

# *The Balanced View:*

## Research Update

*Summary of new research on Balanced View topics*

*Summer 2004*

### **Alternative Certification**

A new report released by the Mathematica research organization details the results of a national study on Teach For America (TFA), a well-known alternative certification program that seeks to attract recent college graduates—most of whom have not majored in education—to the teaching profession. TFA recruits from top universities around the country, focusing its efforts on individuals who possess strong academic skills and leadership capabilities, and who are willing to teach for a minimum of two years in urban and rural low-income schools.

Mathematica researchers analyzed 2002-03 test scores from 2,000 students in Baltimore, Houston, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, and New Orleans. Within the participating districts, students in grades 1-5 were randomly assigned to TFA teachers and “control teachers”—a group that included traditionally certified, alternatively certified, and uncertified teachers. The key findings were as follows:

- ◆ TFA teachers had a positive impact on the mathematics achievement of their students. Average math scores of TFA students were significantly higher than those of control students. The impact was equivalent to an effect size of approximately 0.15 of a standard deviation, which translates roughly to 10% of a grade equivalent, or about one additional month of math instruction.
- ◆ TFA teachers did not have an impact on reading achievement. TFA and control students experienced the same rate of growth—an increase equivalent to one percentile.
- ◆ The impact of TFA was similar for different types of teachers—“novice” TFA teachers versus “novice” control teachers, TFA teachers versus certified teachers only, or TFA teachers versus uncertified teachers. In all comparisons, students of TFA teachers significantly outperformed students taught by control teachers in math; they performed about the same in reading.
- ◆ TFA impacts were also similar across different subgroups of students, e.g., for boys and girls, or for different racial ethnic groups.
- ◆ TFA teachers had no substantial impact on whether or not students were retained in grade or assigned to summer school.
- ◆ As for findings on discipline, absenteeism, and behavior, the results varied by data source. Estimates drawn from student records showed that TFA teachers had no impact on these outcomes. However, teacher survey data showed that TFA teachers were more likely than control teachers to report having problems with student disruptions and physical conflicts among students in their classrooms.

The Mathematica study also sheds some light on the background characteristics of TFA teachers and their control counterparts. Major findings, here, include the following:

- ◆ Far more TFA teachers than control teachers graduated from colleges classified as “most competitive,” “highly competitive,” or “very competitive” by *Barron’s Profile of American Colleges*: 70% versus 2%.
- ◆ TFA teachers had less education-specific training than control teachers: 25% had a Master’s or BA degree in education, compared with 55% among the control group.
- ◆ 51% of TFA teachers had earned a regular or initial teacher certification by the end of the study year, well below the 67% for the control teachers.
- ◆ In terms of demographic characteristics, more TFA teachers than control teachers were male (31% versus 13%) and white, non-Hispanic (67% versus 11%). TFA teachers were also younger—their median age was 24 versus 35 for control teachers.
- ◆ There were no differences between TFA and control teachers with respect to within-year attrition rates. Long-term attrition rates were not examined.

The Mathematica researchers concluded that TFA is making progress toward its primary mission of reducing inequities in education—it supplies low-income schools with academically talented teachers who can contribute to the achievement of students. Furthermore, the success of TFA teachers is not dependent on extensive exposure to teacher practice or training. Even though TFA teachers generally lacked any formal teacher training beyond that provided by TFA, they were able to produce higher student test scores than other teachers in their schools—not just other novice teachers or uncertified teachers, but also veterans and certified teachers. Finally, the increased achievement offered by TFA teachers comes at no direct cost to schools—TFA teachers are paid the same as other teachers, and school districts, typically, contribute only \$1,500 per teacher to offset recruiting costs. This contrasts with other interventions that have been shown to increase achievement, such as class size reduction, but at substantial direct costs.

The Mathematica report can be found at <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/teach.pdf>