TEACH FOR AMERICA
Gets Mostly High Marks from Principal Survey
In addition to reporting high overall satisfaction, principals rated Teach For America (TFA) corps members generally high on specific skills. However, principals rated members in school activities lower. Principals’ perceptions of corps members were comparable to their perceptions of other novice teachers.

TFA alumni and charter school leaders rated corps members lower, while principals with more teacher or principal experience rated corps members higher.

Most principals indicated willingness to hire corps members in the future, though they cited short commitment and classroom-management skills as reasons to not hire corps members.

Across the country, school districts serving socio-economically disadvantaged children—particularly those in small towns and urban areas—lack access to high-quality teachers. Seeking to eliminate this inequity, Teach For America (TFA) recruits and develops recent college graduates and professionals to serve as corps members who commit to teach for two years in low-income inner-city and rural schools. TFA has a highly competitive acceptance policy, and, although program entrants are not required to be certified teachers, unlicensed or uncertified corps members receive alternative certification through coursework taken while completing the program. Corps members whom schools hire are full-fledged faculty members. From its initial cohort of 500 teachers in 1990, TFA has grown significantly: In the 2013–2014 school year, approximately 11,000 active corps members taught in some of America’s neediest schools.

**To Better Prepare Corps Members, Teach For America Seeks to Understand How Principals View Them**

TFA seeks to improve the preparation, placement, and performance of its teachers. Every two years since 1997, it has surveyed principals to help meet these goals. In the fall of 2014, TFA asked the RAND Corporation to review, revise, and administer its 2015 National Principal Survey, a survey of school leaders who employed TFA corps members during the 2014–2015 school year. RAND researchers fielded the online survey to 3,338 principals between January and April 2015 and received 1,803 responses, or a 54-percent response rate.

**Respondent Characteristics**

Principals who responded to TFA’s 2015 survey generally had fewer years of teaching and principal experience than respondents of the 2012 national Schools and Staffing Survey. Nearly half had three...
or fewer years of experience as principals. In addition, principals from charter schools were overrepresented. Although the majority of respondents work in traditional schools, 27 percent were charter school principals; charter schools made up only 6.2 percent of schools in the nation in 2012–2013. It should be noted that a majority of principals reported that they had three or fewer corps members at their schools.

Principals’ Overall Impressions of Teach For America Corps Members Are Positive

A sizable majority of respondents indicated being satisfied with the TFA corps members in their school, consistent with findings from two years ago; however, the rate of principals not reporting overall satisfaction rose to 20 percent, up significantly from the 6 percent reporting similarly two years ago. Overall satisfaction might reflect the positive difference that principals report TFA corps members making in such areas as academic achievement, school culture and faculty collaboration, classroom culture, socio-emotional development, and relationships with parents.

Respondents also rated corps members generally high on specific skills (Figure 1). In fact, most principals responded that TFA corps members’ abilities were either equal to or more proficient than those of other novice teachers.

Conversely, respondents indicated that corps members’ participation in school activities was generally low (Figure 2). However, in this area as well, principals’ perceptions of corps members were comparable to their perceptions of other novice teachers.
Figure 1. Principals indicated general satisfaction with TFA corps members

Numbers represent the percentage of responding principals.

Figure 2. Principals perceive that participation by corps members in school activities is generally low

Numbers represent the percentage of responding principals.
Teach For America Alumni and Charter School Leaders Rate Corps Members Lower; Principals with More Experience Rate Corps Members Higher

In addition to overall trends, the researchers analyzed survey responses to identify differences by various school and principal characteristics. Significant relationships emerged between how principals rated corps members’ abilities and principals’ charter school status, years of experience as teachers or principals, and TFA-alumnus status. Overall, TFA alumni and charter school leaders rated corps members’ abilities lower in most areas than principals not in those groups. In contrast, principals with more teaching or principal experience rated corps members’ abilities higher in most areas than those with less experience as teachers or principals.

When comparing corps members’ abilities with those of other novice teachers, TFA alumni and principals of charter schools rated corps members’ knowledge of subject matter significantly lower than other novice teachers, as compared with principals who were not in those groups. On the other hand, principals who had a TFA-alumnus presence at their schools rated corps members’ abilities to have an impact on student performance and demonstrate leadership among school staff as significantly higher than those of other novice teachers. Principals with more experience working with corps members also rated corps members’ abilities to affect student performance significantly higher than those of other novice teachers, as compared with principals with less experience working with corps members.

Most Principals Would Hire Corps Members in the Future

Like their counterparts two years ago, a large majority of respondents indicated that they would be willing to hire a corps member to fill a
teaching vacancy. Furthermore, most participants (66 percent) in this year’s survey indicated that they would definitely recommend hiring a corps member, a jump from 2013, when only 49 percent of respondents indicated that they were extremely likely to make such a recommendation.

Short Commitment and Classroom-Management Skills Cited for Not Hiring Corps Members in the Future

Although respondents reported many positive reasons for hiring corps members in the future, at least half also noted concerns with the short time commitment and classroom-management skills (Figure 3). Perhaps surprisingly, charter school principals were significantly more likely to report that they would hire another TFA corps member if they had vacancies in their schools, despite the fact that charter school principals also rated many corps members’ abilities significantly lower than non-charter school principals did.

As noted in Figure 3, many principals indicated that experience with previous corps members would positively influence their decision to hire corps members in the future. And, in fact, a large majority of principals working with TFA alumni agreed that these teachers promote school culture and school community and demonstrate leadership.

Conclusion: Principals Find That Teach For America Is Making Positive Contributions to Schools and Learning and Note Areas for Improvement

The results of the 2015 survey provide useful information for TFA to understand how principals perceive TFA corps members working in their schools and to take action as needed to address concerns. For example, although principals generally rated corps members highly in regard to having high expectations for all students and developing relationships with colleagues, they tended

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Respondents generally identified many more reasons they would hire additional corps members than reasons they would not. These findings provide insight into how principals think about hiring corps members. They also identify strengths that TFA might wish to highlight to potential partner districts and schools, and weaknesses that might be mitigated through additional supports to corps members to make hiring corps members more attractive.

Additional research might also be useful to explore why charter school principals and principals who were more familiar with TFA (i.e., TFA alumni, principals with TFA alumni working at their schools, more years of experience working with corps members) tended to rate corps members’ abilities and the support TFA offered significantly lower than principals not in those groups.
This brief describes work done in RAND Education and documented in Results from the Teach For America 2015 National Principal Survey, by Mollie Rudnick, Amanda F Edelman, Ujwal Kharel, and Matthew W. Lewis, RR-1116-TFA, 2015 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR1116). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9865. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2015.

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