

February 16, 2026

Kentucky State Capitol
700 Capital Avenue
Frankfort, KY 40601

Chair Banta and Members of the House Budget Review Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education and Workforce Development,

My name is Charles Morton, and I am the Executive Director of Teach For America Appalachia (“TFAA”). Prior to taking on this role at Teach For America in July of 2025, I served as the Superintendent of the Harlan Independent School District from 2013 – 2025, and prior to that, I was a teacher, district employee, and principal within Harlan County. I have spent the last 34 years deeply committed to education in Eastern Kentucky. Thank you for the opportunity to deliver testimony on Teach For America’s outcomes and impact in Kentucky, made possible by the legislature’s generous support.

Teach For America (TFA) is a national teacher preparation and leadership development program. Together with our partners at TFA Ohio, who support teachers in Northern Kentucky, **we have recruited, trained, and supported over 325 teachers in local Kentucky schools since 2011.** Over the past 14 years, we have placed teachers in 25 counties across the Commonwealth, with 30 current corps members placed in Bell, Floyd, Jackson, Kenton, Knott, Letcher, Lincoln, Magoffin, McCreary, and Montgomery counties. These teachers impact roughly 2,800 students each day of the 2025–2026 school year. We are open to placing in any ARC–designated county.

Teach For America operates at the invitation of local school districts. Our teachers serve under district and school leadership, follow state–approved standards and curriculum, and are evaluated under the same expectations as any other educator in the building. Our responsibility is first and foremost to the students and communities we serve. We comply with all applicable state and federal laws. We regularly review our materials and practices to ensure compliance and alignment with state and local expectations.

We have played and continue to play a critical role in Kentucky’s educational ecosystem, particularly in Eastern Kentucky, addressing the need for teacher and leadership talent in K–12 schools by sourcing, matching, developing, and retaining high–impact talent. Locally, **TFA has grown to a network of approximately 280 corps members and alumni**, with 60% of our 250+ alumni working directly in education in Kentucky.

This influx of education talent intersects with a long–term trend of increased teacher turnover and staffing shortages across the state, felt most acutely in our rural, mountain communities. Data compiled by the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission in their Research Report No. 486: Kentucky’s Public School Employee Staffing Shortages, details the current realities of the counties with whom we work. The report cites increased teacher turnover, lack of satisfactory applicants, and fewer teacher preparation

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program completers as major causes of the shortage of teachers that schools increasingly face. **TFA Appalachia works to address these three challenges directly** through our program continuum. As one of the nine approved alternative routes to teacher certification in the state, we not only provide a path to the classroom, but also ongoing support and development through our initial two-year teaching commitment as well as continued development opportunities for our alumni educators.

Teach For America's program model is rooted in more than 35 years of experience developing effective teachers for high-need schools across the country. Independent research continues to affirm the effectiveness of our approach. In 2024, a meta-analysis by the American Institutes for Research examined 23 studies and found that students taught by TFA teachers consistently made stronger gains in math and science than peers in similar classrooms, with comparable gains in reading. Local data mirrors these findings. In a 2024 survey of Appalachian principals with whom we work, 94% agreed that corps members met or exceeded their expectations for learning outcomes 93% would recommend hiring a corps member to a fellow school leader, and **100% of principals were satisfied with the corps members in their school**. By providing quality talent to local schools, we combat the lack of satisfactory applicants many school leaders face when hiring.

In order to meet the local need for teaching talent, we recruit from both Kentucky institutions of higher education and colleges and universities from across the country. **Roughly half of our current corps members are considered "homegrown,"** meaning that they graduated from Kentucky institutions like Northern Kentucky University, Eastern Kentucky University, Morehead State University, Campbellsville University, and the University of the Cumberlands. In addition to retaining this talent locally, we also bring corps members to the region from outside Appalachia, including current corps members from schools such as the University of Virginia and Yale University. Additionally, over 10% of our corps members are traditionally trained teachers who joined TFA to receive the additional support provided in the first years of teaching that only TFA provides. We want to expand our reach and are actively expanding recruitment strategies at local Kentucky schools. During the current recruitment season, we are:

- Engaging in career fairs, outreach, and referral networks at colleges and universities in Kentucky.
- Supporting local applicants in the selection process through coaching and interview preparation, as well as through certification and placement.
- Providing transitional stipends to offset the costs of entering the teaching profession, with additional financial support for candidates with greater financial need.
- Leveraging current corps member teachers from our Eastern Kentucky communities to engage with local applicants to build further connection and interest in our work.

We are also committed to retaining our growing educator workforce through TFAA's Mountain Teacher Fellowship (MTF), which offers programming and financial incentives for TFA Appalachia teachers to commit to at least one additional year (beyond their initial two-year teaching commitment) in the teaching workforce in Central Appalachia. This Fellowship is also open to current

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TFA Appalachia alumni, regardless of how long they have been in the classroom, who are interested in further professional development and want to remain in the classroom. Since the 2020 – 2021 program year, **we have accepted 35 Fellows ranging from their 3rd to their 8th year of teaching**, with 7 new Fellows joining this past school year. As a result, **80% of our most recent “graduating” corps members are teaching for at least a third year**. On our surveys, our Fellows have consistently agreed that MTF programming encouraged them to stay beyond their initial two-year commitment and helped them improve their current teaching practice in innovative and engaging ways.

