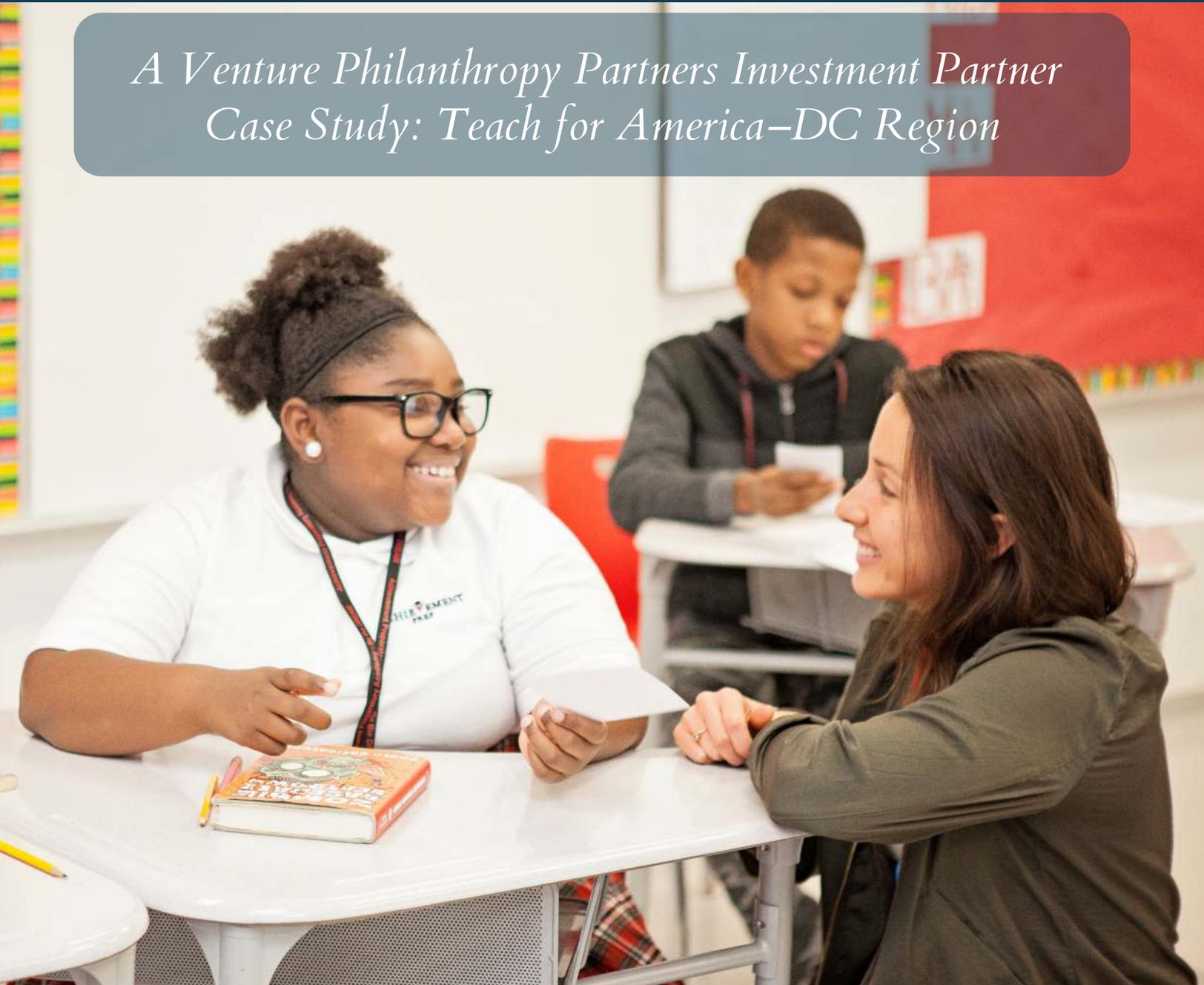


Transforming Relationships, Creating Partnerships

*A Venture Philanthropy Partners Investment Partner
Case Study: Teach for America—DC Region*





This case study tracks the experiences of three Teach for America–DC Region corps members: Smriti Aveeka Vats; Camille Sanchez; and Symmone Fisher.

