

Community Impact Case Study FY20

## Teach For America, Washington DC



### I. Case Overview

*A city of 705,000 (5.3m metro population), the District of Columbia is the Capital of the US. DCPS serves 48,000 students in 116 schools. There are an additional 45,500 D.C. students served by 123 charter schools. In D.C., Teach For America alumni have played a leading role in attracting and developing talent, improving student achievement outcomes, expanding access to pre-K and non-core subjects, and engaging communities in solutions.*

**Launch Year** 1992

**Participants** 110+

**Alumni** 3,000

Around 3,000 alumni live in the area. There are ~650 teachers (many of whom have won reputable teaching awards) and ~50 school leaders, representing about 20% of the district's school leadership.

#### Student progress

- Over the last decade, in each of the city's eight wards, every demographic and every student sub-group has improved in every subject.
- When compared with other US states, the District has made the largest gains in fourth-grade reading and eight-grade math on a national exam dubbed "the Nation's Report Card."
- DCPS enrollment declined annually from 1967 to 2011. It has increased annually since 2011. In 2006, the graduation rate was 48%. In 2019, it was 68%.

## II. Community Story



For 230 years, Washington, D.C. has been the Capital and center of political power in the US. In the federal government’s backyard, “the District,” as it is known, has an important local history, rooted in Black culture, intellectualism, and resilience. During the 19th Century, enslaved peoples in the southern region of the US came to D.C. to build some of the first free Black communities. D.C. was home to Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, writer, and statesman, and is the site of Howard University, the nation’s foremost Black college.

The impact of systemic injustices such as segregation, discrimination, and poverty also shaped Black residents’ experiences in the District. In 1968, this distress came to a head when the city saw fires, destruction, and violence as some residents expressed anger at the assassination of Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. In its wake, many middle and upper class white residents left the city for suburbs. After “white flight,” the city’s services, including the public school system, lacked funds and resources, leading in part to a downward spiral of problems such as decades-long school enrollment declines.

Today, the school system is different. Enrollment has increased annually since 2011 and is up to over 48,000 today (with an additional 45,500 enrolled in the city’s charter schools). The high school graduation rate and proficiency levels of all student groups have improved. Student satisfaction with DCPS is high. Children and families enjoy universal pre-K and students have expanded access to arts, music, and foreign languages. There are many different school models. The local economy calls upon children to develop skills and connections related to sectors such as government, culinary and hospitality, retail, health care, and real estate and construction. In response, DCPS has developed workforce development and vocational programs to help more students gain access to the city’s middle class jobs.



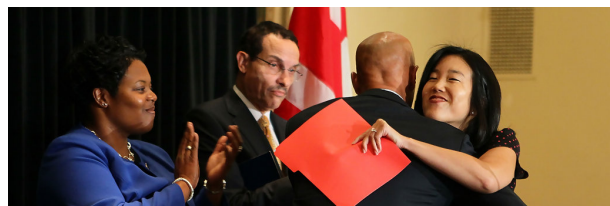
At the same time, opportunity gaps persist. In Anacostia, where Douglass first lived a free man, students' achievement has improved, but they are still far behind affluent peers across the river. Many view gentrification as a new form of white flight, but in reverse, with white and higher income residents enjoying the benefits and the city's low-income (and sometimes middle income) and Black residents enduring the downsides. The persistent impact of poverty, racist policies, and socioeconomic inequality still hold too many back.

### III. Growth of Collective Leadership

Over the time TFA has operated in D.C., leadership has grown throughout the school system. By the mid-2000s, though, parts of the DC school system were indisputably broken. In 2005, The Washington Post reported that the school system “relies on paper records stacked in 200 boxes” to keep track of employees, and in “some cases was five years behind processing staff paperwork.” Each year, teachers lined up at the DCPS budget office to check on the status of their paychecks as they did not reliably arrive. Most important, and despite the hard work of many individuals doing their best in this system, outcomes for children were low.

In 2007, in an attempt to jolt the system, the city shifted its governance structure from Board-control to Mayoral-control. **This meant that the school system was fully accountable to one person - the Mayor** - versus multiple people with varied interests - a Board. The Chancellor would report directly to the Mayor. That year, Mayor Adrian Fenty appointed TFA alum Michelle Rhee Chancellor of DCPS and made improving schools his top priority. Changes would happen swiftly, and did not involve community input.

First, Rhee recruited her team, sometimes in unconventional ways. Peter Weber, a TFA alum and DC resident, wrote to Rhee when she arrived: “I told her if she ever wanted a home cooked meal that I’d have her over,” says Weber. “She responded, as Michelle is known





to do, by asking me to come work for her.” Rhee recruited about 20 other TFA alumni to work on her team. “We all shared a similar attitude about education, rooted in our TFA teaching experience: a sense of optimism about what’s possible, a value of continuous improvement. We generally had a shared language and approach to the work,” says Weber.

Mayoral control and Mayor Fenty’s education-focused agenda provided an authorizing environment wherein Rhee and her team made rapid changes: they improved budgets, operations and facilities, and embarked on a human capital plan. The latter involved two parts: exiting employees and recruiting and developing new ones. Rhee fired over 100 central office staff in one day, exited principals, and turned over teachers. The process was hard, and impacted real people’s lives.

The second part of the plan involved recruitment: the central office hired new staff and recruited teachers through offering higher pay and other levers. The team also developed instructional supports to help raise the quality and consistency of teaching across the city.