Serving as both a key training component for our new teachers and an essential learning opportunity for local students, our summer teaching practicum has provided **six free summer school opportunities** for students from Harlan, Knott, and Floyd Counties since launching in 2020. These summer school opportunities, developed at the request of and in partnership with local districts, meet school districts’ specific needs, including addressing COVID learning loss and providing an ACT boot camp.

We are proud of the profound impact our corps members have on their students and their wider Kentucky communities. In addition to leading in the classroom, they create and lead after school clubs, coach sports teams, and volunteer in their communities. And as alumni, they continue that impact. Our network of alumni leaders includes:

- **Luke Glaser:** A seventh generation Kentuckian, Luke is committed to a life-long mission of education and public service. As a classroom teacher, Luke **leads his AP Calculus students to a 90% or higher pass rate on the national AP exam** each year. In addition to leading in the classroom, Luke also serves as the Vice Principal at Hazard High School and was elected as Hazard City Commissioner in 2018, a position he has held for the past 7 years. Recently, Luke was a **finalist for the Kentucky Teacher of the Year** and just wrapped the sixth class of his Hazard Civic Fellows program, which he started to combat the “brain drain” in Hazard.
- Gary Douglas: 2022 TFAA alum, Gary Douglas, is a **certified AP teacher** at Leslie County High School, his alma mater. In addition to successfully bringing AP Calculus to the school, Gary also serves at the **head of the math department and coaches both the boys cross country and track and field teams**. As a member of our Mountain Teacher Fellowship, Gary is exploring sustainable solutions to allow for higher levels of participation in extracurricular activities, despite geographic constraints. Gary was recently awarded **Math Department Teacher of the Year by Leslie County High School as well as 2025 SOAR Teacher of the Year**.
- **Kelsey Tackett:** As part of our Central Appalachian Leadership Lab (CALL), participants were invited to serve as mentors to members of our Mountain Teacher Fellowship this past year. Kelsey Tackett, a 2012 TFAA alum and current Director of Appalachian Engagement at the Lighthouse Beacon Foundation, leveraged her **12 years of experience as a science and reading teacher in Floyd County Schools** to improve curricular quality and improve teacher retention. Additionally, her longstanding work to increase STEM initiatives in the region also led to her induction into the **BRIGHT Leadership Class of 2024**, providing her with additional access to meaningful development to further her impact.

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On a personal note from my experience as a Superintendent, my partnership with **TFAA was never just an expense line—it was an investment with compounding return.** Across rural Eastern Kentucky, the teacher pipeline has shifted dramatically. As enrollment in traditional educator preparation programs have dwindled, districts now rely heavily on alternative certification routes, especially Option 6. When I left Harlan Independent, more than one-third of our vacancies were filled through Option 6. From experience as the previous VP of the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, it is clear that what began as a short-term fix has become a systemic staffing model in many of Kentucky’s districts.

Amid this landscape, TFAA Option 8 teachers consistently stood out. **Their commitment to serving underserved communities, their alignment towards every child receiving an excellent education, and their focus on student outcomes were unmatched.** The practicum experience they came in with provided early exposure to real classrooms, creating a foundation that accelerated their effectiveness from day one.

TFAA’s coaching and support structure is another differentiator. While districts provide required evaluations, the realities of school leadership often reduce this to compliance. TFAA adds a meaningful, consistent layer of coaching, feedback, and professional community for its teachers that other candidates simply do not receive. This support, especially during a teacher’s first year, directly contributes to stronger student outcomes and faster instructional growth.

By contrast, many Option 6 teachers begin the year without passing PRAXIS exams, without classroom experience, and without coaching in pedagogy or management. TFAA teachers, on the other hand, enter with demonstrated content knowledge, coached and evaluated practicum experience, and ongoing instructional support throughout the year.

The impact extends far beyond test scores. While I closely tracked accountability data—ACT scores, proficiency rates, graduation trends—I also saw the deeper, long-term influence TFA teachers had on students and school communities. My own children counted TFA teachers among their most impactful educators. Without them, they would not have had in-person instruction in Physics, Spanish, or foundational English. One TFA teacher even coached my daughter in cross-country, helping her reach the KHSAA State Championship and eventually compete in college. These are “trajectory-changing” impacts that no spreadsheet can capture.

Perhaps the most immediate benefit TFAA provides districts is stability. There is no substitute for the peace of mind that comes from entering August with every classroom staffed by a qualified teacher. Unfilled positions create ripple effects—disrupted schedules, shifting class sizes, compromised professional learning, and frantic onboarding. But when staffing is secure, leaders can “shift from crisis management to strategic preparation.” Teachers can focus on learning, counselors on student transitions, and central office teams on curriculum and readiness.

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In regions with thin human-capital pipelines, TFA teachers offer more than coverage. They bring demonstrated content competency, classroom experience before day one, mission-driven commitment, structured coaching, and a support system that strengthens district capacity. **In my experience, that combination is not just helpful—it is a strategic advantage for students.**

The state's investment is vital to the continuation of our successful program, which has a proven track record of positive impact in the schools and communities where our corps members and alumni serve. While we work to balance our financial resources with private support from local and national funders committed to rural education, our scale and impact would not be possible without your support. I would be happy to answer any questions about our program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles D. Morton", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Charles "CD" Morton
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