HOW WE LEARN FROM OUR TEACHERS

Teach For America's size and reach gives it a unique vantage point on educational inequity in America. Since its inception in 1990, Teach For America has recruited, selected, trained, and supported over twenty thousand teachers in urban and rural low-income communities across the country. Currently hundreds of Teach For America program staff, many of whom were highly effective teachers themselves, have responsibility for training and supporting corps members.[1] These teachers and staff also work with an extensive network of veteran teachers in summer and regional school placements, as well as the faculty of university partners in the several dozen regions where we place and support teachers.

Among these thousands of teachers and staff members, Teach For America has facilitated an ongoing conversation about what is and is not working in our teachers' classrooms. For twenty years, we have employed a mixture of qualitative and quantitative inquiries into teachers' actions and mindsets, the training and support structures that most improve teachers' effectiveness, and the challenges to student learning in our teachers' classrooms. In pursuit of best practices among the most effective teachers, in the past decade we have put considerable energy into evaluating student learning in our teachers' classrooms so that we can consider connections between teachers' effectiveness and their mindsets, knowledge, and actions.

Defining, Measuring, and Tracking Student Learning

We define the effectiveness of corps members by the extent to which they increase students' academic achievement. In our first decade, we relied on surveys of school principals to assess teachers' effectiveness. Although that system did help generally delineate strong from weak teachers, its inherent subjectivity limited the data's usefulness for evaluating what distinguishes effective teachers and what elements of our program are most improving teachers' effectiveness.

As more and more districts and states implemented standardized assessments in the 1990s, Teach For America sought to harvest the student achievement data coming from those assessments to provide a clearer view of teacher effectiveness. In our dozens of regions, we needed a system that allowed us to interpret and aggregate results across a patchwork of assessments and contexts, since corps members teach different grades and subjects in different schools and districts using different curricula and varied assessments. To that end, we worked to evaluate and ensure the rigor of the district-, state-, or teacher-created assessments our teachers were using to measure student learning, and we developed methods of translating the many forms of student data into a universally comparable measurement.

To help us and our teachers set goals that align with our mission of closing the achievement gap, since 2002 we have evaluated teachers' student achievement data through this system and put teachers into one of several performance categories: significant gains, solid gains, or limited gains. We charge corps members with the aim of achieving the most ambitious of these categories, "significant gains," with their students, given the fact that the students we serve are often years behind their peers in higher-income areas. The following table offers an overview of how those categories of performance are defined for three different axes of student

learning: student academic growth, student mastery of rigorous content standards, and closing the gap with performers in well-served schools:

	Significant Gains	Solid Gains	Limited Gains
Academic growth	1.5 or more years	1.0 to 1.4 years	Less than 1 year
Mastery of standards	80 percent of standards mastered	70 to 79 percent of standards mastered	Less than 70 percent of standards mastered
Distance to performers in well-served schools	20 percent (secondary grades) or 24 percent (elementary grades) of gap closed	10 percent of gap closed	Less than 10 percent of gap closed

This significant-gains system of measuring and tracking teacher effectiveness has served us well but is far from perfect. Given the wide range of grades, subjects, and geographies in which corps members teach and the difficulty of obtaining timely access to state and district data, the assessments and assessment data used by corps members still vary widely in quality and rigor. Furthermore, while the system of benchmarks for significant gains provides corps members with ambitious student learning goals that are explicitly grounded in our quest for educational equity, these goals are still not fully calibrated to context. (They might be, for example, more or less ambitious depending on the subject and grade being taught, the assessment being used, and the starting point of the students.)

We are improving our student achievement measurement system in two ways. First, we are investing resources and working to get higher-quality assessments and data in the hands of corps members. Second, we are analyzing student learning data to produce more calibrated goals that are tied to the achievement of high-performing teachers in each context.

We believe this improved student achievement measurement system will provide a more precise view of teacher effectiveness, accelerating our work to determine what teacher actions and mindsets most correlate with students' success.

Investigating Our Teachers' Practices

Given the high stakes for our students, we invest considerable time and energy learning about our teachers' actions and the influence of those actions on student learning. Our methods of investigating teachers' practices are varied and iterative—an approach we describe as an ongoing conversation rather than as a discrete study. The content of this book is a snapshot of that ongoing conversation and an articulation of what we have learned so far.

