

James Ray and Ellen Wood: Let's grow the successful Teach for America corps in DISD



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Dallas ISD trustees will have the opportunity at Thursday's meeting to extend a five-year contract with Teach for America, a decision that would allow the pipeline that brings high-quality teachers into the district and leaders into our city to continue to flow.

Results from Teach for America's first two years in the Dallas school district, presented at a recent board of trustees' briefing, show early success that is compelling and incontrovertible. Quantitative and qualitative evidence, from student achievement data to principals' testimony, overwhelmingly highlights the effectiveness of the Teach for America-Dallas ISD partnership and underscores the need for its continuation.

For example, DISD reports that TFA teachers are, on average, performing in the top third of *all* math and science teachers in the district in only their first year. In other words, TFA first-year teachers are stacking up well, relative to experienced math and science teachers, not just their first-year peers. DISD trustees should be commended for bringing the Teach for America program to Dallas and encouraged to continue making decisions, such as this, that put students first.

We have seen a number of actions taken by the school trustees in recent months that are putting Dallas ISD on a path for long-term success. Our community, meanwhile, is heavily investing in the idea that a high-quality education for all is a right, not a privilege, and that one solution to delivering on this promise is to attract, develop and retain a higher percentage of top-performing teachers. Building partnerships with supportive organizations such as Teach for America, which aligns with these beliefs and delivers for students, is a must.

Seeking out educators who can generate the kind of strong growth in student achievement that TFA teachers have shown to be capable of should be a driving factor in DISD decision-making. Additionally, the zealous pursuit of learning that these teachers bring to their classrooms is impacting campus culture. For example, when Dallas ISD principals were asked about their experience, 100 percent stated that TFA teachers were as prepared or better prepared than other first-year teachers on their campuses, and the principals called for expansion of the district's partnership with Teach for America. These principals already have promoted 15 TFA teachers into leadership positions on their campuses, creating an excellent pathway for future school leaders.

The long-term value of Teach for America is the talent network that is in place to recruit smart, hard-working and entrepreneurial teachers who believe all students can achieve at high levels and who work to ensure that they do. These young graduates might not otherwise be attracted to work in Dallas ISD, or even in the field of education, if it were not for Teach for America, which offers strong teacher support and an alumni network of education entrepreneurs. Of the original charter corps members who started teaching in Dallas two years ago, 75 percent remain in the field of education, an overwhelming majority of those still teaching in the classroom.

Some may wonder how a relatively small group of individuals can have a systemic impact on such a large operation. In answer, we steal from Margaret Mead and say, "Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." With more TFA teachers making a sustained impact beyond their two-year commitment and with their significant engagement in school leadership and extracurricular opportunities, this beachhead of talented educators, working with like-minded principals, veteran teachers and other young teachers, can make a significant impact on the trajectory of student outcomes and student engagement in the classrooms and in school leadership.

Expanding Teach for America's presence in Dallas ISD should be a no-brainer decision thanks to compelling performance data, overwhelming principal support and insignificant cost to the district. The upcoming vote will demonstrate whether the board is truly interested in students, or whether all the rhetoric about putting students first and creating a first-class public school system is just talk.

James Ray, co-founder of Dallas Kids First, can be reached at jamesdray@gmail.com. Ellen Wood, co-founder of the Teaching Trust, can be reached at ewood@teachingtrust.org.