

Local education politics 'far from dead'

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An effort by Teach for America to capture school board seats across the nation suggests local politics still plays a vital role in shaping education, suggests a study by Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

Teach for America, known for recruiting teachers, is also setting its sights on capturing school board seats across the nation. Surprisingly, however, political candidates from the program aren't just pushing its national education agenda, they're advancing local issues as well, according to a new study.

The findings, said Michigan State University's Rebecca Jacobsen, refute the argument that school boards have become ineffective and obsolete in the wake of national education reform. Teach for America, a nonprofit

that enlists high-achieving college graduates and professionals to teach in poor communities for at least two years, has some 32,000 alumni.

"It appears that TFA alumni candidates running for school boards paid attention to both national and local messages because of a growing recognition that local politics is far from dead," said Jacobsen, associate professor of teacher education and lead investigator on the study.

"School board members, like it or not, remain key to shaping the future of our schools."

Jacobsen studied school board elections involving Teach for America alumni in 2009 and 2010, following the launch of TFA's Leadership for Educational Equity. The program aims to grow the number of program alumni who serve in elected office.

Jacobsen found that program alumni running for school board did indeed champion the organization's core values and priorities. Echoing the core value of "respect and humility," for example, one candidate said "more needs to be done to welcome, involve and inform parents." Another candidate stressed the core value of "relentless pursuit of results" by saying he "demonstrated impressive results as a classroom teacher, with his students tripling the average state science scores expected."

But Jacobsen was surprised to learn that TFA alumni candidates also focused frequently on local issues – in some cases more than non-TFA candidates. The most common local issue was the budget; others included school safety and the need for programs such as the arts, athletics and early childhood education.

The study suggests Teach for America, while operating as a national organization, recognizes it must tap into the local arena in order to affect change. Supporting alumni to run for local school boards may be the most effective way to advance its agenda.

Teach for America's motto is, "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

The study appears in the journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives*.

Provided by Michigan State University

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