With an interest in pursuing education reform, Smriti Aveeka Vats believed the first step in making lasting, systematic change was to become a teacher in a public school system to see where inequities lie and how she could begin her professional journey of purpose. Her research led her to consider an opportunity within a network of educators invested in transformative change for students and communities: Teach for America (TFA).

“I was interested in TFA because I was drawn to the network and meeting other like-minded individuals that are passionate about addressing educational inequity,” says Vats. Now pursuing a Juris Doctorate at Tulane University Law School, Vats says her experience as a TFA corps and alumni member and High Point High School teacher provided the tools to support her growth—personally and professionally. “I learned patience, the importance of connecting with others, being present, and working hard. I loved getting to know my students as humans first. We were invested in each other’s growth beyond just math.”



THE INVESTMENT PARTNER: TEACH FOR AMERICA–DC REGION

Since it was established over 25 years ago, Teach for America–DC Region (TFA–DCR) has introduced thousands of corps members into classrooms in Washington, DC and Prince George’s County, helping fuel progress for students and schools across Greater Washington.

Today, TFA corps members—alumni teachers, principals, school system leaders, and leaders in policy, advocacy, elected office, non-profits, philanthropies, business, the law, and medicine—bring about transformative change for students and communities each day. TFA–DCR recruits, matches, onboards, and supports a diverse network of teachers and leaders who bring promise and commitment to advance the academic and personal growth of their students.





THE CHALLENGE: TEACHER RETENTION

Prior to the investment, TFA–DCR was successfully placing corps members in a variety of schools. However, the common critique was that corps members would leave after the required second year of service and would not stay and join the school systems’ teacher roster. In many cases, they would leave the school system for another regional system that paid a higher rate. In some cases, those teachers would leave the profession altogether. In response, this investment was designed to encourage alumni teachers to teach at their matched school for a total of four years. Alumni teachers were awarded a \$10,000 stipend at the end of each school year, provided that they stayed through the entire year.

THE RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE: THE TALENT HUB

TFA–DCR is one of the first regional affiliates to develop an operating model, the Talent Hub, which elevates the focus on alumni teachers by providing financial incentives to continue placement beyond the two years of corps service. The Talent Hub model, which Venture Philanthropy Partner’s (VPP) investment helped to develop, enables TFA–DCR to place alumni teachers at partner high schools in an effort to increase students’ academic abilities and their readiness for college and careers.

For the first 23 years of its history in the National Capital Region, TFA–DCR’s operating model was structured to support corps members. In 2015, its leadership had begun to reconfigure the model to build stronger relationships to coordinate and support alumni teachers. The Talent Hub represented TFA–DCR’s new operating model, programmatic vision, and direction. Through the Talent Hub, TFA–DCR would focus on four key concepts:

1. Recruit
2. Vet and Select
3. Onboard and Match
4. Develop and Retain

TFA–DCR alumni teachers would commit to additional years beyond their initial two-year commitment associated with the traditional TFA corps model. This new approach to professional development uniquely designed for alumni teachers would produce a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to motivate teachers to remain at their respective schools. A menu of learning opportunities would be offered through new Teacher Leader Collaboratives.



Teachers would provide feedback and guidance on the different strategies to engage students in active learning and help students take more responsibility for their education. In addition to the professional development, an annual \$10K subsidy/stipend would help close the salary gap between Prince George’s County Public Schools teachers and teachers in other jurisdictions in the region.

THE ACTION

VPP and TFA–DCR began working together in December of 2015 to (a) develop and implement a new and financially sustainable operating model (the Talent Hub) for the Greater Washington region, and (b) implement the alumni matching portion of the Talent Hub model in *Ready for Work* schools to help improve student academic achievement.

VPP, in partnership with Prince George’s County government and the Prince George’s County Public School System, created *Ready for Work: Champions for Career- and College-Ready Graduates* in Prince George’s County. This six-year, three-part initiative—including strategic alliances with businesses, non-profits, and the public sector—prepared Prince George’s County Public Schools students for careers in high-demand occupations.

