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Andrew Hartman
Illinois State University

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The Hidden Curriculum of Teach for America*

Andrew Hartman
Illinois State University

The job of the American public school teacher has never been so thankless. In states across America, cutting teacher salaries and pensions has become the most popular method for fixing budget deficits.

New Jersey Republican Governor Chris Christie's deep cuts force teachers to contribute a much higher percentage of their salaries to their pensions, while doubling or even tripling their health care contributions and eliminating cost-of-living adjustments. Republican Governors Scott Walker of Wisconsin and John Kasich of Ohio took their austerity measures a step further by abolishing collective bargaining rights for teachers. Such legislation is possible because the image of teachers has never been so degraded, especially of unionized teachers, whom Christie routinely refers to as "thugs" and "bullies."

The liberals of the education reform movement, often more surreptitiously than the overstated former Washington D.C. Chancellor of Schools Michelle Rhee, have for decades advanced negative assumptions about public school teachers that now power the attacks by Christie, Walker, Kasich and their ilk. Even though what currently goes for education reform originated in the 1980s, in part, as a strategy to reduce inequality without the political challenges involved with redistributing wealth, it has evolved into a well-funded movement to remove supposedly incompetent teachers from schools and replace them with brighter, more motivated, more selfless teachers. In this, Teach for America (TFA), where Rhee first made her mark, is the prototypical liberal education reform organization.

The history of TFA reveals the ironies of contemporary education reform. In its mission to deliver justice to underprivileged children, TFA and the liberal education reform movement have advanced an agenda that advances conservative attempts to undercut teacher's unions. More broadly, TFA has been in the vanguard in forming a neoliberal consensus about the role of public education—and the role of public school teachers—in a deeply unequal society.

In 1988, Princeton student Wendy Kopp wrote a thesis arguing for a national teacher corps, modeled on the Peace Corps—the archetype of liberal volunteerism—that “would mobilize some of the most passionate, dedicated members of my generation to change the fact that where a child is born in the United States largely determines his or her chances in life.” Kopp launched TFA in 1990 as a not-for-profit charged with selecting the brightest, most idealistic recent college graduates as corps members who would commit to teach for two years in some of the nation's toughest schools.

* A version of this article first appeared in *Jacobin*.



From its inception, the media anointed TFA the savior of American education. Prior to a single corps member stepping foot in a classroom, *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* lavished Kopp's new organization with cover stories full of insipid praise.

Adulation has remained the norm. Its recent twenty-year anniversary summit, held in Washington, D.C., featured fawning video remarks by President Obama and a glitzy “who’s who” roster of liberal cheerleaders, including John Lewis, Malcolm Gladwell, Gloria Steinem, and TFA board member John Legend. The organs of middlebrow centrist opinion—*Time Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New Republic*—glorify TFA at every opportunity. The *Washington Post* heralds the nation’s education reform movement as the “TFA insurgency”—a perplexing linguistic choice given so-called “insurgency” methods have informed national education policies from Reagan to Obama. TFA is, at best, another chimerical attempt in a long history of chimerical attempts to sell educational reform as a solution to class inequality. At worst, it’s a Trojan horse for all that is unseemly about the contemporary education reform movement.

The original TFA mission was based on a set of four somewhat noble if paternalistic rationales. First, by bringing the elite into the teaching profession, even if temporarily, TFA would burnish it with a much-needed “aura of status and selectivity.” Second, by supplying its recruits to impoverished school districts, both urban and rural, TFA would compensate for the lack of quality teachers willing to work in such challenging settings. And third, although Kopp recognized that most corps members would not remain classroom teachers beyond their two-year commitments, she believed that TFA alums would form the nucleus of a new movement of educational leaders—that their transformative experiences teaching poor children would mold their ambitious career trajectories. Above these three foundational principles loomed a fourth: the mission to relegate educational inequality to the ash heap of history.

TFA goals derive, in theory, from laudable—if misguided—impulses. But each, in practice, has demonstrated to be deeply problematic. TFA, suitably representative of the liberal education reform more generally, underwrites, intentionally or not, the conservative assumptions of the education reform movement: that teacher’s unions serve as barriers to quality education; that testing is the best way to assess quality education; that educating poor children is best done by institutionalizing them; that meritocracy is an end-in-itself; that social class is an unimportant variable in education reform; that education policy is best made by evading politics proper; and that faith in public school teachers is misplaced.

