

## A LEADER FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM: WENDY KOPP

*Remarks from the Journal's Board*

**H**uman progress has often been accelerated by visionary individuals who imagine a better future and dedicate their lives to realizing that goal. These social entrepreneurs question the status quo and promote systemic change by shifting behavior patterns and perceptions. In 1989, as a college senior at Princeton University, Wendy Kopp envisioned a movement to end the educational disparities between under-resourced urban and rural public schools and those in higher income communities. This vision became Kopp's senior thesis, the development of a national teacher corps of recent graduates from America's top colleges who would commit two years to teaching in urban and rural public schools. The realization of this idea, Teach For America, has been a tremendous success. Over 17,000 individuals have joined its ranks and over 2.5 million children have been impacted.

Though she was a self-described "naïve" college senior at the project's inception, Ms. Kopp, through her remarkable idea and unfaltering determination, has established an institution by which children born in poor communities, with limited life prospects and opportunities, are gaining a more equitable chance at life. Her work has attracted thousands of supporters—including college students, educational leaders, and philanthropists—in the effort to eliminate educational inequities.

As undergraduates who seek to make a positive mark on the world, this story inspires us and confirms our belief in the power of ideas to make a difference. It is our privilege to present Wendy Kopp and her campaign to close the achievement gap with Teach For America.

*Guest Essay*

## LEADERSHIP FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

*Wendy Kopp*

When nine-year-olds growing up in low-income communities are already three grade levels behind their peers in high-income communities, there is no doubt that an achievement gap along socioeconomic and racial lines exists. To better understand this disparity in academic performance between groups of students, the Gallup Organization conducts a survey in which it asks the public to explain why we have low educational outcomes in low-income communities. In 2005 the survey provided twenty options; the top three responses were “lack of student motivation,” “lack of parental involvement,” and “home-life issues.” These responses demonstrate a common sentiment that educational inequity stems from factors exogenous to the school system. Teach For America corps members, however, based on their experiences in working with students and families in low-income communities, answer the Gallup question very differently. They say the top factors contributing to low outcomes are “poor teacher quality,” “weak school leadership,” and “low expectations of students.”

Since the founding of Teach For America, I have witnessed corps members consistently emerge with the knowledge that while societal inequities and poverty create additional challenges for students, it is possible to provide them with educational opportunities that result in a high level of engagement and achievement. The experiences of Teach For America corps members allow them to question the assumptions regarding the causes of achievement disparities and, empowered by this understanding, to actively work to effect change. There is so much hope in this knowledge: Our corps members are telling us that this problem is within our control—that we can ensure that all of our nation’s children have the opportunities they deserve. Their perspective

allows them to question the assumptions regarding the causes of achievement disparities and, empowered by this understanding, to actively work to effect change.

The achievement gap between poor, mostly minority students, and more affluent, mostly white students, is a crisis that undermines our most fundamental ideals of freedom and equality. It does so by denying the potential to succeed for millions of American children. While systemic change must come, today's students cannot wait for the fruits of the long-term efforts of our nation's policymakers and school district leaders. They need teachers equipped to offer students educational opportunities despite the obstacles they face, such as schools inadequately designed to support their teaching efforts. Teach For America was founded with the objective of enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in the movement to eliminate educational inequality. To address this issue, our organization works on the premise of a two-part theory of change. In the short term our corps members will provide students with the quality education they deserve and in the long term, these corps members will become lifelong advocates for the expansion of educational opportunity from all sectors of society.

Turning to the first part of our two-part theory of change, by studying those rare teachers who effect dramatic, life-altering academic achievement for their students in low-income communities, Teach For America has developed a growing understanding of what it takes to achieve high results. We have come to see our corps members operate in their classrooms as effective leaders would operate in any context: They set ambitious, measurable goals; motivate others to work extraordinarily hard to reach those goals; plan and work with purpose; and face challenges with resourcefulness and relentlessness.

Before the school year even begins, these teachers create bold (some would say audacious), measurable year-end objectives for their students. These objectives, when properly aligned with established learning standards and coupled with effective motivational strategies energize both teachers and students with the focus and drive they will need to carry them past the inevitable

obstacles to academic achievement. A vivid goal provides a daily sense of urgency to instruction, leads students to work with the teacher and to push themselves harder than they typically would, and brings to the surface the unorthodox creativity necessary for success in underperforming schools.

The power of ambitious goals is evident in the work of Atlanta corps member Crystal Jones. With the state learning standards in mind, Ms. Jones set her first-graders' sights on "reading like third-graders" by the end of the year. The majority of her students came from low-income families; some of them had never attended any form of school before entering her classroom. Only a few recognized the letters of the alphabet. Nonetheless, the children's sense of excitement, motivation, and urgency eventually yielded massive academic gains. Ms. Jones hosted a "graduation ceremony" for her giddy and proud students before spring break, when they had surpassed the second-grade standards.

The motivational strategies used by successful teachers are similar in classrooms across the country. These teachers recognize that they must break the entrenched cycle of low expectations that often characterizes their students' sense of self-worth and perspective on school. Confirming the research results of Stanford University Education Dean Deborah Stipek, Professor Carol Dweck, and other analysts, successful teachers change students' fearful belief that intelligence is a fixed characteristic and that more effort will not affect their success.

