



ONE NATION, FOR THE STUDENTS, WITH EDUCATION FOR ALL

Teach for America participants share their views on the program and the challenges all new educators face

story by Mandy Curtis
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Stephanie LaMarca had no interest in becoming a K–12 educator until she read the Teach for America (TFA) mission statement: “One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.”

On the other hand, Chase Sander has always been interested in education. “During my first year at the University of Texas [at Austin], I began to see how fortunate I was to have received the education that I did,” he says. “Many of my peers struggled to make the adjustment to the university setting.” When a friend applied for TFA, Sander learned more about the program and decided it was a good way to start his career in education.

TFA is a national organization that prepares college graduates, regardless of their majors, to teach for two years in public schools located in low-income areas; currently, the program has teachers placed in nearly 40 urban and rural areas across the country. The members are placed in schools with the aim of increasing student achievement, particularly that of minority students. TFA is a charter program under AmeriCorps, which was established in 1993 by the federal government.

LaMarca, who is currently a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin pursuing a master’s degree in higher education administration, holds bachelor’s degrees in economics and anthropology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. During her two-year commitment to TFA, LaMarca taught 11th-grade U.S. history and Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. history at Roma High School in Roma. She then moved to Austin and taught for three more years outside of the TFA program. Two of those years were at the Johnston Campus of Austin ISD’s Eastside Memorial High School, where she taught world history, U.S. history, economics, psychology, sociology and TAKS prep.

Sander is currently in the second year of his two-year TFA commitment in San Benito ISD, where he teaches biology, pre-AP biology, conceptual physics and pre-AP physics at San Benito Veterans’ Memorial Ninth Grade Academy. A member of San Benito ATPE, Sander graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a bachelor’s degree in Spanish (Hispanic Studies) and pre-med.

TEACHER BOOT CAMP

TFA educators can be found in four areas of Texas: Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley. Sander, being a native Texan, wanted to teach in his home state. LaMarca had never been to Texas prior to her program involvement but found the region interesting. Both listed the Rio Grande Valley as their top placement preference.

After undergoing a rigorous application process, TFA corps members attend a five-week training program and regional orientation. During the first week, they attend classes on

classroom management, lesson planning, pedagogy and more from 7 a.m. to 4 or 5 p.m. The next four weeks are a combination of more classes and teaching summer school. “Some people liken it to teacher boot camp,” LaMarca says. “It’s super-intensive.”

Ann Petrillo, Region 4 ATPE director, served as a TFA faculty adviser during summer 2009 and was assigned six TFA members to mentor, including Sander. She made contact with the members on a daily basis, gave them feedback on their lesson plans and observed the classes they taught. “Always, after observing a lesson, I would arrange a feedback meeting sharing what I observed and what I thought they did well and offering suggestions for improvement,” Petrillo says.

Petrillo also provided her TFA mentees with supplies, ideas for student rewards and advice on where to turn for future support.

“The members relied upon each other for support, but they came to me with issues, and they drew on my experience,” she says.

She initially became involved with the program because she’d previously served as a lead mentor for other educators on her campus. “I knew that I would enjoy the interaction [with corps educators] and that our students would ultimately benefit,” Petrillo says. The experience was different than the mentoring she’d experienced at her school, Petrillo says, in that there was more focus on collaboration and constructive criticism.

STEPPING ONTO NEW GROUND

Both Sander and LaMarca feel that the challenges they faced during their first year in the classroom were no different than these of any other first-year teacher. “I felt ready to start teaching,” Sander says. He spent his first year learning how to balance his teaching with the needs of his students and adapting to the learning process outside of a university setting. He looks back on his first year fondly and knows that he made an impression.

“Just the other day, I had a girl come up to me in the grocery store to thank me,” he says. The student hadn’t really thought about the benefits of his class while she was in it but realized later just how beneficial it had been. “The thank-you afterward is so important,” Sander says.

