



Hard to Staff Schools and TFA Tears

By Educator Barnes – August 11, 2019

Teach for America (TFA) and other alternative teaching programs provide an invaluable service of providing teachers for hard to staff schools. These schools tend to have populations of students who are of color and/or living in poverty. Students in these schools are used to the teacher churn. Teachers come and go, or there is not a teacher, and instead, there is a long-term substitute teacher. This is not ideal for students and impedes academic progress. That's the benefit of alternative programs, but with this pro, there are also cons.

It wasn't until I began coaching teachers, that I started having lots of interactions with people who entered the teaching profession outside the traditional path of being an education major and then passing the teacher licensing exam. My experience has been some alternative program teachers end up becoming great educators and some do not. The ones that do not are of great concern because of how they are failing and how they react to their failure while at school.

Most of the alternative path teachers I coached or worked with were in the Teach for America program. A professor I know frequently called it the Teach for a Minute program. The professionals only have to commit to teaching in schools for two school years, and then, they can quit being teachers. Some TFA teachers I know are still in the classroom and rocking it. Others are struggling to get to the two-year mark and are failing miserably. What's the point of having a teacher in a hard to staff school who isn't better than a long-term sub?

What bothers me most is the TFA teachers I have encountered that are struggling to teach successfully in urban schools have been white teachers with a white savior complex. Yes, I am aware they have had courses through TFA to address bias and culture, but that's a mindset shift that takes more time than the duration of a course or two.

The downside to TFA is that teachers are placed in schools away from their homes. If they are from an urban city, they wouldn't necessarily be placed in a school in their community. These teachers end up being new to the city and state and then try to rescue the poor children of color. When the rescuing doesn't work, there are tears. Children of color don't have time for white tears. They need teachers who can teach them and can improve their skills fast.

I remember a former principal sending me to take over and teach a reading block for a TFA teacher because my principal said, "that class is a dumpster fire and I need you to put out the flames." As I was teaching and modeling some strategies I had taught the teacher, the teacher started crying. This teacher is not the first white TFA teacher I have seen the cry in front of me or students, but I'm tired of the crying. When your mentality is more about rescuing and saving children rather than evaluating the engagement of your lessons, then you will continue to fail. No fancy chants or bribing children with incentives will work.

I'm not saying that programs like TFA aren't useful and helpful for hard to staff schools, but schools can do without the teachers who are on a mission to rescue rather than a mission to teach effectively.