

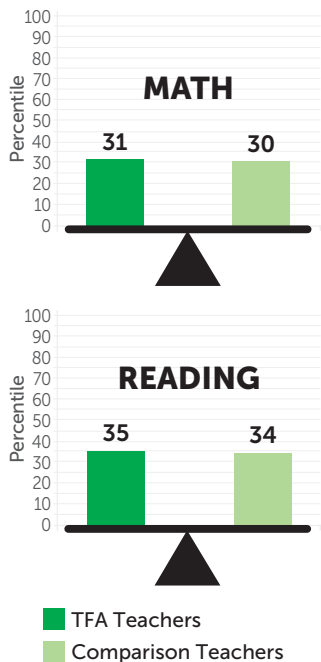
# InFOCUS

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## Assessing the Effectiveness of Teach For America's Investing in Innovation Scale-Up

**Teach For America (TFA) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students by recruiting and training teachers to work in low-income schools.** The program uses a rigorous screening process to select college graduates and professionals with strong academic backgrounds and leadership experience to teach for two years in high-need schools. These teachers, called corps members, typically have no formal training in education but participate in an intensive five-week training program before beginning their first teaching job. TFA then provides them with ongoing training and support throughout their two-year commitment.

### No Significant Differences in Achievement



In 2010, TFA launched a major expansion effort, funded in part by a five-year Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up grant of \$50 million from the U.S. Department of Education. By the 2012–2013 school year—the second year of the scale-up—TFA had expanded its placements of first- and second-year corps members by 25 percent. This study examines the effectiveness of TFA elementary school teachers hired during the first two years of the i3 scale-up, relative to other teachers in the same grades and school.

### KEY FINDINGS

- On average, TFA corps members hired in the first two years of the i3 scale-up were as effective as other teachers in the same high-poverty elementary schools in teaching both reading and math.
- TFA corps members in lower elementary grades (prekindergarten through grade 2) were more effective at teaching reading than other teachers in the same schools, increasing students' reading scores by an amount equal to 1.3 additional months of school.

- There were no statistically significant effects for other groups of TFA corps members examined.

### ABOUT THE STUDY

The study examined how students in grades pre-kindergarten through 5 performed when taught by a TFA or non-TFA teacher in the same school and grade. At the start of the 2012–2013 school year, we randomly assigned students in each participating school and grade level to a class taught by a TFA teacher or a teacher from another teacher training program (a comparison teacher); comparison teachers included a mix of traditionally and alternatively certified teachers.

At the end of the school year, we compared the math and reading achievement of students assigned to the TFA and comparison teachers. We measured achievement using scores from the Woodcock-Johnson III achievement test for students in grades prekindergarten through 2, and from state assessments for students in grades 3 through 5. Because we randomly assigned students to classes, there were no

systematic differences between those assigned to TFA or comparison teachers at the start of the school year. Any end-of-year test score differences therefore reflected differences in teachers' effectiveness rather than existing differences in the students they taught.

The sample spanned 13 school districts in 10 states and included more than 2,000 students, 156 teachers, and 36 schools. Although study schools were not randomly selected from the full set of elementary schools employing TFA teachers nationwide, they were similar to elementary schools employing TFA teachers nationwide along many dimensions. Both sets of schools predominantly served students from racial and ethnic minority groups, and about 80 percent of students at both sets of schools were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF TFA AND NON-TFA TEACHERS

Consistent with TFA's distinctive model for selecting and recruiting corps members, there were many differences between the TFA and comparison teachers in the sample. For example:

- The TFA teachers in our sample, which was limited to first- and second-year corps members, had significantly less teaching experience, on average, than comparison teachers. TFA teachers had an average of 1.7 years of experience compared with 13.6 years for the comparison teachers.

#### Average years of experience

**1.7** years compared with **13.6** years



TFA Teachers



Comparison Teachers

- TFA teachers were less likely to be from racial or ethnic minorities than comparison teachers. About 70 percent of TFA teachers were white and non-Hispanic, compared with 55 percent of comparison teachers.
- TFA teachers were more likely to have graduated from a selective college or university than their comparison counterparts. About 76 percent of TFA teachers in our sample had graduated from a selective college, compared with 40 percent of comparison teachers.

### RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

TFA was awarded the i3 scale-up grant based in part on rigorous prior evidence of its effectiveness. Past random assignment studies of TFA teachers have shown them to be more effective at teaching math at all grade levels and equally as effective at teaching reading to elementary school students. Several well-designed nonexperimental studies have also found that TFA teachers outperform novice non-TFA teachers in math, although results for reading have been mixed. Our findings are consistent with earlier studies showing that TFA teachers were just as effective as other teachers in teaching reading; however, unlike some prior studies, we do not find that TFA teachers were more effective than their colleagues in teaching math. Although we cannot definitively determine why our impact estimates for math differ from previous studies, we found some evidence that the quality of comparison teachers in the schools served by TFA might have changed for the better. This could suggest that the effectiveness of non-TFA teachers in schools served by TFA has improved, either because of general improvements in the quality of non-TFA teachers in high-poverty schools or because TFA has expanded to schools with more effective non-TFA teachers.

This study provides a snapshot of TFA's effectiveness at the elementary school level in the second year of the i3 scale-up. It is possible that the effectiveness of TFA's teachers could increase or decrease as the program expands further and adapts to its new, larger scale. However, the findings suggest that TFA can provide high-poverty schools with teachers who are, on average, as effective as other teachers in these same schools.

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