

Study stirs teaching controversy

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

MONTREAL — Your local teachers' college may be no Harvard, but new research suggests it produces teachers that are just as good.

Stanford University researchers examining the test scores of more than 130,000 students in Houston public schools found that teachers with state-approved certification, usually obtained through up to four years at a teachers' college, helped produce better scores than those without it. In many instances, they also outperformed those who came through Teach for America, a well-regarded program that recruits graduates of Ivy League colleges and other elite schools.

TFA officials and others question the findings, presented here on Friday at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. They charge that the study is at best preliminary, using only a small sample of TFA teachers. They also note that its lead author is a longtime TFA critic.

"We embrace evaluation and we will embrace this evaluation, once researchers are able to review it," says Wendy Kopp, the program's founder and president.

Teachers' colleges have come under heavy scrutiny in recent years, with opponents saying they should be revamped, if not abolished. They say teacher preparation should focus more on subject matter, such as math or history, and less on instructional theory. The criticisms, along with chronic teacher shortages in urban and rural school districts, have led most to develop quicker, less theory-laden paths to teaching, minimizing formal preparation. Most make use of emergency permits or waivers from state certification requirements.

The new findings challenge that approach. They suggest that at least in elementary school, students of teachers with standard certification have higher scores on skills tests than those of uncertified educators. It also takes on TFA, which recruits new college graduates to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools. TFA provides training through a five-week summer institute, classroom observation and on-the-job workshops on classroom management, literacy and other topics.

Last month, TFA announced that it had received a record 17,000 applications for its 2005 "corps," 29% more than in 2004. It also said 12% of Yale's graduating class applied, as did 11% at Dartmouth and Amherst colleges and 8% at Princeton and Harvard universities.

Supporters note that school administrators usually place TFA teachers in their neediest schools, with few complaints.

"Very little of the criticism of TFA comes from the field, or from the people charged with producing results for underserved kids," says Andrew Rotherham, director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute and editor of the blog, www.eduwonk.com.

"The overwhelming majority (of criticism) comes from the colleges of education, and that's telling. I have yet to hear of a superintendent in a large urban setting say, 'Please don't send Teach for America teachers here.' On the contrary — most of the leading superintendents want more."

The Stanford researchers, led by Linda Darling-Hammond, a teacher quality researcher and TFA critic, looked at reading and math data from 1995 to 2002 on three standardized tests. The researchers correlated the data to the credentials of more than 4,000 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers. They found that the state-certified teachers outperformed others, even when controlling for students' prior achievement and other factors. As with previous studies, this one found that teachers without standard certification were "disproportionately likely" to be teaching black and Latino students, as well as lower-income students.

It also found that the students of TFA teachers did about as well as those with other uncertified teachers, but not as well as those with certified teachers. Performance improved once TFA teachers got certification.


The research confirms previous findings — including a large-scale, randomized study released last June that favorably compared TFA teachers with colleagues teaching similar groups. But the new study also suggests that teachers in general perform better after they're trained more extensively, says Darling-Hammond.

"Our study doesn't say you shouldn't hire Teach for America teachers. Our study says everyone benefits from preparation, including Teach for America teachers — that they became more effective when they became certified."

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