LaMarca agrees that she felt a lot like other educators who are just starting out. “A lot of teaching is experiencing,” she says. “You can only learn so much in a classroom or from a textbook or from a professor about what you will experience or how to handle certain situations in the classroom. Plus, to our advantage, TFA provides a wealth of resources, information, networks and support that other first-year teachers might not necessarily have.”

LaMarca found inspiration in helping her students reach college. “Where I taught, for most of the students, college isn’t something that they think about or aspire to do,” she says. “We talked a lot about college and going to college and accessing college.” She believes that had she and other teachers not talked to these kids about higher education, the students might not have pushed themselves to go. “It’s really rewarding to know that I played a small role in starting the conversation with a student about going to college,” she says.

Neither LaMarca nor Sander found that they were singled out by the “traditional teachers” on their campuses for being TFA members; their campuses each included a large population of current TFA members or TFA alumni. “Everyone there was super-supportive,” LaMarca says. “They really value education, and they value their teachers, regardless of where you came from. They never looked down upon us. They never questioned our skills, our training or anything.”

IT’S ALL ABOUT THE STUDENTS

Both LaMarca and Sander agree that making connections with students was and is the best part of the job. They also believe that TFA was beneficial to them personally and to the state of public education in Texas as a whole.

“In the short run, being a part of Teach for America exposed me to the educational inequities that exist in our country,” LaMarca says. “In the long run, it inspires me to remain in education and work to provide equal educational opportunities for all students.”

While not in the classroom any longer, LaMarca doesn’t rule out ever returning.

“[Teaching] is really challenging work; it’s really time consuming,” LaMarca says. “I just needed a break from classroom teaching. I might go back at some point in my life. I’m really interested in higher education, and after working in a high school for five years, you want to see the next level—where your students are going. I’m really interested in that transition between high school and college.” LaMarca is still involved with TFA as a member of the Austin alumni board, which provides outreach and networking opportunities to former TFA participants.

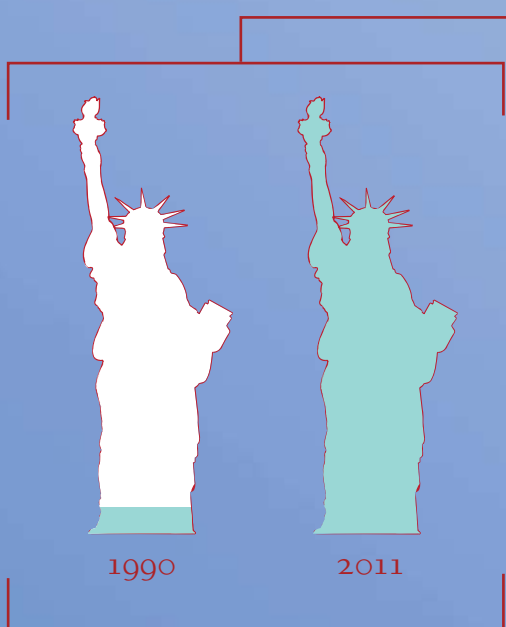
Sander plans to stay in education once this year is over. “I believe that the biggest benefit of [the program] for both me and my students is the opportunity to learn from each other,” he says. “In my classroom, I do not feel that I am the only teacher. Each day, I learn from them as we explore the content, they ask questions, and we encourage each other to reach our goals.”



This article is the first in an occasional *ATPE News* series examining the wide variety of educators who teach the public school students of Texas. Look for articles in future issues covering other types of educators, including those certified through alternative certification programs, male teachers, second- and third-career educators, and more.

