

Eric Scroggins: Leading for Educational Equity



Widely regarded as one of the premier social entrepreneurship organizations in the country, Teach for America attracts the "best and brightest" college graduates to teach in poor urban and rural schools. In this fast track program, corps members prepare for teaching through a five week pre-service summer training program and then become teachers in their own classrooms. TFAers commit to teach for two years at the same school. When TFA launched in 1989, 2,400 college graduates applied to be part of the initial cohort. This year, over 40,000 graduates from top colleges and universities will apply to TFA. The Foundation supports TFA's Early Childhood Education Initiative.

"Teach for America is not an alternate route to teacher certification. It is not about addressing the teacher shortage. TFA is a leadership development strategy. It prepares participants to be a force for change so all children can get a quality education," stresses Eric Scroggins, Executive Director of TFA Bay Area. This relentless focus on educational equity, the lodestar for TFA, fuels Scroggins' urgency to boost the Bay Area program. Over the three years of his leadership, the program has grown 118% and now has a budget of \$6 million, all raised locally.

Like many TFAers, Scroggins took an unexpected path to teaching. Growing up in a small southern Illinois town, he is the first in his family to graduate from college. Scroggins earned a full scholarship to the prestigious Washington University in St. Louis and was on course for a career in medicine. But, his own academic struggles at the university (he later excelled and graduated Phi Beta Kappa) and his experiences volunteering with St. Louis youth had a searing impact on him. He saw first hand the immense obstacles facing low-income, low-achieving St. Louis youth and realized that the scarce options open to these young people were directly related to the quality of their education. "They had no safety net. They were part of an insidious cycle of poverty and failed schooling."

TFA was the perfect vehicle for Scroggins to act on his passion about educational equity. TFA provided an opportunity to jump in immediately and be part of a broader network for change. His TFA placement was teaching science at a K-8 school in the South Bronx. The school's outdated textbooks and inadequate resources would hardly spark a love of science, but even more troubling to Scroggins was the fact that his students were already years behind peers in more affluent districts. This disparity motivated him to create a high school level Regents Program in earth science for his middle school students. It was no small feat to get school and district leaders to allow him to teach the course, but in the end, he prevailed, and his students astonished nay-sayers by passing at a rate comparable to high schoolers.

Scroggins was later tapped to go back "home" and launch TFA's expansion to St. Louis. Displaying the determination, perspicaciousness, and entrepreneurship that are hallmarks of TFA, Scroggins developed

pivotal partnerships with the school district and funders, and labored over the nuts and bolts of creating systems for recruitment, placement and professional development. His efforts paid off and in two years, he grew the program from an inaugural corps of 25 to over 150 today.

In 2006, Scroggins took up another challenge – strengthening and scaling up TFA's Bay Area program. He bolstered the program such that 330 corps members are now teaching in high profile local districts including San Francisco and Oakland. Scroggins also launched TFA's Early Education Initiative, which aims to address the achievement gap before children start elementary school. He is particularly passionate about this Initiative because it is a critical piece of TFA's change agenda and it provides a plum opportunity to create policy leaders who will advance improvements in early childhood education.

Diversity is a powerful but often unrecognized benefit that TFA brings to communities, emphasizes Scroggins. Corps member cohorts are more diverse than the districts they serve in terms of socio-economic background, race, sexuality, and representation from elite colleges. Connecting students with these diverse role models sparks inspiration and aspirations, notes Scroggins. "Imagine the kind of statement it makes when an African American graduate from Princeton is teaching in a low income, inner city school."

Scroggins is immensely proud of what TFA is accomplishing. "Communities across the country are vying for TFA. We bring a critical mass of bright, energetic young leaders to teach in the highest need classrooms and they are showing their fortitude." After years of skepticism about the effectiveness of TFAers who "drop in" to schools for two years, there is growing evidence of their impact and continuing commitment to the field. A 2006 study conducted in North Carolina high schools found that corps members were as effective as, and in some cases more effective than, teachers who are fully certified. In the Bay Area, students in classes led by corps members made academic gains of 1.5 or more grade levels in one academic year. And while some TFAers fulfill their two year stint and leave the field, two-thirds stay in education – 44% are teachers; 9% are principals or assistant principals; and 19% work for education-related nonprofits. TFA is also cultivating a new breed of school reform leaders. Former TFAers lead top tier social entrepreneurship enterprises such as New Leaders for New Schools, the New Teacher Project and Kipp Schools.

Scroggins sees strong alignment between TFA's work and President Obama's education agenda. "There is a great match between TFA's goals and the new administration's. Obama believes in scale that works. He is open to innovation, to trying new things. Like TFA, he is not locked into old ways of doing things." Indeed, TFA and President Obama share the vision that *all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education*. According to Scroggins, "TFA is building this generation's civil rights movement." He and 14,000 fellow TFA participants and alums are examples of TFA's big picture strategy of creating lifelong crusaders for educational equity.