

Testimony on behalf of
Teach For America Greater Philadelphia
House Appropriations Committee and House Education Committee
October 24, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with the House Appropriations Committee and the House Education Committee. My name is Anna Shurak and I have the pleasure of serving as Executive Director of Teach For America in Greater Philadelphia. I started my career in education nearly 20 years ago with Teach For America at Rhodes High School in Strawberry Mansion where I served for 10 years as a teacher, and ultimately principal. After my time at Rhodes, I worked in district administration here at The School District of Philadelphia, and across the river in Camden. I am honored to have been invited to share recommendations with the Committees regarding supporting Black educators and Black students, especially alongside my fellow panelists who are extraordinary leaders in education. While my remarks will center on recommendations related to diversifying the educator workforce to ensure that students- especially Black students- have access to Black educators, there are clearly many additional critically important areas of focus to improve opportunities and outcomes for Black students and educators, alike—including the urgent need for the development and implementation of an equitable education funding system in our Commonwealth.

By way of context, the organization I represent- Teach For America- is a non-profit organization that recruits, develops, and retains leaders in education: at the classroom, school, and system level, and we have partnered with schools and communities in Philadelphia for 20 years now. TFA Philadelphia's core programming includes recruiting and developing classroom

teachers for Philadelphia public schools, who we develop and support through an initial training program, followed by 2 full years of 1-on-1 coaching paired with cohort-driven professional development. To enable our teachers to build additional skills and leadership in the field, we have a strong partnership with the University of Pennsylvania and the Relay Graduate School of Education for both teacher certification and master's degrees. In addition to our teaching corps, we more recently have developed a robust tutoring program—which we call the “Ignite Program”—in which we train college students to be effective tutors and serve the needs of schools and students in Philadelphia for learning recovery and learning acceleration. The program also acts as an early exposure for college-aged students to gain interest in the teaching profession. Finally, we have developed support programming for our network of 1,600 alumni leaders across Greater Philadelphia – including our Academic School Leader Fellowship, which builds interest and early exposure to school leadership for our alumni, and now additionally extend some of our professional development programming to other educators, beyond TFA's alumni educators, with a particular focus on improving literacy instruction and orientating around the science of reading.

To mitigate the severity of the educator shortage, we are focused on growing the numbers of capable and well-trained tutors, teachers and school and systems leaders. At the same time, we are also deeply focused on ensuring that all these cohorts of educators are diverse and well supported. In deep partnership with our tremendous colleagues at the Center for Black Educator Development and as part of the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium and the Philadelphia Citywide Talent Coalition, we have placed a considerable focus on recruiting diverse teaching candidates and on advocating for policies which make teaching more attractive to educators of color--- in large part because research shows that with educators who share their

backgrounds, children of color- especially Black children- have greater rates of academic achievement and persistence. Our incoming teaching corps this fall was comprised of 50% educators of color with over 1/3 of our new teachers identifying as Black. That said, less than 4% of Pennsylvania’s educator workforce identifies as Black, while Black students represent nearly 15% of the state’s student population- and in cities like Philadelphia, over half of the student body identifies as Black, while less than a quarter of teachers do¹. Clearly, we have a lot of work to do.

In the service of educator diversity, we support competitive annual compensation for educators-- -a baseline of at least \$60,000 per year- and for meaningful financial incentives to attract and retain educators, as we know these are policies which will be of disproportionate benefit to educators of color and educators coming from low-income backgrounds. At Teach For America, we provide transitional grants to all our teachers to enable them to transition into the profession in a cost-effective manner and cover costs such as those associated with certification testing. Additionally, we have also developed the “Black Educators Promise Grant” which provides additional funding to our Black educators who accept our TFA offer, and who commit to remain in the profession beyond their two-year commitment. But these types of transitional aid and grant programs should not be limited to our TFA teachers. *All* new teachers--- especially those coming from underrepresented backgrounds and committed to working in low-income communities--- should be able to enter the profession without breaking the bank. We also advocate for undergraduate loan forgiveness for teachers--- especially those serving in higher-need communities- as we know how many prospective educators are saddled with student loan debt—which, again, is something that disproportionately impacts Black college students and new

¹ [Research For Action, April, 2022: The Need for More Teachers of Color](#)

Black educators. While we are fortunate that all Teach For America teachers benefit from deferred undergraduate loan payments for their first two years of teaching due to Teach For America being an AmeriCorps program, we know that more can be done to alleviate loan burdens for all teachers, and also that doing this would positively impact the diversity of the profession.

We also recommend that the state increase investment in alternative pathway programs like our own. Alternative pathway programs are notably diverse—typically more so than traditional preparation programs- and attract and enroll sizeable cohorts of prospective educators of color². We also recommend ensuring that the state is fully drawing on the available talent pool by eliminating barriers to educator certification for individuals in receipt of DACA—otherwise known as “Dreamers” and others who hold valid immigrant visas, work visas or employment authorizations so that these individuals can become educators in the Commonwealth.

We additionally recommend investing in programs and affinity spaces to support Black educators. Affinity spaces for educators of color have been identified by researchers as a promising practice for retaining educators of color, particularly Black male educators³. In 2011, Teach For America created “The Collective,” our alumni association for our more than 23,000 alumni across the country who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Our colleagues and partners at Teach Plus are launching the Philadelphia Affinity Group Network, which seeks to cultivate authentic, inclusive, intersectional spaces shaped by and for educators of color. And there are numerous other examples both nationally and locally, including the Black

² : [TNTP, December 2020: Analyzing Teacher Preparation's Diversity Problem, Dec. 2020](#)

³ [The Black Teacher Project, 2018: How Racial Affinity Professional Development Sustains Black Teachers](#)

Teacher Project, that we could draw upon and deepen investment in, to create spaces for collaboration and community among our Black educators.

These are just a handful of the many promising policies and practices that can help Pennsylvania diversify our educator workforce and ensure that our all our students, and especially Black students, have the opportunity to learn and thrive in classrooms led by Black educators. We are deeply grateful for the Committees' focus on this issue, and we look forward to continuing to work with our many partners in Philadelphia and at the state level to bring continued focus and investment to this priority.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to responding to any questions you may have.