Justin Meli, a fourth-grade teacher in a low-income neighborhood in Houston, modeled these motivation strategies. He started chipping away at students' low expectations and lack of motivation on the first day of school, when he told his students that they were placed in his classroom on a top-secret mission to achieve academically because of their high potential for success. With the theme to *Mission Impossible* playing in the background, he revealed the class motto ("Work Hard, Get Smart!") and laid out the high expectations for his class. With his daily emphasis on effort, a refusal to accept anything but their best work, and clear graphic representations of their progress toward reading, writing,

and math goals, Mr. Meli flipped the switch in his students' minds: They came to believe that academic success was within their reach if they tried hard enough.

Even with highly motivated students, reaching ambitious academic goals depends on a teacher's planning and execution. To succeed in the difficult contexts in which the achievement gap persists, teachers have to be strong "backward planners." They must start every endeavor, from individual lessons to grand, yearlong calendars, with the question, "Where are my students now compared to where I want them to be, and what is the best possible use of time to move them forward?" The successful teachers we see do not engage in activity-driven lessons. Instead they infuse their goal-driven efficiency into every aspect of instruction and classroom management. Similarly, these teachers are effective executives, offering their students consistent, caring, but demanding leadership, and working to give students the most time possible to reach their goals.

In addition to maximizing the time they have during the school day, these teachers overcome the system's constraints to meet students' needs. In low-income communities, putting children on a level playing field requires individuals who cast off the conventional parameters of their role as "teacher." They refuse to allow lack of books, overcrowded classrooms, broken copy machines, or lack of time to become roadblocks. Ms. Jones, who instilled her non-reading first-graders with the idea that they would read like third-graders, ended the year with 90 percent of her students reading on or above a third-grade level and all of her students reading on at least a second-grade level. LesLee Bickford in Philadelphia coached basketball at a school with no athletics or extracurricular programs as leverage to get students to stay for extra tutoring before practice. Her sixth-grade students moved from a third-grade level mastery of math and little science knowledge at the beginning of the year to mastering more than 90 percent of the sixth-grade math and science objectives at the end—representing academic growth of three to four years in just one. Mr. Meli, who inspired his students with constant reminders of their special potential using *Mission*

*Impossible* metaphors, saw average growth in his class of 1.8 grade levels in reading and 3.6 grade levels in math on the Stanford 10 standardized test. Ms. Jones, Ms. Bickford, and Mr. Meli show us that excellent teachers can move students dramatically forward right now, even in the system we have.

Of course, what such teachers are accomplishing, while replicable, is difficult. Given the magnitude and historical intractability of the achievement gap, it is not realistic to expect to solve this problem with only the dedicated efforts of the hundreds of thousands of teachers fighting this battle every day. Making these highly successful strategies sustainable for all teachers should be the focus of our efforts for broader change in the way schools and school systems are run.

But the path to that broader change starts on the same path as the immediate solutions: enlisting high-achieving individuals with the necessary leadership qualities and training and supporting them to teach effectively in low-income communities. Teach For America is working to reach the point where many of our nation's leaders have the experience of teaching effectively in urban and rural communities—leaders who have witnessed the potential of kids in low-income communities and who, as a result, will accept nothing but tremendous results.

To realize educational excellence and equity, we will need need long-term, sustained leadership from within education of individuals who have experienced success as teachers and can go on to model excellence as teachers and to lead highly successful schools and school systems. We will also need policy makers and those who influence them to deeply believe that educational inequity is a solvable problem and have a grounded understanding of how to address it. As long as the dominant conviction in our country is that the majority of students growing up in poverty will not excel due to their parents or their challenging life circumstances, we will not live up to our potential as the land of opportunity because we will not have the appropriate priorities or enact the appropriate policies.

We will also need leaders who are committed to addressing

the socioeconomic pressures on schools—leaders committed to pursuing careers in health, social services, or economic development, driven by what they learned in the classroom. Steve North, Eastern North Carolina Corps '93, for example, is one such corps member who went on to become a family physician and fellow in adolescent medicine at the University of Rochester. Dr. North, realizing the adverse effects lack of healthcare has on educational outcomes, coordinates several collaborations with area public schools that bring pediatric and family medicine residents into the classroom.

And so, Teach For America is working to enlist our country's most promising future leaders—top college graduates of all academic majors and career interests—in the fight to eliminate educational inequity, and then to ensure that they experience extraordinary success with their students. We know that beyond the impact these corps members have during their two-year commitment, more than half of them will continue working full-time in education and many of the rest will assume influential roles in other sectors.

We have only just begun to see the true potential of this effort. We are working to become one of the nation's top employers of outstanding recent grads, and to build a corps 8,000-strong in the next five years. At that scale, we would reach almost 700,000 students annually, as many students as the second-largest school district in the country. We are making continuous, significant improvements in our training and professional development programs to ensure that corps members are still more effective—that they produce path-altering results in the lives of their students. And, as we more than double the size of our alumni force in the next five years alone, we are doing more to cultivate and foster the ongoing leadership of these alumni who possess such rare insight and conviction.

We have never felt such a sense of urgency, or had more of a sense of possibility. It is possible to put children facing the challenges of poverty on a level playing field with students in wealthier areas, by utilizing more leadership and more public resolve. The only question then is whether this generation's most talented, committed participants will decide to lead us to the day when the vision of educational excellence for all is a reality.