

Does Teach for America Work?



Stephen Lovekin / Getty Images

Wendy Kopp

When Wendy Kopp's son Benjamin was 8 years old, he interviewed her for a school project on learning to overcome challenges. The topic was the founding of Teach for America, Kopp's bold experiment—which began as a 1989 Princeton University senior thesis—to convince recent elite-college grads to devote two years to teaching in struggling inner-city and rural public schools.

"I just don't understand," Benjamin asked his mother, "how if this is such a big problem—you know, kids not having the chance to have a good education—why would you ask people with no experience right out of college to solve it?"

Two decades into TFA's existence, Benjamin's question—recounted in his mother's new book, *A Chance to Make History*—remains a point of controversy. Though Teach for America began as an insurgent challenge to teachers' unions, teachers' colleges, and established school district hiring practices, today TFA is itself very much part of the American education establishment.

A power player in Washington education-policy debates and a favorite beneficiary of deep-pocketed philanthropists and corporations, TFA has 8,000 teachers working in 60 cities, and a network of 20,000 alumni spreading the school-reform gospel in fields such as banking, medicine, politics, and education itself. Its new sister organization, Leadership for Educational Equality, is aimed at helping TFA alumni win public office; some, such as Colorado Senator Michael Johnston and Washington, D.C. City Councilman Sekou Biddle, already have.

And it's fair to wonder if Kopp, 44, has her own political ambitions. In an interview at TFA's loft-like headquarters near New York's Penn Station, she smiles when asked if Mayor Mike Bloomberg spoke to her about replacing former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. Despite a long relationship between TFA and the New York City schools, he did not, she says.

The job went to former Hearst magazines chief *Cathie Black*, who had no professional experience in public education, and who sent her own children to private boarding school. Kopp, whose four kids attend public schools on Manhattan's West Side, says running the city's schools would be a dream job, far more attractive than heading to Washington, D.C. to succeed Arne Duncan as the secretary of Education.

Kopp is not shy about saying what she'd do differently as New York City schools chancellor. While the Bloomberg administration is fighting the United Federation of Teachers in court for the right to release to the news media individual teachers' "value added" ratings—an estimate of how effective a teacher is at improving his or her students' standardized test scores—Kopp says she finds the idea "baffling" and believes doing so would undermine trust among teachers and between teachers and administrators.

"The principals of very high performing schools would all say their No. 1 strategy is to build extraordinary teams," Kopp said. "I can't imagine it's a good organizational strategy to go publish the names of teachers and one data point about whether they are effective or not in the newspaper."

The chancellor job is "the best job in the world. I think it's just awesome," she gushes. Then she catches herself. "That being said, other than my job. I've really drunk all the Teach for America Kool-Aid myself."