



## There Are No Silver Bullets<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Examining the role of Teach For America in education reform from an insider's perspective as a current Corps Member, the author seeks to demonstrate how Teach For America is a partner in the larger education reform movement, not its silver bullet. Using anecdotes from her time in the classroom, the author seeks to place a human factor on the effects the achievement gap and inequitable education has on students and demonstrate how the only way to address these effects is to learn and adapt successful strategies from all who seek to reform American education.*

“Hi Ms. Morman.”

Even though I have been teaching for over a year, it still catches me off guard when I am referred to as “Ms. Morman,” a title that is surely reserved for my mother or a far older person than I. It is especially true when I am referred to as “Ms. Morman” outside the four cinder block walls of the rural Arkansas high school where I teach.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Morman is a 2011 graduate of Ohio Northern University with degrees in Political Science and Spanish. An Ohio native, she now lives in the Mississippi Delta along the banks of the Mississippi River in northwest Arkansas where she teaches high school Spanish as a 2011 Teach For America Corps Member. In addition to teaching Spanish I, II, and III courses, she is also active as Student Council and Spanish Club advisor at the high school. She serves the Mississippi Delta region as a Development Fellow and Learning Team leader and her local church as a lector. Upon the completion of her teaching commitment, Ms. Morman plans to attain her MPA in non-profit management and economic development from Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs, hoping to work for a non-profit that seeks to support transformational extracurricular experiences and activities for underserved student populations.

I slowly turn from the self-checkout at Walmart to see one of my former students, the star athlete and charismatic big man on campus, with a group of friends. Back home for a weekend visit, we chat for a few minutes about how he is doing at college, where he is a pre-med major on his way to becoming a doctor. This is where the conversation changes.

He tells me college has been harder than anticipated. I ask him how his science classes are going, and, with an embarrassed chuckle, he mentions how his first college science test was a wake-up call. It is that comment that sets off an unmistakable twinge of guilt as this student, who was so successful in high school, discusses the difficult transition he faces in college.

As you read this, you might think it is normal to adjust to the rigor of a college classroom; such a transition is to be expected and is normal. But, for me, that comment meant so much more. It was a reminder of the inadequate education, preparation for college, and his future, that “Lester” received. You see, I am a Teach For America (TFA) Corps Member (CM). I am a member of an organization that is known for serving schools and districts that are far from exemplary. For me, Lester’s one-line comment reinforced the realities of the education he achieved, and mine, and others’, complicity in these failures, failures that stood in the way of Lester’s, and his classmates’, opportunity to obtain an excellent education.

My path to TFA was typical. A precocious political science major, I had been interested in education policy since high school. A string of unsuccessful levies for a new school building made me acutely aware of the pressures that exist within the education system to best serve teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and especially students. Following an internship with the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions where I supported staff members as they drafted a new version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I was ready to try teaching first hand. I thought, “Who am I to offer policy prescriptions to those who have made the education of students their lives’ work?” But more than any other motive, it was my desire to pay forward the efforts of those teachers and professors who helped shape me into the person I was that led me to jump into the achievement gap and education reform trenches.

After making my way through the application process, I was one of 5,000 new 2011 CMs selected to help close the achievement gap by setting high, attainable goals and expectations for our students. I was placed, and continue to teach, in the Mississippi Delta--one of the 46 regions TFA serves. Nestled along the Mississippi River, the Delta region is the land of cotton, the blues, the civil rights movement, and tremendous educational inequity. The Delta spans the states of Mississippi and Arkansas to create the largest Corps region in the country, in terms of both CMs and geographic size. I teach in northeast Arkansas, ten minutes from the Mississippi River, in the far northern portion of the Mississippi Delta region.

When people think of TFA and the achievement gap, they usually think of state-tested subjects—English and math—or hard-hitting academic subjects like the sciences, or the educational building blocks found in elementary classrooms. I, however, teach a subject where the achievement gap and lack of equitable educational opportunities is just as recognizable and provides just as big a challenge. I teach Spanish to ninth through twelfth graders.

I see the results of the achievement gap each day in my classroom, whether through struggles with grammar because of an ineffective grasp of their first language, a lack of basic geography knowledge, or the absence of educational investment and engagement from years of negative reinforcement because of educational failures and the education system itself. In spite of that, through hard work from the kids (and their teacher), 80% of my students scored the

equivalent of Proficient or higher on the end of year exam this past school year. But, how are these results, and the results of countless other Corps Members, achieved?

The seeds of these successes are established during the summer Institute where CMs are trained in the pedagogical skills of effective teachers. In what we affectionately refer to as “teacher boot camp,” we learn how to backwards plan from summative assessments, create effective lesson plans and objectives, establish firm expectations, consequences, and rewards systems, and expose students to the expanded opportunities educational success and attainment will provide. It is this component that also receives criticism from those who challenge TFA’s credibility and position as a partner in educational reform.

