

28 February 2020

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION IN REMOTE AND COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

Teach For Australia (TFA) is an ambitious non-government organisation confronting educational disadvantage: the reality that a child's background, postcode or circumstances can determine the type of education they can access, and subsequently their agency and opportunities as an adult.

Through our flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP), TFA recruits, trains, supports and empowers high-calibre people from all walks of life to become 'Associates' – exceptional teachers and inspiring leaders who can give students the knowledge, skills and confidence to realise their potential. Associates complete a two-year placement in schools serving low socioeconomic communities, as determined by their score on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), while also studying to attain their Masters in education.

Our vision is an Australia where all children, regardless of background, attains an excellent education. As such, much of our work occurs outside of capital cities; in communities where geographic isolation amplifies educational inequity and increases its impacts.

Since 2008, TFA has placed 11 Cohorts comprising a total of 951 Associate teachers in 202 schools across Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory. 52% of these schools have been in regional, rural or remote Australia.

Schools in remote areas of Australia often struggle to provide the standard of educational experience metropolitan schools can offer. Studies have indicated that rural and remote schools are more expensive to run, harder to staff, and students have less choice in the subjects they study, especially in their senior levels of schooling¹. This has a significant impact on students; not only do they demonstrate poorer educational outcomes², higher rates of absenteeism, and engage less with tertiary education³, they report more challenges with emotional wellbeing and with feelings of belonging, self-confidence and perseverance⁴.

TFA's relationships with schools in these communities has helped address some of these major barriers to their students' achieving excellent educational outcomes. Among these:

1. **Attracting top talent.** TFA's LDP is intended to introduce skilled and knowledgeable people from outside the education sector (often people that had not considered teaching as a profession) into the classroom. The LDP is particularly valued for its ability to help schools fill hard-to-staff vacancies, especially those requiring expertise in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The one-to-one relationship with TFA means schools, already disadvantaged by their isolation, no longer have to battle to attract teachers in a competitive marketplace. Two thirds of TFA's Partner School principals have reported that Associates provide specific subject matter expertise they would otherwise be unable to obtain⁵.
2. **Recruiting the right people.** TFA's rigorous recruitment is aligned with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. The multi-stage selection process evaluates not just skills, but mindsets – considering traits like flexibility, adaptability, resilience and empathy. These are valuable 'soft' qualities that are vital to forming strong relationships as an educator, and that data indicates is particularly important for non-local teachers to be able to successfully integrate into a remote community.⁶

¹ Lamb, S; Glover, S; Walstab, A. (2014) Educational disadvantage and regional and rural schools. Retrieved from Australian Council for Educational Research. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1228&context=research_conference

² Mitchell Institute. (2015). Young people in rural and remote communities frequently missing out. Retrieved from the Mitchell Institute: <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/fact-sheets/young-people-in-rural-and-remote-communities-frequently-missing-out/>

³ Ibid Lamb, S; Glover, S; Walstab, A.

⁴ Ibid Mitchell Institute.

⁵ Teach For Australia Principal Survey, December 2018.

⁶ Guenther, J. (2015) Teacher quality and qualities in remote schools: what matters? Retrieved from Cat Conatus http://www.catconatus.com.au/ebook/lecture_series/6_150812_Teacher%20quality%20and%20qualities%20in%20remote%20schools.pdf

3. **Supporting professional growth for impact.** Teaching is a challenging profession; and teaching in schools serving low socioeconomic communities is a particularly difficult task. Formalised support and mentorship of new teachers is vital to enabling their success. TFA Associates are backed by a comprehensive ecosystem of support throughout the program. They work with:
- a TFA-employed Teaching and Leadership Adviser (professional coach);
 - an Academic Mentor, employed by the Australian Catholic University, TFA's university partner;
 - a School Mentor employed by their placement school.

This support model helps Associates accelerate their teaching capacity and capability, enhance their professional development, and maintain their health and wellbeing. Additionally, Associates undertake targeted professional learning that includes a strong focus on building an understanding of regional context.

4. **Establishing consistency in the classroom.** Without a consistent presence at the front of the classroom and in the schoolyard, children cannot form the sorts of dynamic and enduring relationships with their teachers that form the bedrock of effective learning. Retaining quality teachers and leaders is a challenge for most schools; but teachers in remote areas are more likely to leave than their metropolitan counterparts.⁷ A partnership with TFA can offer stability and reliability for both schools and students, with their teacher given the extra support that can help them integrate more quickly into a community and culture. Approximately 94% of Associates that begin teaching complete their two-year placement; and data on TFA's most recently graduated cohort indicates that four in five Associates placed outside metropolitan areas stay teaching working in regional, rural and remote regions after they finish the Program.⁸

In 2019 TFA determined that teachers in Australia's most remote locations require additional assistance beyond the existing frameworks; to support them to overcome the various challenges that can impede their growth to become quality educators, to develop strong connections and bonds with the community, and to ensure quality outcomes for students and schools alike.

Remote Support Model – A Successful Case Study

In response to this, TFA piloted a Remote Support Model project to enable the placements of two Associates in a traditional Aboriginal community in northeast Arnhem Land. The innovative, modified Model consists of five support elements around the Associate to enable them to perform at their best for their students. It is tailored to adapt to specific regional contexts.

Key to this Model is the introduction of deeper cultural competency via a cultural adviser, and further investment in culturally-responsive pedagogy in Associate training to ensure that Associates are learning the skills as teachers that best aid them in the classroom. Part of this approach has included a deeper focus on literacy and numeracy – areas that present significant, well-documented challenges for remote schools, students and communities.

Early feedback from both Associates and the school has been extremely positive; indicating that the level of support and context understanding has set the foundations for success and impact on students. This feedback has allowed TFA to increase placements in remote locations in 2020 with the confidence that Associate teachers will receive the support necessary to overcome the major challenges that schools and teachers in remote regions face. We hope this approach may act as a template for best-practice teacher support into the future so that children in remote Australia are able to enjoy the same educational experiences as their peers in metropolitan regions.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry. We would welcome the chance to provide further evidence and insight as appropriate, with support from our Program Associates and Alumni.

Regards



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⁷ McKenzie, P., Weldon, P., Rowley, G., Murphy, M., & McMillan, J. (2014). Staff in Australia's schools 2013: Main report on the survey. Australian Council for Educational Research. Retrieved from: https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/sias_2013_main_report.pdf

⁸ Teach For Australia Alumni Survey, March 2019.