Among the most productive methods of investigation we use to inform this conversation are:

- *Teacher observations and debriefs.* Program directors observe, coach, and support first- and second-year teachers. These staff members come together regularly in their regions and, periodically, nationally to share insights and patterns of teacher practices and needs. In some cases, observations are videotaped. Many other staff members, in various capacities, also observe and share impressions of teachers.

- *Co-investigative reflection sessions.* Several times a year, teachers have an extended conversation with staff members in which the teacher brings to the table evidence of student learning and, using the cycle of reflection described in Chapter Five, identifies root causes of gaps in student learning in order to improve his or her effectiveness. In some cases, we videotape those conversations. The conversations are a rich source of insight on teachers' actions and mindsets. We track data from these conversations to inform teacher performance and development needs.

- *Yearly recognition of highly effective teachers.* Each year, regional staff nominates for awards teachers who are achieving particularly dramatic progress with their students and exemplify the practices we are finding most effective. These teachers are recognized in their regions and nationally with the Sue Lehmann Award for Teaching Excellence. We analyze and discuss the documentary and video evidence from these teachers' classrooms, a process that provides valuable insight into the practices of highly effective teachers.

- *Rubric norming on teacher video and documents.* As we continue to improve our Teaching As Leadership framework and rubric, we have normed ourselves on the rubric by collectively analyzing video clips or teacher documents and using discrepancies in rubric scoring to catalyze conversations about how to define and articulate levels of proficiency on key teacher actions.

- *Online resources.* Our teachers (as corps members and as alumni of our program) are members of an online community in which they can share, search, and rate resources; discuss their challenges, needs, and advice; and access training and support materials. Teachers can watch annotated videos of their colleagues performing various teacher actions at all levels of proficiency. How teachers are interacting with those online resources is another source of insight into teachers' needs, strengths, and actions.

- *Teacher surveys.* Several times a year, we survey our teachers to learn what resources and structures they are finding most and least helpful to their work. We analyze those data on dozens of variables (teachers' effectiveness, resources accessed, school placement, grade level, region, gender, race, experience, effectiveness, and so on), seeking patterns.

- *Teacher surveys and interviews on discrete issues.* As we see patterns in these sources of information to explore, we launch discrete initiatives on particular issues, such as how teachers use learning standards in the process of designing big goals, or how teachers who share racial or socioeconomic identity with their students approach the resulting opportunities and challenges, or what methods the most effective teachers are using to assert their authority with students at the beginning of the school year. These initiatives often involve a combination of the methods described above, in particular teacher surveys, observations, and interviews.

The analysis of these incoming streams of information involves dozens of national and regional program staff and is informed by external research and external researchers. We partner and consult with a number of top experts in the field, some of whom have served on our research advisory board and others who are serving as advisors for specific research efforts.

Using Student Data and Teacher Data to Explore Best Practices

When we can see what the teachers making significant gains are doing differently from those making solid and limited gains, we begin to understand how to move more teachers into the category of significant gains.

By bringing together data showing student learning and other data showing teacher actions, we shed light on a number of important questions. What resources are the most effective teachers using and not using? What resources did teachers who moved out of the limited-gains category most rely on? How do the lesson plans of teachers making significant gains differ from those whose students are making solid gains? What patterns are there in the ways teachers in these three categories of student achievement describe their relationship with their students? How do the teachers whose students are making enormous growth make instructional choices? When we examine these teachers' application files, what indicators seem to predict this teacher's making significant gains with students and what of our selection criteria are not correlated with measures of student learning?

As we investigate and debate these questions based on the data, each new hypothesis catalyzes new questions and more studies. In the last few years, for example, through data analysis, document review, and focus groups, we have looked closely at how teachers design and set goals that most influence student learning. We have gathered and studied the most effective teachers' systems for monitoring, publishing, and celebrating students' progress. We have evaluated countless year-long and unit plans, lesson plans, and classroom management plans, distilling the common qualities of those belonging to teachers whose students are most successful. Through extensive interviews with teachers of all backgrounds, experiences, and identities, we have looked at how more and less effective teachers address challenges related to race, class, language, and power dynamics that arise in our work. We have met with some of the growing number of teachers in our network who have achieved strong results with their students for five and sometimes ten or fifteen years, learning how these teachers make their success sustainable.

These iterative and ongoing investigations are the primary sources of *Teaching As Leadership*.