Take the first rationale: that TFA would enhance the image of the teaching profession. On the contrary, the only brand TFA endows with an “aura of status and selectivity” is its own. As reported in the *New York Times*, eighteen percent of Harvard seniors applied to TFA in 2010, a rate only surpassed by the twenty-two percent of Yale seniors who sought to join the national teacher corps that year. All told, TFA selected 4,500 lucky recruits from a pool of 46,359 applicants in 2010. Although many applicants are no doubt motivated to join out of altruism, the two-year TFA experience has become a highly desirable notch on the resumes of the nation’s most diligent strivers. The more exclusive TFA becomes, the more ordinary regular teachers seem. TFA corps



members typically come from prestigious institutions of higher education, while most regular teachers are trained at the second- and third-tier state universities that house the nation's largest colleges of education. Whereas TFA corps members leverage the elite TFA brand to launch careers in law or finance—or, if they remain in education, to bypass the typical career path on their way to principalships and other positions of leadership—most regular teachers must plod along, negotiating their way through traditional career ladders. These distinctions are lost on nobody. They are what make regular teachers and their unions such low-hanging political fruit for the likes of Christie, Walker, and Kasich.

The second justification for TFA—that it exists to supply good teachers to schools where few venture to work—has also proven questionable. Though the assertion made some sense in 1990, when many impoverished school districts did in fact suffer from a dearth of teachers, the same is not so easily argued now. Following the economic collapse of 2008, which contributed to school revenue problems nationwide, massive teacher layoffs became the new norm, including in districts where teacher shortages had provided an entry to TFA in the past. Thousands of Chicago teachers, for instance, have felt the sting of layoffs and furloughs in the past two years, even as the massive Chicago Public School system, bound by contract, continues to annually hire a specified number of TFA corps members. In the face of these altered conditions, the TFA public relations machine now deemphasizes teacher shortages and instead accentuates one crucial adjective: “quality.” In other words, schools in poor urban and rural areas of the country might not suffer from a shortage of teachers in general, but they lack for the *quality* teachers that Kopp’s organization provides.

After twenty years of sending academically gifted but untrained college graduates into the nation’s toughest schools, the evidence regarding TFA corps member effectiveness is in, and it is decidedly mixed. Professors of education Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su Jin Jez, in the most thorough survey of such research yet, found that TFA corps members tend to perform equal to teachers in similar situations—that is, they do as well as new teachers lacking formal training assigned to impoverished schools. Sometimes they do better, particularly in math instruction. Yet “the students of novice TFA teachers perform significantly less well,” Vasquez Heilig and Jin Jez discovered, “than those of credentialed beginning teachers.” It seems clear that TFA’s vaunted thirty-day summer institute—TFA “boot camp”—is no replacement for the preparation given future teachers at traditional colleges of education.

Putting TFA forward to solve the problems of the teaching profession has turned out poorly. But the third premise for Kopp’s national teacher corps—that it would “create a leadership force for long-term change” in how the nation’s least privileged students are schooled—has been the most destructive. Such destructiveness is directly related to Kopp’s success in attaching TFA to the education reform movement. In this, Kopp’s timing could not have been more fortuitous. When TFA was founded, the education reform movement was beginning to make serious headway in policy-making circles. This movement had been in the works since as far back as the notorious Coleman Report, a massive 1966 government study written by sociologist James Coleman, officially titled “Equality of Educational Opportunity.” Coleman contended that school funding had little bearing on educational achievement and, thus, efforts to achieve resource “equity” were



wasteful. The Coleman Report became a touchstone for those who argued that pushing for educational “excellence,” measurable by standardized tests, was the best method to improve schools and hold teachers accountable. Chester Finn, an influential conservative policy analyst who worked in the Reagan Department of Education, put his finger on the educational pulse of our age when he wrote that “holding schools”—and teachers—“to account for their students’ academic achievement” was the only educational policy that made sense in a “post-Coleman” world.

