

Gillard's "Teach for Australia": a corporate-backed assault on teaching

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On April 21, federal Education Minister Julia Gillard and Victorian state premier John Brumby launched Teach for Australia (TFA), a program that will commence next year in around 60 of the state's disadvantaged government schools.

Graduates from TFA will front classrooms in January, followed by a nationwide rollout of the scheme that is closely modelled on Teach for America and the UK's Teach First.

According to Gillard, the initiative will attract "the best and brightest university graduates" and place them in disadvantaged schools "where they can make a difference". It is being sold by Labor as part of a raft of measures aimed at lifting "teacher quality and performance" and "improving educational outcomes".

Like every other aspect of the Rudd government's "education revolution", Teach for Australia constitutes a regressive shift in education policy. In this case, unqualified teachers will be parachuted into low socioeconomic status schools after a six-week crash course.

After two years, TFA "associates" will graduate with a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching. Yet formal training will be limited to just six weeks of intensive training over December-January 2009/10, along with "self-paced study" delivered online by the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education. According to TFA's publicity firm—Haystac Positive Outcomes—there may be additional "intense on-campus blocks of study", although curriculum details are not yet publicly available. TFA has been condemned by education deans nationally. (See: "Education deans oppose Teach for Australia: 'Teachers need a depth of theoretical understanding'"')

"What on earth are you thinking?"

Speaking at the National Press Club in August 2008, Rudd claimed that Teach First and Teach for America were "innovative and successful". Gillard has been equally effusive: "It's made a huge difference overseas, it can make a huge difference here," she declared at the TFA launch held in April, "and I think this is an exciting day for Australian education and, particularly, for Victorian schools who will be in the lead in this initiative."

The Rudd government's strident claims are refuted by a large body of evidence.

On August 17, an article ("The view from America: what on earth are you thinking?") by David Berliner, Regents' Professor of Education at Arizona State University, appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "The news that Australia is following the United States in introducing a program which puts untrained teachers in the classroom came as a real shock to us here.

"Simply put, you are being conned. Teach for America, the model of your national program, is not effective in helping students in poverty learn more..."

Teach for America was introduced in 1990. There are currently 7,300 TFA "cadets" in the United States, and nearly 17,000 have graduated over the past two decades. The American scheme was marketed with the same upbeat assertions now being made by Gillard, but the results have been wholly negative.

Several major studies show, unsurprisingly, that uncertified Teach for America recruits have presided over significantly *poorer* student results than those obtained by their professionally trained and fully accredited counterparts.

A 2002 study by Berliner and Ildiko Laczkó-Kerr from the Arizona Department of Education (*The Effectiveness of "Teach for America" and Other Under-certified Teachers on Student Academic Achievement: A Case of Harmful Public Policy*) provides a damning assessment. They found TFA teachers produced 20 percent less academic growth a year than graduate teachers with full certification. An entire section of their report was devoted to TFA and should be required reading for Australian teachers.

The Laczkó-Kerr and Berliner report provides excerpts from several independent studies, including a 1997 survey authored by Professor Linda Darling-Hammond: "Four separate evaluations found that TFA's training program did not prepare candidates to succeed with students, despite the noticeable intelligence and enthusiasm of many of the recruits. Most criticism of a corps member's teaching behaviour (classroom management was the greatest area of concern, followed by insufficient knowledge of the fundamentals of teaching and learning) was qualified by the cooperating teachers' perceptions of limitations of the program in providing the corps member with adequate practice or theory to be successful."

And further down: "Jonathan Schorr (1993), a former TFA teacher, describes the inadequate training and preparation that he and other TFA teachers received prior to being placed into schools. He notes, 'just eight-weeks training is not enough for teachers'. Schorr admits, 'I was not a

successful teacher, and the loss to the students was real and large’.”

In his recent warning to Australian teachers, Berliner cited a study published on August 10 by University of Colorado’s Professor Donald Easton-Brooks. His review of elementary grade students found they scored higher in reading when taught by certified versus uncertified teachers. Significantly (in light of Labor’s claims that TFA recruits will assist disadvantaged schools) the “achievement gap” between African-American and white students narrowed slightly only under the supervision of qualified teachers.

Easton-Brooks concluded: “The findings suggest that the presence of a certified teacher is associated with higher growth in reading for both African American and European American students but is marginally more important for African-American students.”

Corporate sponsors

A telling feature of Teach for Australia is that those behind the scheme have no professional teaching knowledge. The scheme’s authors are not educators. Rather, Teach for Australia, is, like its UK and American predecessors, sponsored by major corporations and by private institutions that will reap commercial reward from the Rudd government’s pro-market education reforms.

