and how we can recognize that potential in them as applicants. This research, conducted year round by a special team of researchers and statisticians, studies the factors that differentiate our corps members who are highly effective from those who are not, gauging effectiveness as the degree to which corps members significantly improve their students' academic achievement and transform their students' life trajectories.

The answers have resulted in a model that uses both human judgment and statistical measures to create a selection process that researchers in New York recently noted could be an exemplar *"regarding the selection of candidates who are effective teachers in low-performing classrooms."* [1]

This effort endures today as we continue to improve our methods of tracking teacher effectiveness and test competencies for their ability to predict teacher success. Talent selection is challenging and imperfect. Our commitment is to use data to get better every year, increasing the number of candidates who will have a lasting, positive effect on their students — and decreasing the number who struggle.

OUR FINDINGS

There is no one profile of an ideal applicant; however, based on years of robust research, we look for the following characteristics in applicants to our program:

[1] "Recruiting Effective Math Teachers, How Do Math Immersion Teachers Compare? Evidence from New York City." Don Boyd, Pam Grossman, Karen Hammerness, Hamp Lankford, Susanna Loeb, Matt Ronfeldt, and Jim Wyckoff. September 2009

- **Demonstrated leadership and measurable success in leadership roles:** Corps members are required to set ambitious goals for their students and themselves. They must lead their classrooms boldly and work relentlessly on a daily basis to achieve these goals.

- **Perseverance in the face of challenges, ability to adapt, and desire to constantly improve:** Corps members are taking on one of the greatest challenges of their lives. Students are counting on them. They must be in it for the long haul.

- **Strong critical-thinking skills — ability to link cause and effect and generate solutions:** Effective corps members gather and analyze data on their students' performance, address areas of concern, solve problems quickly, and continuously improve their methods.

- **Exceptional interpersonal skills to motivate and lead others:** Successful corps members must invest students and those who influence them in the hard work it takes to achieve big goals.

- **Superior organizational ability:** Effective corps members plan well and use their time with their students effectively.

- **Respect for diverse experiences and ability to work with people from a variety of backgrounds:** Successful corps members must build strong relationships not only with their students, but with their students' families, their colleagues, and the communities they work in.

- **Unwavering belief in the potential of all students and a desire to do whatever it takes in pursuit of educational equity and excellence:** This work is extremely challenging and requires tremendous dedication.

A recent study by Harvard University that compared the admissions data of corps members with their achievements in the classroom found that teachers who embody these characteristics are more likely to lead their students to academic gains in English and math, and less likely to have behavior problems in their classrooms.[2] These results, the study says, suggest that a teacher's ultimate success in the classroom can be predicted during the hiring process.

DIVERSITY

Teach For America is deeply committed to diversity. However, because our research has not found race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status to be predictive of greater student achievement, and because federal and state laws prohibit employer discrimination in hiring based on these factors, we do not consider them in admissions decisions.

At the same time, we know that teachers who share their students' backgrounds — more than 90 percent of whom are African American, Latino, and/or from low-economic communities — serve as powerful role models. We also know that the leadership and engagement of diverse individuals will maximize our organization's potential as a force for change.

Thus, we have a vested interest in ensuring that our corps is particularly representative of minority and low-income backgrounds and we devote additional time and resources to ensuring candidates from these backgrounds who meet our selection criteria do not slip through the cracks.

To do this, we:
- Train selectors to guard against personal bias.

- Provide resources to equalize interview preparation and ensure all candidates have an opportunity to display their true abilities.

- Consider hours worked per week in school and serious family commitments as part of the candidate's record of achievement.

- Review admissions decisions to ensure we come to the best outcomes. Last year we reviewed thousands of files, a disproportionately larger share of which were for applicants from minority or low-income backgrounds.

OUR RESEARCH-BASED MODEL

The search for candidates who embody the characteristics predictive of great teachers would not be successful without research-based principles and a process to carry it out.

PRINCIPLES

1. **Gather accurate data to inform long-term improvement:** Our selection process evolves based on data. We analyze our corps members' effect on student achievement and other factors — including the creation of a culture of

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[2] Will Dobbie, *Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement: Evidence from Teach for America,*
http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~dobbie/research/TeacherCharacteristics_July2011.pdf (July2011).

achievement and classroom rigor — against their ratings in the selection stage to identify which factors are associated with standout performance. Our efforts continuously improve as we more clearly define success, leading to a stronger data set from which we may draw.

2. **Develop a standard rubric for each competency:** Applicant evaluations involve many nuances. At each stage of our admissions process, we use a standardized rubric and scoring system. It's important to have a common language and understanding across our organization of what makes a candidate strong in order to make decisions based on a candidate's likelihood to lead students to high academic achievement.

3. **Invest time and resources in training selectors before they begin their duties and coach them to become expert decision-makers:** More than 1,800 Teach For America staff members and alumni participate in the selection of our corps. By investing in training and support and standardizing our measures, we increase the quality of their decisions.

4. **Employ checks and balances in the selection process:** Applicants to our corps pass through multiple application phases and selectors, allowing us to identify patterns and avoid relying on the assessment of any one individual. Our process also employs a statistical model, based on historical student achievement data, to help evaluate the likelihood an applicant will be successful in the classroom.

5. **Strive to improve every element of the process continuously:** As strong as we believe our admissions process is today, we are committed to strengthening it further through ongoing research and analysis. We frequently partner with external researchers to ask new questions and pilot new assessments.

PROCESS

There are three steps that a candidate passes through in our selection process. At each step, they are considered for admission by a staff selector who has undergone significant training and has been assessed for his or her readiness:

1 Candidates submit online application materials — including a resume and letter of intent — for review. The process is selective at all stages, and several thousand applicants are turned away at this early stage.

2 Applicants who pass the first phase complete an online activity. Most candidates also attend a 30-minute phone interview. There are a small number of applicants who are considered highly likely to reach the final round based on their written application. These applicants skip the phone interview but are not necessarily admitted at higher rates than others.

3 The final stage is a daylong, in-person interview that includes a group discussion, delivery of a sample lesson, and a one-on-one interview. Evidence collected during this and the previous two stages is then carefully considered to make an ultimate decision.

Throughout the process, our extensively trained selectors analyze the evidence they gather to recommend for admission candidates who, according to the model, are most likely to excel in the classroom. Additionally, our senior selection committee reviews decisions for candidates who meet any number of queries, including those who were identified as particularly competitive early in the process but were not recommended for acceptance. Reviewing such files helps safeguard against any false positives and false negatives.

We take great care to ensure candidates have ample opportunity to demonstrate their strengths, but because the stakes for the candidates and the students and schools they will work with are so high, all admissions decisions are rooted firmly in our selection model.

A CONSTANT QUEST FOR IMPROVEMENT

We are under no illusion that our selection model — or any selection model — is perfect, and we continue to refine it each year. We also believe that many applicants who are not accepted to our program have valuable qualities and skills that could make them good teachers, but perhaps in more consistently supported situations than we offer. For this reason, we provide candidates who are not selected with information about other routes into teaching and public service.

Our thoroughly researched and tested model, commitment to excellence and improvement, and passion for our work help get the right people in the classroom to work towards a day when all kids have equal opportunities in education and in life.