Mayor Fenty lost his re-election in 2010, in part due to the unpopularity of Rhee’s decisions. However, the new mayor hired Rhee’s #2, Kaya Henderson, also a TFA alum. Building on Rhee’s focus on human capital, Henderson prioritized improving the quality and the breadth of learning. During her tenure, she led a more collaborative approach to system-wide improvement, expanding and raising the quality of early childhood education, improving special education, providing high-quality teachers and support, and expanding opportunities for students. Cross-sector collaboration was more streamlined because the heads of agencies sat next to each other in meetings and all reported to the mayor. This reality hastened the expansion and success of city-wide efforts because early childhood education providers, health and human services, and K-12 schools were more coordinated and aligned.

Henderson also had deeper connections to D.C. than Rhee. She attended college there and led non-profits (including TFA-DC) there for years. Her relational approach marked a shift from her predecessor: Henderson sought stakeholder and community input on a strategic plan, which worked in improving outcomes for children, but began to alienate parents and community members. They felt like difficult changes – like the closure of some schools – were being done to them. Henderson quickly revised the approach to include community members in leadership decisions, reaching out to the whole community through suggestion boxes in shops, churches and hair salons, and inviting them to participate in making difficult decisions.



Henderson’s relational approach translated to the curriculum. At the time, DCPS lacked one. Instead of taking something off of the shelf, Henderson and her team engaged teachers in a co-creation process, following the adage “people support what they create.” They set up a challenging and elaborate process for teachers to build the scope and sequence, and the results - both quality and implementation - were positive. Henderson also developed secondary academies with workforce development opportunities to help

students gain experiences, skills, and connections to access middle class jobs in the city. Henderson hired someone she knew who had worked with trades. The person brokered connections with large companies to make the effort

successful. “The good intentions are often there, but you need the relationships in place for people [like the large employers] to take the leap of faith,” says Weber. “Kaya brought relationships and local knowledge.”

Henderson and her team also emphasized the importance of compromise, particularly when balancing school-based autonomy and district-wide equity. They mitigated some inequalities by constraining competition between schools by, for example, determining that every student needs a foreign language. They established the policy after soliciting input from various community groups, and finding a common interest among them.

Community engagement did not always mean doing what community members said; it often meant deeply listening to members’ hopes and goals and getting creative. It never appeared on a community survey form, but DCPS set up an international travel program, an opportunity for every student in the city regardless of if they have a passport or the means. “It probably didn’t causally improve test scores, but it’s important. Every single student gets the same opportunity. It does all of this great exposure work that rich kids get just by luck of the opportunities they are born into. And people love it. Figuring out those opportunities - that’s really listening,” says Weber.

At the end of Henderson’s tenure, D.C. went from the lowest performing to the fastest improving urban school district in the U.S.

## IV. Teach For America’s Approach

No one on Teach For America’s staff would say this story was planned or pre-engineered. However, Teach For America played critical and strategic roles in the story of D.C.’s progress.

### Facilitate shared experiences, an approach to educational change, and a network

The two-year fellowship provides a shared experience that tends to bond people for life. The shared ethos and approach - and even shared language - were all noted in interviews as drivers for building teams when opportunities arose. Local and national networks provided trusted talent to quickly get aboard and take risks together.

### Provide high-quality and high-volume talent across the ecosystem

For nearly three decades, Teach For America has provided talent at all levels of the D.C. ecosystem in both high numbers and quality. Over 80% of the region’s alumni continue to work in education or work impacting low-income children. Alumni have led the school system as Chancellors, Deputy Mayors of Education, and Superintendents of Education, and the majority of the district cabinet for 11+ years. Alumni have made up 15-20% of DC’s principals over the last decade. Hundreds of alumni are teachers, including six of the past seven Teachers of the Year. Alumni include the founders of several non-profits including the Flamboyant Foundation, an organization focused on improving teacher-parent relationships), Literacy Lab, Capital Teaching Residency, and the Together Group. The talent pipelines are essential for long-term change.

### Emphasize and model shared decision-making

Some of Teach For America’s alumni participated in two different approaches to decision-making in D.C.: 1. a top-down approach under Rhee; and 2. a more collective, shared decision-making model under Henderson. Many would argue that the co-created curriculum and the semi-uncontroversial school closures - both results of a shared decision-making approach - were more positive and enduring. That said, the story begs the question of whether

Rhee's approach is needed to precede Henderson's; that is, is a jolt to the system, internally or externally (e.g., centralized and top-down leadership, COVID-19), required to mobilize collective leadership?

## V. Looking Ahead

Since Henderson's departure in 2016, DCPS has struggled with high turnover of senior leaders. Some also argue that DCPS and the charter system need a reckoning to pursue a shared vision with healthy competitive tension. While student level results have held steady and in some cases improved, some feel the momentum of progress has slowed and a clear vision for the city's education system is elusive. Possible lessons involve:

- The need for a shared, collective vision for the next phase of growth for all of DC's children and youth (not just DCPS or the charter sector)
- The need to continue to cultivate fresh talent to sustain moment after a galvanizing leader (like Henderson) departs

Teach For America - Washington, D.C. and partnering non-profits like Mission Squared recently conducted stakeholder interviews and research to plan TFA's alumni strategy in the coming years. Possible priorities include: Co-create an alumni vision in pursuit of improving student outcomes and build capacity toward it;

- Support an alumni network that connects, educates, and activates across geographies, sectors, and identities; and
- Support DCPS and charter schools directly with TFA alumni talent they want and need to be successful.

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