The organisation responsible for implementing Labor’s Teach for Australia is a non-government organisation of the same name. Headquartered in Melbourne, the latter had its genesis in the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership (CYIPL). Under Noel Pearson’s leadership, CYIPL pioneered welfare quarantining and other right-wing measures in the Northern Territory, working closely with the previous Howard government.

TFA’s chief executive officer is Harvard graduate Melodie Potts Rosevear. A former consultant at the Boston Consulting Group in Atlanta, Georgia, she is a founding member of CYIPL where she became “Think Tank Coordinator” in 2004, writing TFA’s original business plan while employed there.

The “team” at TFA includes Operations Manager Sek-Loong Tan, also from BCG, and Eleanor Donovan a former management consultant at McKinsey & Company who is TFA’s Selection and Placement Manager. Donovan (according to TFA’s website) is “responsible for the process of identifying appropriate teaching candidates and schools to participate in Teach for Australia, and for the matching of selected candidates and schools.” She has no educational expertise.

Approached this week by the *World Socialist Web Site*, TFA refused to divulge how much public funding they will receive via the Rudd government’s \$550 million Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership. But Brumby has already announced that funding from this misnamed “partnership” will be backed by an additional \$7.6 million to “kick the program off”.

Teach for Australia’s corporate sponsors include the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), top-tier legal firms Freehills, and Corrs Chamber and Westgarth, along with property firm Stockland, and the ubiquitous

Microsoft.

TFA is a “win-win” for sponsors. At a basic level the program addresses a well-known problem in graduate recruitment programs targeting bright students—after years of intensive academic work they often arrive on the job with poor people skills and require considerable Human Resource management. TFA provides the perfect answer, and does so moreover with the federal and state governments footing the bill.

More fundamentally however, the thrust of TFA, with its strong corporate focus, is in line with efforts by capitalist governments throughout the world to break the back of public education and ensure that it is run on a market-driven basis.

BCG’s core involvement with TFA—the company is also represented on TFA’s governing board—points to an interlocking web of right-wing education reform and commercial interest. The connections are particularly stark in Victoria. In 2003 the Bracks Labor government hired BCG to formulate a ten-year workforce development strategy for government schools, subsequently incorporated in that year’s Education Blueprint. BCG’s report urged a “culture of continuous performance and development”, demanding measures to “weed out” “underperforming teachers”. Its recommendations are included in Labor’s second Education Blueprint adopted last year by the Brumby government.

TFA boasts their “associates” and alumni will act as a “force for change” in education. But buyer beware! In the United States TFA has created a layer of “social entrepreneurs” and school administrators committed to the ongoing privatization and destruction of public education.

The new Chancellor of Public Schools in Washington D.C., Michelle Rhee, is a Teach for America alumni. Rhee has closed 23 schools, and fired 34 principals since she took office in 2007. In June this year she terminated 250 teachers and 500 teachers’ aides. Of those Rhee fired, 80 were tenured staff, while 60 were probationary first- or second-year teachers. She has drawn up a list of 17 “categories” upon which teacher “competency” is measured. Once a teacher is deemed deficient in any six of these, a 90-day mechanism is imposed, including scheduled and unscheduled classroom observations by school administrators. Rhee’s deputy chancellor is Kaya Henderson, a fellow Teach for America alumni.

Teach for America alumni in New York, Texas and Louisiana are spearheading similar “reforms”.

The American program is part of a wider de-skilling of the teaching profession. Unqualified teachers are entering US schools in growing numbers. In more than a dozen US states approximately 30 percent of teachers do not have a bachelor’s degree or full state licensure and certification. As the deepest recession since the 1930s takes hold, many US states are facing bankruptcy, with the resort to under-qualified—and hence cheaper—teachers accelerating. Teach for America cadets are already being used by some school administrators to fill gaps created by mass sackings. In North Carolina, the district of Charlotte-Mecklenberg laid off more than 400 certified teachers in late May, simultaneously bringing in 100 Teach for America cadets, who will be paid at a lower rate.

Peter Gorman, superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools Authority, attempted to justify the district’s cost-cutting measures, baldly declaring Teach for America recruits would only “bump the underperforming teachers”.

Driven by the Rudd government's "education revolution" and powerful corporate interests, Teach for Australia will help spearhead similar ruthless privatisation and pro-market reforms against teachers and students. The program—like every aspect of the Rudd government's agenda—is being enforced by the Australian Education Union, which has enabled TFA to proceed in Victorian schools based on the suppression of any discussion and debate among teachers.



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