Getting personal: An open letter to TFA recruits in Chicago

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Dear New TFA recruits in Chicago,

Can we talk about your teaching plans, as if you came to my office, as do lots of students and college grads thinking about becoming a teacher?

First off, I'll explain that I understand why you might want to take that TFA job you've been offered in a Chicago school this coming year. You think you have something to offer and you want a stab at testing yourself. You don't know if you want to stay in teaching (I didn't either, incidentally) and TFA offers a way for you to explore this option and do some good, you think. On the other hand, there's so much contradictory information, vociferous debate. What should you do?

I've been involved in this urban teaching thing for quite a while. I first learned about Teach for America (TFA) in a doctoral seminar at Harvard Ed School, in 1988. The instructor worked at Brookings and Wendy Kopp's honor's project had just started wowing powerful policy folks. I was on leave from my teaching job in the New York City schools, and my doctoral work was on urban teacher preparation. The instructor pressed me for my reaction to Kopp's project.

TFA was ill conceived, I said, because city teaching is tougher than any other kind and requires the best prepared teachers who will stay in hard-to-staff schools, helping to stabilize them. I spoke from experience at that point. I had taught for 7 years in three different suburban school districts before becoming a NYC teacher, but my first term in NYC school was a shocker. I knew what new teachers faced, that they would get the hardest teaching slots in the schools with the most challenges. And I had seen first-hand how kids' lives were destroyed when teachers bolted in the first months of the term – as did those without adequate preparation.

Now, 20-some years later, after a career as a researcher and teacher educator who specializes in urban schools, I hold the same opinion of TFA. Except now we have solid research that the teacher shortage TFA aimed to correct didn't exist – and doesn't now, if what you consider a shortage is an inadequate number of people educated to be teachers. The problem was – and is – teacher retention and turnover (except maybe in math and science on the high school level). It should be no surprise that schools that have high turnover and are hard to staff have rotten working conditions. Of course, this fact creates an unpleasant choice for people who want to find solutions to unequal educational opportunity that ignore deep inequality in our society. We'd have to greatly improve conditions in the most challenging city schools to retain teachers: more funding for smaller classes; more parent and student involvement; better professional development; supervisors who know good teaching and how to relate respectfully with teachers.

I totally get the reasons people can't always go through university-based programs, and I've even advised two graduating seniors to apply to TFA. They were Hispanic women who lived in the communities where they wanted to teach. They supported their families and couldn't afford to take off a semester to student teach. I knew from research they would likely hold their own in a traumatic first year (count on that first year being a doozy, no matter how well prepared you are) and subsequently be a valuable resource to the school and the community. But here's the catch: TFA rejected them because it aims to put young, high-status (mostly white, mostly female) college grads

into classrooms teaching other people's children.

I know some TFA alums who managed to use TFA. They became wonderful teachers – and union activists. Real leaders! But following their path, using TFA for your own purposes and ignoring what the organization does, is not an option for you now in Chicago. When Wendy Kopp did her thesis project, the neoliberal project was just getting started in this country. As powerful business interests who want to make education their vehicle for controlling what kids learn have ripped apart school systems, TFA has morphed into their partner. Nowhere is this clearer than in Chicago, with TFA partnering with CPS to retaliate against Chicago teachers and parents for their resistance to "reforms" imposed by the business elite that runs the schools. The first retaliation was school closings. The second was layoffs. The third is hiring TFA recruits to replace experienced teachers who have lost their jobs.

If you permit TFA to place you in Chicago for this coming school year you are allowing CPS and TFA to exploit you in a very old strategy used to break unions, replacing older workers with new ones. In my book of advice to new urban teachers, I ask that people consider carefully how their colleagues will regard them if they are seen as being used by the administration. My prediction here is that if you take this job with TFA, you will be seen – forever – as having taken a job that was not rightfully yours. That's hard to forgive and never forgotten, especially when teachers are being punished for fighting so bravely to improve conditions in the CPS.

TFA in Los Angeles says it won't take jobs away from LAUSD's experienced teachers. Frankly this is a shell game, with TFA and its billionaire funders supporting creation of schools that take kids from LAUSD so as to shrink enrollments in the publicly-controlled system. But let's take TFA LA at its word: Experienced teachers have priority. This stance, which articulates a return to TFA's original mission of staffing schools with shortages, puts you in a strong position to say "*I won't take a job away from an experienced teacher. I won't teach in CPS until all the teachers who have been laid off are rehired*."

Please don't let TFA use you in this evil project. It doesn't matter if TFA leaders and supporters don't realize it's evil. Sometimes, good intentions don't count. All that matters is whether you show up – on the right side, and in Chicago this is the side resisting TFA's grab for political power at the expense of Chicago's children and parents.

Questions? Please contact me privately.

Professor Lois Weiner

Readers can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, and here on New Politics.