

## Expanding Educational Opportunity

An Interview with Wendy Kopp,  
CEO and Co-Founder, Teach For All; Founder and Chair of the Board, Teach For America

**EDITORS' NOTE** Wendy Kopp studied at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1989. In that same year, she proposed the creation of Teach For America in her undergraduate thesis. Shortly after graduating, she founded Teach For America. In 2007, Kopp began leading the development of Teach For All. In 2013, the board of directors of Teach For America named Kopp as their board chair. Kopp has chronicled her experiences in two books: *One Day, All Children: The Unlikely Triumph of Teach For America and What I Learned Along the Way* and *A Chance To Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education For All*.



Wendy Kopp

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *Teach For All* ([teachforall.org](http://teachforall.org)) is a growing network of independent partner organizations in 32 countries dedicated to expanding educational opportunity. *Teach For All* partner organizations recruit and develop future leaders to teach in their countries' highest-need classrooms and work throughout their lives to increase educational equity for all children. *Teach For All* was launched at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2007, in response to social entrepreneurs from around the world who sought to adapt the model of Teach For America and the UK's Teach First to meet their own countries' needs. *Teach For All* works to support partners' progress and increase their impact by drawing on the network's knowledge and sharing innovations that are continuously emerging across the globe. By learning from each other and innovating together, *Teach For All's* partner organizations are working to ensure that one day, all children – everywhere – can attain an excellent education.

### What was the original vision for Teach For America and how has it evolved?

The big idea that Teach For America has been pursuing for 25 years is to channel our country's most promising future leaders to address a problem that we think is among our most fundamental challenges as a nation – the fact that today, the neighborhood in which kids are born is one of the primary determinates of their educational outcomes, and in turn, their life outcomes.

Teach For America addresses this by recruiting on hundreds of our nation's campuses as aggressively as leading corporate recruiters and

graduate schools. We have a rigorous process for selecting those who demonstrate leadership potential. We then invest in them throughout their initial two-teaching commitments in high-need communities, and foster their leadership as alumni pursuing educational equity and opportunity. Ultimately, this is an ongoing effort to build a leadership force for change, working at every level of the education system and across all sectors.

We're working to cultivate leadership capacity, and 25 years in, we are beginning to see the payoff. It's incredible to

see what is happening in communities where Teach For America has been placing a steady stream of educators for, in some cases, more than two decades. There is a great deal of progress in many of the communities thanks, in part, to the leadership and entrepreneurial spirit of Teach For America alumni. For example, the schools chiefs in Tennessee and Washington, D.C. are both Teach For America alumni, as are many others working in public education in those states. On a recent national assessment, both Tennessee and D.C. showed more growth over the last two years than most states have shown over the last 10.

### Why hasn't there been more of an impact on the K-12 education system in the U.S.?

We have actually made extraordinary progress over the past 20 years. In order to fully understand the impact, we need to look at what's really happening within our urban and rural communities.

There are now hundreds of schools across the country that are providing a transformational education, focusing on students who face extraordinary challenges due to the circumstances of their economic class and race. These schools are putting them on a meaningful different trajectory than the statistics would predict.

We are also seeing urban systems that people had given up on a decade ago making very meaningful progress. New York City has increased the graduation rate among kids of color by 20 points over the past decade; New Orleans has grown the graduation rate from 54 percent to 78 percent in the past seven to eight years. These communities are showing us what is possible.

We have learned a tremendous amount. There are so much more resources and energy being directed at this problem than there were when I began this journey. I believe that we will move student achievement levels in the U.S. in an aggregate sense over the next decade or two.

### In your recent travels to China, did you find successful elements of their school system that might be adapted for application elsewhere?

In October, I joined leaders from across the Teach For All network on a visit to Shanghai to observe classrooms and meet with education leaders in an effort to better understand why the school system performs so well on international assessments. What was striking to me in Shanghai was the degree to which the strategies they pursued were similar to those we see in other very high-performing contexts. There is nothing magical about what they do: they embrace very rigorous standards for kids that require critical thinking, not just rote memorization, and they invest deeply in the professional development of the teaching force. They have acted on a passionate commitment to equity, and they have sold various constituencies on the idea that if we integrate our most disadvantaged students within schools and provide them with high expectations and extra support, there will be better outcomes for all students.

I also found it interesting that they said the number-one key to their success is embracing an open-door policy, meaning they sent their educators around the world to learn from others.

### Is finding the right partner the key element to your continued expansion?

Yes. We have seen that this model can thrive across a great diversity of countries when it's in the hands of committed social entrepreneurs who have a real vision for adapting it to their contexts.

We have seen thousands of people vying for positions in these programs, from Pakistan to Peru. We have seen them have a positive effect as teachers, and 60 to 70 percent of the alumni across the programs and the network sustain their involvement beyond their initial two year teaching commitment.

The constituents in lesser-developed contexts tell us that this model may be even more relevant to them, because the reason basic needs aren't being met is that there simply isn't enough educational leadership capacity to train the teachers, develop the curriculum, and enact the best policies.

We see a real excitement across the globe for this model, in rich and poor countries alike. Ultimately, we envision a world in which an international network of programs is learning from each other and innovating on each other's strategies and solutions. By working together like this, these organizations will increase progress in their own countries and accelerate impact toward education excellence and equity at the global level. ●