

## Talent Selection: Choosing Aspiring Teachers with the Greatest Potential to Impact Student Achievement

By Josh Griggs, Vice President of Admissions, Teach For America

At Teach For America, selecting the members of our teaching corps is a high-stakes endeavor. We believe that teaching successfully in high-poverty communities is one of the most important and challenging jobs in the country. Our corps members lead classrooms where the average student is two to three grade levels behind, and they are charged with producing the dramatic academic progress necessary to catch up. Given the weight of this responsibility and the immense number of applicants to our corps—35,000 in 2009—it is critical that we identify those who have the greatest potential to be effective teachers in this context and who are committed to our approach to teaching. As a result, we are extremely selective; our 15-percent acceptance rate in 2009 was lower than many top colleges.

The 4,100 members of our 2009 corps are certainly an impressive group: Their average undergraduate GPA was 3.6, and nearly 90 percent held an undergraduate leadership position. Yet we are also looking for many qualities beyond those found on an applicant's resume. Every one of our admissions decisions is grounded in nearly a decade of research into how we can best recognize the potential for strong performance as a teacher.

We still have more to learn. Talent selection is challenging, and like any institution engaged in this endeavor, we recognize that it's an imperfect effort. Our commitment is to use data to get better every year, increasing the number of successful candidates who go on to be effective teachers and decreasing the number who struggle. In a recent study of teacher-preparation programs in New York City, the researchers suggested that "other programs could learn from Teach For America regarding the selection of candidates who are effective teachers in low-performing classrooms."<sup>1</sup> At a broader level, any organization striving to improve selection practices might find useful lessons in our approach to research and the development of our outcomes-driven selection model.

### What We Look For and Why

Since 2001, we have analyzed student achievement data to refine our admissions process. Before each recruiting season, we systematically consider what differentiates our most successful corps members, building on our previous findings to increase the chances that we're selecting individuals who are likely to be successful.

Over time, we have learned several lessons about the mind-sets, skills, and abilities that our most effective teachers share. As we applied these lessons to our selection process, we identified the applicant characteristics, or competencies, that correlate with effective teaching in the school districts where we place corps members. Here are six examples of the competencies we seek:

*Competency:* Demonstrated leadership and achievement—achieving ambitious, measurable results in academic, professional, extracurricular, or volunteer arenas

*Why we measure it:* Corps members are required to set ambitious goals for their students and themselves, and they work relentlessly to achieve measurable results on a daily basis.

*Competency:* Perseverance in the face of challenges

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<sup>1</sup> "Recruiting Effective Math Teachers, How Do Math Immersion Teachers Compare? Evidence from New York City." Don Boyd, Pam Grossman, Karen Hammerness, Hamp Lankford, Susanna Loeb, Matt Ronfeldt, and Jim Wyckoff. September 2009

*Why we measure it:* Corps members are taking on one of the greatest challenges of their lives.

*Competency:* Strong critical thinking skills

*Why we measure it:* Effective corps members gather and analyze data on their students' performance, address areas of concern, solve problems quickly in tricky situations, and continuously improve their methods.

*Competency:* The ability to influence and motivate others

*Why we measure it:* Successful corps members invest students and those who influence them in working hard to achieve big goals.

*Competency:* Organizational ability

*Why we measure it:* Effective corps members plan well and use time effectively with their students.

*Competency:* An understanding of and a desire to work relentlessly in pursuit of Teach For America's vision of educational equity and excellence

*Why we measure it:* Our mission—to build the movement to end educational inequity by enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in the effort—is extremely challenging and requires tremendous dedication.

Because many of these competencies are complex and nuanced, we gather evidence of them at each stage of our admissions process, looking for multiple examples so that we better understand each applicant and his or her strengths. Successful applicants excel in more than one competency, yet we recognize that no applicant will score perfectly in all of them.

By focusing on evaluating applicants' abilities and potential, rather than seeking out weaknesses, we can increase the reliability of our selectors' evaluations. With evidence mounting that teacher quality is the determining factor in raising student achievement levels, we don't want to risk turning down an applicant who has what it takes to excel in the classroom.

### **Our Selection Process**

More than 195,000 individuals have applied to Teach For America since our founding in 1990. Over time, we have refined our admissions process to offer multiple opportunities to understand an applicant's abilities and experiences.

The admissions process begins when candidates submit online application materials, including a resume and letter of intent, for review. The process is selective at all stages, and in each of the past few years, we have had to turn away several thousand applicants after reviewing their applications. The remaining candidates proceed to the second stage, a 30-minute phone interview. The third and final stage is a daylong in-person interview that includes a group discussion, sample teaching exercise, problem-solving activity, and written reflection. During the final evaluation, evidence collected at all three stages is carefully considered to determine the ultimate admissions decision.

A small number of applicants are invited directly to a final interview without attending a phone interview. This only happens when we have enough information from a candidate's written application to determine that he or she has a high likelihood of reaching the finalist round. These applicants are not necessarily admitted at higher rates than those invited to interview on the phone first; the written application is one important element among many in our admissions process.

## **Talent Selection: Lessons Learned**

As our understanding of what makes an effective teacher has developed, so have our selection model, process, and tools. Throughout our admissions process, we are focused on finding those applicants with the most potential to impact students in underserved urban and rural schools. Over the years, regular data analysis, observation, and reflection has yielded several key lessons that enable us to base our selection decisions on the most important outcome: student achievement.

*Lesson 1:* Gather accurate data to inform long-term improvement.

We use data to drive the development of our selection process over the long term, analyzing candidate ratings each year to identify which factors are associated with standout classroom performance. Good data strengthen our ongoing research into predicting teacher effectiveness at the selection stage.

*Lesson 2:* Develop a standard rubric for each competency.

Applicant evaluations involve many nuances. At each stage of our admissions process, we use a standardized rubric and scoring system. It's important to have a common language and understanding of candidates' strengths in order to make decisions based on a candidate's likelihood to lead students to high levels of academic gains.

*Lesson 3:* Invest time and resources in training selectors and assessing their knowledge before they begin their duties.

Strong data lead to strong decisions. By investing in selector training and assessment as well as standardizing our rubric, we increase the likelihood that applicants' scores are accurate and grounded in quality evidence.

*Lesson 4:* Employ checks and balances in the selection process.

By gauging applicants' competencies through multiple stages with various selectors, we can identify patterns across assessments. This system of checks and balances enables us to avoid relying on the determinations of any single selector. In addition, since 2005, we have been using statistical modeling, based on historical student achievement data, to help evaluate the likelihood that an applicant will lead students to make dramatic academic progress.

*Lesson 5:* Strive to continuously improve every element of the process.

As strong as we believe our admissions process is today, we are committed to further strengthening it through ongoing research and analysis. We work frequently with external researchers and firms to pilot new activities, questions, and assessments. One to two years down the road, we evaluate the resulting data to consider if we should more formally apply these elements to our decision-making process.

Teach For America's admissions model, process, and decision criteria will continue to evolve as we learn more. Through careful data collection and analysis, we aim to improve our selection effort incrementally with each year so that we are identifying applicants with the most potential to impact student achievement. This focus is essential in our work to train and develop high-quality teachers—and mounting research tells us that teacher quality is the most important factor in improving educational outcomes. That is the ultimate goal guiding our selection efforts, as in everything we do: to ensure that all of our nation's children have access to an excellent education.