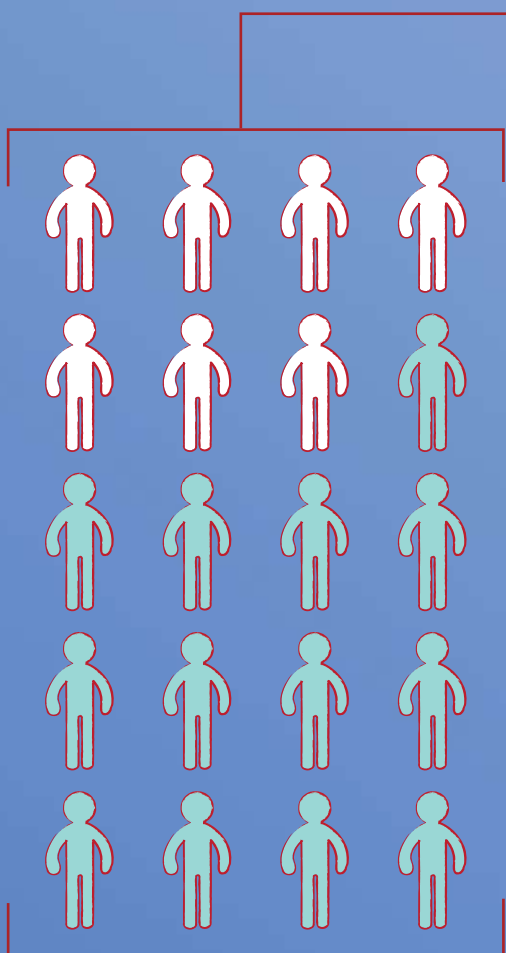


Examining the stats



Since 1990, the program's inaugural year, Teach for America (TFA) has grown from 500 members to more than 8,200. Out of that 8,200, 89 percent have college leadership experience. Applicants' average GPA is 3.6 on a 4.0 scale, and 20 percent are the first in their family to attend college. And although these educators aren't "traditional," some studies show that they are making an impact. A 2009 University of North Carolina study found that middle school students taught by TFA members received an extra half year of learning in math. In December, a report published by Dallas ISD showed that TFA educators outranked other Dallas ISD teachers in math and language arts (when measured by the district's controversial Classroom Effectiveness Index). The turnover rate in this population was also low, with 68 of the 70 teachers who taught during the 2009-10 school year returning to teach during 2010-11.

On the flip side, a study by researchers at the University of Texas and California State University reported last June that TFA educators start out at a disadvantage—not having gone through traditional educator preparation—and that although they make progress during their two years of teaching, many don't stick around long enough to continue that forward momentum. A 2008 Harvard study found that only about 28 percent of TFA educators are still in the teaching profession five years later.



Some do continue to work in or for education, however. According to the TFA website, out of more than 20,000 alumni, 65 percent work in the field of education, and 450 serve as leaders in schools. More than 500 have gone on to work in careers in which they can advocate for public education.

In January, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) performed an audit of TFA's performance in Texas. In 2010, the Legislature allocated \$8 million to fund the program; with a budget deficit looming, it's essential to know if that money is being well spent. (As of press time, TFA's \$600,000 of funding had been removed from the Texas House of Representatives' base budget, but that could change by the time the budget passes.) The Legislature tasked TEA with comparing the performances of students taught by TFA educators, students taught by educators who have degrees in education and those taught by educators who got their certificates through alternative certification programs. The TEA study, performed by researchers at the University of Texas at Dallas, found that TFA teachers are being placed in high-need areas, but the program could increase efforts to recruit with more diversity; in the four areas of Texas where TFA members are placed, most traditional educators are Hispanic while the TFA members are likely to be white. The study found that the retention rate of TFA members in their first two years of teaching is higher than that of their peers but that the rate drops once the two-year commitment to the program is over.

The study also found that TFA members are making a positive impact in high school mathematics and contributing to closing the math achievement gap for these students. TFA members are also performing better than other teachers in teaching English/language arts/reading (ELAR) to African-American high school students; however, their gains are lower in teaching ELAR to elementary and high school Hispanic students. Download a copy of the TEA study at <http://portals.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=2147495762>.