

Community Impact Stories - Teach For America Appalachia



Context

Teach For America has been partnering with students and families, educators, and community and business leaders in the Appalachia region, which includes Kentucky, West Virginia, Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, since 2011. It now has 22 corps members plus 400 alumni in over 17 school districts, all working in partnership with school and community leaders to reach a collective vision: that we deliver on the promise of an excellent public education that will give students the chance to lead a life of their choosing.

50 years ago President Johnson declared a War on Appalachian Poverty from the front porch of a home in Inez, Kentucky—one of the many communities TFA partners with to bring about systemic change in the mountains. Despite that rallying cry, people living in the region still face many complex and systemic challenges. At the same time, as Appalachians have proven for centuries, their resilience, deep orientation to community and love for the region continue to produce innovative opportunities.

Progress - Measurable progress over the past decade (Q1)

- **Increasing College Attendance & Graduation** – Kentucky ranks 7th nationally when measuring high school graduation rates (88.6%). In Harlan County, a persistently impoverished community where TFAA places teachers, the graduation rate rose to 95% in

2016, up from 71% in 2011. College attendance rates in Tennessee have increased, notably from the Tennessee Promise Program, which saw college enrolment rates increase 58.4% to 64.3% in the first year.

- **Advancing Student-Level Outcomes** – Kentucky ranked 17th in 4th grade reading (up from 26th in 2007) and 9th in 4th grade science (up from 11th in 2007) based on the 2020 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. TFAA teachers in Floyd and Perry Counties (Kentucky) led the state in establishing their first Advanced Placement programs and supporting students to reach.

Drivers - Key drivers of progress (Q2)

In Appalachia, there are three key drivers: increased public will, policy change, and expanded funding for educational efforts. Initiatives driving that progress include:

1. A coalition of advocacy groups including the Prichard Committee (Kentucky), SCORE (Tennessee), and Education Alliance (West Virginia) shared accessible reports through various public channels, driving accountability efforts and leading to legislative commitments and policy changes at the state and local level that increased student achievement.
2. The Kentucky Education Reform Act led to the disbursement of millions of dollars to local districts and training for teachers around best practices, and placing students in open early elementary classrooms, from which they could only advance upon demonstrating proficiency.
3. The Education Alliance in West Virginia provided funding for enrichment activities throughout rural schools, including arts education and alignment of curriculum to local economic industries at the high school dual-enrollment level.
4. Union teachers rallied in historic numbers to advocate for legislative priorities such as pension and salary, helping to minimize the tremendous avoidance of and exit from the teaching profession that has plagued the region. In West Virginia, a multi-month strike led to the state's first teacher pay raise in years.

While these reforms have led to meaningful progress, at times it has led to instances of lower in-school standards of proficiency, and even falsification of data. Lawsuits have shown students placed in special education to avoid standardized testing. Further, lagging indicators show that while high school graduation remains high in all four states, rigor is low. Credentials earned in school are also not sufficiently preparing students for success in college, and those who do succeed are not returning home to lead. Further enrolment in AP exams is low (8-11%) limiting college readiness and success.

Contribution - Unique contribution (Q3)

Teach For America also monitors the 'unique contribution' that the alumni and organization are making to driving progress. In Appalachia, beyond the state level interventions, proof points in the ecosystem are created by those intentionally choosing disruption of traditional approaches to school and classroom leadership. TFA has been a key driver of that in over 17 different school districts where we place corps members, and across the four-state region where our alumni serve as leaders across industries. Specifically TFA has contributed through:

1. **Growing the leadership pipeline** – In many placement schools, TFA provides the only qualified applicants for essential positions within a region that does not retain or attract leadership talent. These TFA corps members stay in Appalachia far longer than their peers, bringing young leadership into the region. Alumni are doing intensive work to improve the economy of their local communities, and there

are several high-profile alumni working in leadership roles in Central Kentucky, West Virginia, and the State Office of Education in Tennessee.

2. **Collective efforts to spread best practices and high expectations** – Corps members and alumni are often catalysts for best practice. TFA corps members and alumni have led professional development for thousands of non-TFA teachers in the region. Corps members and alumni are also shifting the local, state, and national narrative about what students are capable of achieving and what they aspire to be true through public declarations and advocacy.
3. **Driving student outcomes at the classroom, school and county level** – In the counties with concentrated corps member placements, students score higher on array of key indicators like college career readiness and grade point average. Schools with corps member and alumni clusters have seen dramatic turnaround efforts, for example Betsy Layne High School grew from the lowest state ranking (under state control) to the highest possible rating (distinction) over the course of five years; TFA has made up at least 10% of the teaching staff consistently year over year. Alumni who continue teaching beyond their two-year commitment are seen as best-in-class within their schools and counties, and they are often recognized both formally and informally for their skills as teachers and leaders.

Links and resources

- [‘Unprecedented Year, Undeniable Impact’, TFA Appalachia’s Reinvention 2020-21](#)

Executive Director

Stephanie Devine is the Executive Director for TFA Appalachia. She fell in love with education as a high schooler, where she volunteered in a special needs classroom and saw the immeasurable impact teachers have on students’ lives. After studying K-12 special education in her undergraduate years, she became a TFA Corps Member, teaching students with emotional and behavioural disorders in West and Southeast Baltimore. During her 3 years in the city, Stephanie partnered with her students and families to improve student reading levels by over 2.5 years, on average, per year. Additionally, she leveraged her skills as a nationally competitive debater to found her middle school’s inaugural debate club and empower 2 of her self-contained special education students to earn top 5 spots in the city’s youth debate league. She joined Teach For America Appalachia’s regional staff as a teacher coach in 2014. In the last six years, she has worked alongside and led her team to achieve their most dramatic and sustained gains in teacher satisfaction and performance, supporting work with students in over 17 counties across Eastern Kentucky. In her time as the Executive Director, Stephanie has pivoted her team’s strategy towards a bold 10 year impact goal focused on postsecondary readiness and success, providing the strategy clarity and storytelling needed to establish a robust Executive Advisory Board and increase cash collection by 200%. She has served as a member of key TFA coalitions such as the Core Values Committee, Rural School Leadership Academy, Teacher Leadership Development Fellowship, Executive Leadership Team Committee, and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Council. In addition to her undergraduate work in special education, Stephanie holds a distinguished Master’s Degree in Curriculum and Instruction, emphasizing the role of differentiated instruction in pedagogy.



