



Testimony for the Ohio Senate Education Committee

March 8, 2011

Jamie Davies O'Leary, Senior Ohio Policy Analyst & Associate Editor

Thomas B. Fordham Institute

Good morning.

Chairwoman Lehner and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak with you today in support of Senate Bill 81.

My name is Jamie Davies O'Leary and I am a senior policy analyst and associate editor at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute here in Columbus. I am also a proud alumna of Teach For America, and a native of Mansfield, Ohio. I grew up in a working class family and while both my parents pounded into my head the value of education, neither of them had the means to complete college themselves. I'm proud to be among the first generation in my family to complete college and attain a graduate degree.

I didn't join TFA because of its prestige, or because it would boost my resume – and I say this because frankly, these are criticisms of the program. I became a teacher because having worked with low-income kids throughout college – kids who were in domestic violence shelters or attending schools in inner city Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) – I realized that nothing was a more powerful tool to rescue them from the cycle of poverty and violence than an excellent education.

I taught kindergarten for two years in Camden, New Jersey. I loved teaching, and was effective at it. I left the profession in large part because my district, facing a budget shortfall, made layoff decisions based on seniority and I knew I'd soon lose my job. I also wanted to address problems of educational inequity from a broader perspective and so enrolled in Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, where I received my graduate degree in public affairs in 2009.

Like any Ohio native who's lived elsewhere and contemplated coming back, my decision to return to the Buckeye State wasn't easy. I looked into possible teaching jobs here and it became apparent that getting licensed would require more coursework and jumping over other regulatory hurdles – despite my six years of college education and two successful years in the classroom. I was lucky to find a job doing exactly what I love – thinking and writing and researching education issues with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Since moving back to Ohio, I've observed a number of trends that evidence why the passage of Senate Bill 81 is so critical and on so many fronts. Most obviously, Senate Bill 81 will help students in low-income areas, but it also promises to provide a shot in the arm for chronically under-performing schools, help build talent pipelines producing leaders committed to public education and to equity, and fight this state's "brain drain."

Teach For America's mission to build a movement of leaders committed to ending educational inequity is not one Ohio can afford to miss out on. Ohio has inexcusable achievement gaps between whites and minorities, low-income students and wealthier peers. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 42 percent of white eighth graders scored proficient on the reading portion of the test, while just 13 percent of African American students did so. In math, the gap is worse – a 30-percentage point difference. There are similar gaps when you compare socio-economic subgroups. In Teach For America founder Wendy Kopp's new book, *A Chance to Make History*, she describes how TFA alums and teachers are making significant gains with low-income children in classrooms across the country, and how their successes are rooted in one primary quality – leadership. This *isn't* to say that traditionally prepared and certified teachers in this state aren't leaders or aren't committed to closing the same gaps. But Ohio's classrooms need more such people, people who've proven their commitment to public education, to low-income children, and to doing whatever it takes to change their life trajectories. If you have any doubt whatsoever about the commitment and leadership I'm describing – and its exponential power to transform children's lives – I encourage you to go visit one of these teacher's classrooms for a day. Why would we put a cap on that commitment and leadership and not let such teachers into our schools?

Teach For America places teachers in low-income schools, and most alumni working in education continue working in low-income areas. The key here is a commitment to *low-income* communities. I've heard a number of lawmakers and educators express concern that teaching jobs in Ohio are in short supply, and they don't want graduates here to have extra competition for jobs. Politically-speaking, I understand that sentiment. But teaching is not, and should not be, about giving people jobs. Especially when we're talking about our state's most vulnerable children, students in schools that have been underperforming for decades, this *cannot* be about adults. And the schools that TFA would place in are most often *not* the schools that traditional teacher graduates want to work in. Think of Champion Middle School in Columbus, which is slated for a school "turnaround" because for over a decade, student achievement has been a rare exception, while failure is the norm. For example, just 11 percent of seventh graders passed the state math test last year. Schools like Champion need the energy and commitment of young TFA teachers. As a community, TFA doesn't claim to know how to solve all of the problems of urban education. But one thing is guaranteed: its teachers and

alums will throw everything they have into helping solve those problems. All we have to do is let them.

Teach For America builds a leadership pipeline that Ohio needs. One of the biggest misconceptions about TFA is that its primary purpose is to solve a teacher shortage problem. There are shortages in some of Ohio's toughest classrooms, which face serious turnover of teachers year after year. But Teach For America also produces great leaders, two thirds of whom continue working in education in some capacity. A recent study published in *Education Next* examined people working in some of the most entrepreneurial and innovative education organizations, and concluded that the vast majority of them had been "spawned" by Teach For America – more so than any other organization. In this way, Teach For America creates not just teachers but a community of "change agents." Communities of alumni are like Silicon Valleys of education reform. Ohio could use such a community.

Teach For America helps fight Ohio's brain drain. Over the last two years, I've observed a broad trend that has convinced me of how badly Ohio needs the changes in Senate Bill 81. During conversations with fellow alums who live here, or on the phone with alums in other states who want to move back, a discouraging theme has emerged: many of them want to go back into classrooms, but can't. Ohio's current licensure system makes it difficult for alums to teach here, regardless of their impact with students at their previous schools. Many decide to put roots down in other states. And this happens not just with alums of the program, but teacher candidates who matriculate out of Ohio's top universities and into the TFA program -- in other states. Ohio is losing some of our most talented college graduates, which is just about the last thing we need. Fordham conducted a survey in spring 2009 showing the extent of Ohio's brain drain problem. Among students at Ohio's top colleges and universities, 58 percent said they planned on leaving. I decided to move back because Ohio's narrative – one of post-industrial job loss (especially in places like my hometown of Mansfield), and the struggle to reinvent itself, saddened me. I wanted to return to a place that I loved and address policy and education issues on home soil. The most discouraging part of moving back has been that not everyone shares this sentiment. But among the TFA community – alums living here and out of state – I've never seen such a strong commitment to Ohio, to its kids, and to its future.

In sum, the provisions of Senate Bill 81 can bring TFA alums back into classrooms that need them, and it also paves the way for the program to finally come to the Buckeye State. Most immediately, this means more effective and committed teachers in low-income classrooms working with their school communities to solve intractable problems facing urban education. But it also has longer term policy and economic implications for this state that I implore you to consider. The creation of Teach For America-Ohio means more teachers committed to working

in some of the state's toughest classrooms, and it also means Ohio will have more education leaders and innovators, and more folks committed to the future of this state.

Thank you. I look forward to hearing your questions and comments.