Camille Sanchez, a *Ready for Work* fellow who taught algebra at High Point High School in Prince George’s County, worked with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students who learn with the same teachers and student peers daily. Sanchez prioritized building respect and trust and creating connections in her classroom. Sanchez joined TFA–DCR to teach in an urban setting to help students understand the importance of a STEM education.

“I found the listing for my current job through the Talent Hub,” says Sanchez. “I was able to see what schools partner with TFA in the northern New Jersey region. My placement school was in the DC region, but I knew I wanted to move back to New Jersey eventually. When it came time to make that transition, the Talent Hub helped me find teaching opportunities in urban schools.”

TFA–DCR launched the alumni matching portion of the Talent Hub in Prince George’s County beginning in the Fall of 2016 in preparation for School Year 2016/17. High Point High School had a history of rebuilding academic departments around TFA corps members. It utilized the Talent Hub to retain teachers beyond their initial two-year assignments to embed them in the academic and social success of their students.

Smriti Aveeka Vats was one of those teachers, originally hired to teach math and incentivized to stay with a stipend. She joined a professional learning community attached to VPP's investment and worked collaboratively with Career and Technical Education Teachers to reinforce learning through interdisciplinary assignments. "Professionally, seeing how hard my students worked in the classroom helped to motivate me to apply the same energy in spaces that I am committed to, whether that was in faculty meetings or interactions with administration," noted Vats.

Vats and Sanchez are two of many examples of teachers who were placed by TFA-DCR and became integral members of their school communities. "Our team's charge is to work with districts and states by recruiting, matching, and developing diverse talent in high-impact roles—including classrooms, schools, and systems—to fuel individual and collective progress toward educational equity," says Helda Morad, Chief Impact Officer for TFA-DCR. She strives to connect participants' experiences from acceptance into the TFA program through alumni-hood, ensuring that their journey is cohesive, responsive, and aligned to the regional mission and strategy. "We know that educational equity is only possible if change happens at the classroom, school, and system-level, and we have seen how our presence and network can enable conditions to achieve positive results at all those levels."

THE RESULTS

Through this investment, TFA-DCR is helping to fuel the movement for educational equity in the Greater Washington Region through the preparation of new teachers and, for the first time, matching talented alumni TFA teachers to positions in classrooms in schools with demonstrated need throughout the region. During the investment period, which ended July 31, 2020, VPP invested \$742,715 in TFA-DCR.





Talent Hub Expansion. The success of the Talent Hub has expanded beyond Prince George's County and has been replicated in Northern Virginia. There were several key learnings that were applied to the expansion:

- **Steward District Leaders.** Prioritization of building strong relationships with district leaders to better understand their talent needs and align the TFA–DCR strategy to help meet those needs. Frequent updates on progress-to-goal were shared, and the TFA–DCR team connected with leaders to agree on success metrics and mitigate anticipated risks.
- **Establish Strong Communication and Collaboration Structures.** Enabling conditions that would support ongoing collaboration were set, including the creation of a meeting cadence with the district HR team, consulting with partnering schools, and setting up a system to ensure that participants were in alignment on the candidates' hiring progress. Accordingly, continued collaboration and partnership with the school system contributed toward the expanded success of the Talent Hub and retention stipends.
- **Diversification of Revenue.** Expanding and diversifying public funding and earned revenue was key to organizational sustainability and successfully replicating the Talent Hub model.
- **Share Knowledge Capture.** Effectively sharing success stories was essential, particularly the TFA–DCR clustering model, which consists of concentrating TFA talent in high-needs schools to invest them in hiring both corps members and alumni.

Engagement with High Point High School. Through this investment, TFA–DCR deepened its partnership with Prince George's County Public Schools and built an effective working relationship with High Point's principal and leadership team. This included consistently seeking opportunities to improve internal communication within the school. As a result, TFA–DCR strengthened its relationship by establishing new Talent Hub processes that enhance staff communication between schools. Of the two efforts developed, one involved increasing the number of touchpoints with school leaders as the hiring cycle gains momentum, which helps TFA–DCR create more matches aligned to a schools' needs.