With unwavering support from powerful economic and political actors, who almost uniformly understood the state of American public education through the lens of “A Nation at Risk,” a widely publicized 1983 study that argued the failure of American schools was undermining the nation’s ability to compete in an increasingly global economy, education reformers set out to ensure that schools and teachers were held accountable for the achievement of their students, privileged or not. George H. W. Bush, dubbed the “Education President,” filled his department of education with advocates of “outcome-based education,” which emphasized “excellence” in contrast to “equity.” Educational progress was to be measured by what students produced (outputs) rather than by what resources were invested in schools (inputs). The TFA mantra—“we don’t need to wait to fix poverty in order to ensure that all children receive an excellent education”—meshed perfectly with this “post-Coleman” zeitgeist. One of the more salient aspects of the so-called “TFA insurgency” was that it operated from the assumption that more resources were not a prerequisite for improving schools. “Schools that transform their students’ trajectories aspire not to equality of inputs,” Kopp declared, “but rather to equality of outputs.” Instead of more resources, underprivileged students needed better teachers. Reformers thus set out to devise a system that hired and retained effective teachers while also driving ineffective ones from the classroom.

The TFA network has been crucial in shaping efforts to improve the nation’s teacher force. Kopp’s second book, *A Chance to Make History* (2011), reads like a primer for such reform measures. Kopp is particularly enamored by high-performing charter schools, which succeed because they do whatever it takes to hire and retain good teachers, a zero-sum game that most schools cannot win without more resources—those dreaded “inputs.” But successful charter schools, Kopp maintains, also stop at nothing to remove bad teachers from the classroom. This is why charter schools are the preferred mechanism for delivery of education reform: as defined by Kopp, charter schools are “public schools empowered with flexibility over decision making in exchange for accountability for results.” And yet, “results,” or rather, academic improvement, act more like a fig leaf, especially in light of numerous recent studies that show charter schools, taken on the whole, actually do a worse job of educating students than regular public schools. Rather, crushing teacher’s unions—the real meaning behind Kopp’s “flexibility” euphemism—has become the ultimate end of the education reform movement. This cannot be emphasized enough: the precipitous growth of charter schools and the TFA insurgency are part and parcel precisely because both cohere with the larger push to marginalize teacher’s unions.



The TFA insurgency has, from its inception, sold education reform as above politics. The idea is to support ideas that work, plain and simple, no matter their source. But the biography of Michelle Rhee, the prototypical TFA corps member-turned-reformer and the most divisive person in the education reform movement, defies such anti-political posturing. After serving a two-year stint in the Baltimore Public Schools as one of the earliest TFA corps members, she earned a Master's Degree from the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government. From there Kopp tapped Rhee to be the founding CEO of The New Teacher Project, a TFA spin-off that sought to revolutionize the teacher accreditation process by helping school districts evade colleges of education. The notoriety she gained in her work with The New Teacher Project enabled her appointment as Chancellor of Schools in Washington, D.C.

Rhee is adored in elite circles. Regularly feted by Oprah, Kopp touts her as a “transformational leader.” During her short tenure leading the infamously bad D.C. schools, Rhee gained national acclaim for applying, in Kopp's admiring words, the corporate “principles of management and accountability.” In contrast to such devotion, teacher's unions loathe Rhee. Rhee's heavy-handedness in dealing with the Washington Teacher's Union conveyed her attitude that a non-unionized teacher force would better serve justice for children, as if children would benefit from their teachers lacking the few remaining benefits accrued by collective bargaining, such as nominal job security and shrinking pensions. Rhee is also disliked by a large percentage of black D.C. citizens, who voted out former Mayor Adrian Fenty in part because of his unqualified support for Rhee's actions. This included firing four percent of district teachers, mostly black, and replacing them largely with TFA-style teachers, mostly white, whom one astute black Washingtonian labeled “cultural tourists.”

TFA's complicity in education reform insanity does not stop there. From its origins, the TFA-led movement to improve the teacher force has aligned itself with efforts to expand the role of high-stakes standardized testing in education. TFA insurgents, including Kopp and Rhee, maintain that, even if imperfect, standardized tests are the best means by which to quantify accountability. Prior to the enactment of Bush's bipartisan No Child Left Behind in 2001, high-stakes standardized testing was mostly limited to college-entrance exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). But since then, the high-stakes testing movement has blown up: with increasing frequency, student scores on standardized exams are tied to teacher, school, and district evaluations, upon which rewards and punishments are meted out. Obama's “Race to the Top” policy—the brainchild of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the former “CEO” of Chicago Public Schools—further codifies high-stakes testing by allocating scarce federal resources to those states most aggressively implementing these so-called accountability measures. The multi-billion dollar testing industry—dominated by a few large corporations that specialize in the making and scoring of standardized tests—has become an entrenched interest, a powerful component of a growing education-industrial complex.