How can someone learn to be an effective teacher in only five weeks? The fact is that you do not and cannot; it takes years of constant reflection, training, and development to truly master the teaching profession. However, a person can acquire the skills that establish the building blocks of a master teacher. Before a person arrives at the Institute, he or she reads copious amounts of educational theories and materials that have been thoroughly researched and continuously modified based on the data and results CMs and other educators produce. The organization uses a vast number of surveys from students and teachers, in addition to continuous professional development, student data from exams, and objective and student learning expectations (SLE) mastery, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers the organization trains. Further, Corp Members engage in self-reflection about individual areas of strength, improvement, results, and student achievement which leads to a relentless pursuit of what can be different, what can be better, and how, ultimately, CMs can ensure that students get the best possible results and outcomes. This is one of the ways TFA seeks to expand and rely on existing pedagogical and educational theories. However, CMs experience a steep learning curve as they move from the Institute, where each Corps Member teaches one class per day to 20+ kids, to teaching 80+ kids per day for eight plus hours.

Skeptics of Teach For America often question its place in the education reform movement due to the two-year commitment of its Corps Members. From the experience my service as a CM has provided, in addition to the training and reflection that are expected as part of our development, it is obvious that we see ourselves as partners in education reform at all levels of the movement. It must be that way in order for all children to attain an excellent education regardless of where they are born and to make a lasting dent in, and to eventually destroy, the achievement gap in the United States. By exhibiting humility and respect towards veteran teachers, administrators, parents, and support staff, we, together, can parlay our knowledge and experiences with the kids we serve to achieve the best results possible. Yes, TFA is an educational reform movement, but only inasmuch as it takes the best components of education reform and seeks to concentrate them in highly motivated and results-oriented teachers.

Though the commitment of one CM is only two years, the attitudes, partnerships, and trajectory of change that one establishes during his or her service is one that is continued by subsequent Corps Members, teachers, administrators, parents, and, above all, the students that we CMs teach.

The vision and attitude of TFA and the CMs it selects, in addition to making sure that all students have the opportunity to attain an excellent education, is that students who are served by TFA-trained teachers will have the skills, attitudes, and mindsets to continue to seek out and advocate for their own educational outcomes. It is this attitude, that I am an advocate for my own education and that I have the skills to attain an excellent education, which sets TFA apart from

others. While there is a significant quantitative component to the work of Teach For America through teacher and student surveys and tracking of students' academic growth and mastery, this qualitative function of providing students with the skills and traits they need in order to be successful in the rest of their educational lives is one that, at least for me, means the most.

Ultimately, it is not the mission of TFA and its CMs to have other education reformers follow their lead; it is the mission of the organization and those who serve it to facilitate and provide the human capital necessary to make lasting, transformational change in the everyday education of the students served to ensure the students have the skills and mindsets necessary to attain an excellent education. The organization provides a pathway for skilled and successful individuals who would not ordinarily enter the classroom a way to do so. We seek to find the best pedagogical strategies and use them in our classrooms and share them with other educators regardless of how they entered education and the reform movement. Additionally, by providing a pathway into education that might not otherwise have been pursued, Teach For America offers an opportunity for these individuals to become educational leaders, whether in schools, districts, government, communities, or non-profits, that will continue our progress to make "one day" a reality.

Last spring, I taught a culture lesson centered on the Chilean student protests in my Spanish II classes. Our activity for the day was to discuss how Chilean student protests demanding equitable education were similar to struggles for educational equity in our own country. The day was significant for me because of the varying responses I received from my students. On one hand, I received the overwhelming sense that my students know that other high schools do not operate like ours and that they are receiving inferior education in our Delta community. However, far more informative was a comment made by "Jayshawn" about his experiences after coming to our school district. He made the comment that before he came to our school, he was a middle-of-the-road student; but here at our school, he is one of the top students in his class. Though he didn't realize the significance of his statement, it was one that reminded me of our mission to make sure that a zip code does not determine the quality and rigor of the education a student receives.

It is comments like these from both Lester and Jayshawn that remind all of us who are invested in the fight for education equality and reform that we still have a long way to go in order to achieve our mission. However, by partnering and sharing successful results and strategies and by remaining focused on qualitative and quantitative academic progress, we will be able to achieve the dreams of "one day," someday. It will require hard-working, dedicated individuals in all facets of education and education reform who have firm visions and goals for those they teach and reach on a daily basis in order to achieve that goal. But, it is undeniable, after seeing the faces and dreams of students like Jayshawn, Lester, and the millions like them across the country, that it is a worthy goal for all of us invested in education reform, regardless of how we entered the movement, to continue to fight and work toward.

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<sup>1</sup> All opinions expressed within this article are those of the author and not of Teach For America, its employees, Corps Members, or subsidiaries.

All students' names have been changed, though the stories are real.