TFA insurgents support standardized testing not only because they believe it ensures accountability. They also herald testing because it provides evidence that their efforts are working. The schools and districts that achieved celebrity as the reform movement's success stories did so by



vastly improving standardized test scores. In emphasizing testing, though, reformers tend to overlook the obvious incentives that ambitious educators have to manipulate statistics. President Bush appointed Houston Superintendent of Schools Rod Paige as Secretary of Education in 2001 because Paige's reform measures seemingly led to skyrocketing graduation rates. Not surprisingly, this so-called "Texas miracle," predicated on falsified numbers, was too good to be true.

More recently, cheating scandals have likewise discredited several celebrated reform projects. In Atlanta, a TFA hotbed, former superintendent and education reform darling Beverly Hall is implicated in a cheating scandal of unparalleled proportions, involving dozens of Atlanta principals and hundreds of teachers, including TFA corps members. Cheating was so brazen in Atlanta that principals hosted pizza parties where teachers and administrators systematically corrected student exams. Following a series of investigative reports in *USA Today*, a new cheating scandal seems to break every week. Cheating has now been confirmed not only in Atlanta, but also in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Orlando, Dallas, Houston, Dayton, and Memphis, education reform cities all. Rhee's D.C. "miracle" has also been clouded by suspicion: impossibly high wrong-to-right erasure rates indicate that several of Rhee's "blue ribbon" schools might have cheated their way to higher test scores. Such accusations are nothing new to Rhee. The legend of how she transformed her Baltimore students—a fable resembling the Hollywood drama *Stand and Deliver*, based on East Los Angeles math teacher Jaime Escalante's work in helping several of his underprivileged students pass the Advanced Placement Calculus exam—has been called into question by investigative reports that suggest fraud.

That education reformers have long argued that "incentives" are necessary to improve the teaching profession underscores another in a series of ironies that mark the movement. Reformers believe that if teachers are subjected to "market forces," such as merit pay and job insecurity, they will work harder to improve the education they provide for their students. The need to incentivize the teaching profession is the most popular argument against teacher's unions, since unions supposedly protect bad teachers. But, in a predictable paradox, by attaching their incentives agenda to standardized testing, the reform movement has induced cheating on a never-before-seen scale, proving the maxim known as Campbell's Law: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor." In sum, the TFA insurgency's singular success has been to empower those best at gaming the system.

In contrast to such "success," the TFA insurgency has failed to dent educational inequality. This comes as no surprise to anyone with the faintest grasp of the tight correlation between economic and educational inequality: TFA does nothing to address the former while spinning its wheels on the latter. In her writings, nowhere does Kopp reflect upon the patent ridiculousness of her expectation that loads of cash donated by corporations that exploit inequalities across the world—such as Union Carbide and Mobil, two of TFA's earliest contributors—will help her solve some of the gravest injustices endemic to American society. Kopp shows some awareness of the absurdities of her own experiences—including a "fundraising schedule [that] shuttled me between two strikingly different economic spheres: our undersourced classrooms and the plush world of



American philanthropy”—but she fails to grasp that this very gap is what makes her stated goal of equality unachievable.

In short, Kopp, like education reformers more generally, is an innocent when it comes to political economy. She spouts platitudes about justice for American children, but rarely pauses to ask whether rapidly growing inequality might be a barrier to such justice. She celebrates twenty years of reform movement success, but never tempers such self-congratulatory narcissism with unpleasant questions about why those who have no interest in disrupting the American class structure—such as Bill Gates and the heirs to Sam Walton’s fortunes, by far the most generous education reform philanthropists—are so keen to support the TFA insurgency.

Even if TFA and the liberals of the education reform movement are well intended—even if they truly want to help solve racial and economic inequality—their do-gooder sensibilities are rendered meaningless by their naïve grasp of political economy. At best, they have spent two decades busily shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic. But at worst, liberal education reformers have aligned with those for whom inequality is a feature not a bug of education reform. And ignorance is no excuse for this.