Additionally, TFA–DCR created a public data file system that provides schools with greater transparency and "just-in-time" information on the pool of candidates TFA–DCR staff have recruited. These efforts help improve Talent Hub communications between school leaders and TFA–DCR staff, ultimately improving the relationship overall.



Improved Alumni Teacher Recruiting. The TFA–DCR team strengthened the Talent Hub's alumni recruiting, tracking variances in how alumni teachers sought new opportunities and engaged with TFA–DCR staff to address diversity within their pool of candidates. In response, TFA–DCR set a policy to ensure that half of their candidate pool is comprised of teachers whose racial and ethnic identities (e.g., African American, Latinx, etc.) reflect that of the student population. To achieve this, the team diversified its outreach strategies to achieve the organization's goal of maintaining a well-rounded and diverse candidate pool.

CONCLUSION

This partnership supported an innovative operating model that continues to help TFA–DCR achieve its goals and aspirations, including increasing student academic achievement and expanding local and state partnerships. TFA–DCR will continue to refine how the Talent Hub model is implemented with an emphasis on building relationships at multiple levels within a local education agency to create the right supports and incentives for principal engagement and buy-in to yield long-term success.

In addition, TFA–DCR staff will continue to monitor and support the performance of all alumni teachers matched through this initiative. This includes annually measuring changes in student performance, connecting them to regional and TFA nationally sponsored leadership development opportunities, and supporting a network of TFA teachers across Prince George's County Public Schools and other supports, as needed.

Currently teaching high school math at a charter school in Newark, New Jersey, Camille Sanchez accepted a role for the School Year 2021–22 as the math department Chair at a charter school in Jersey City. “VPP/TFA–DCR shaped me into the teacher I am today,” says Sanchez. “My experience gave me the foundation I needed to excel in my career. I have developed as a leader and have realized my goal of one day becoming principal of an urban school to ensure that every student receives an excellent education.”

TFA corps member Smriti Aveeka Vats reflects on the experience that she says prepared her for her future, providing the foundation for her career in overcoming educational inequity: “Working at High Point and with TFA helped me understand the importance of showing up and speaking out when you see injustice—in the classroom or otherwise. If you don't personally bring a call to action, the change you see necessary may not always come through. The friendships [formed through TFA] are lifelong, whether it is with other corps members, students at your school, school faculty, or TFA staff.”



Symmone Fisher—originally a 2016 New York City TFA corps member—joined her current role as a VPP *Ready to Work* Fellow at High Point High School in 2018. “I have been provided with every tool to perform effectively through a myriad of circumstances,” says Fisher. “What was most helpful is that there has always been an open line of communication.”

"TFA–DCR’s partnership with VPP has supported us in fostering transformational relationships with schools and district,” said Morad. “We leveraged what we learned through this partnership and the strong relationships we cultivated with Prince George’s County Public Schools leadership to continue to attract alumni to Prince George’s County through the inclusion of alumni matching in the district contract for the first time in the history of our partnership...and, as a result, strengthen our story as it relates to alumni.”

Fisher believes that the most important principle she has learned from her experience VPP/ TFA–DCR has been the value of partnership. “Partnerships are grounded in the unity of shared work,” says Fisher. “My partnership with VPP/TFA–DCR and everyone involved has provided solace and support over the past few years. My school community struggled with unprecedented circumstances such as an insurrection, sociopolitical protests and movements, a pandemic with school closures, and many more instances of discomfort at different sections of my identity and lived experiences as an educator. Not only do I feel a deep sense of partnership with VPP/TFA–DCR, but I feel a sense of community and connectedness to the TFA network at large. We are in this shared work *together*.”

The TFA–DCR investment is at the heart of VPP’s mission to align partners, resources, and actions to improve life opportunities for young people in Greater Washington. Dr. Adele Fabrikant, former Executive Director for TFA–DCR at the time of the investment, sought opportunities to expand the success of the Talent Hub into other jurisdictions. With this investment, VPP was able to help TFA–DCR explore a new financial model for the program through partnership and cost-sharing with Prince George’s County Public Schools.





Now Senior Vice President, Regional Field Executive at Teach for America, Dr. Fabrikant leverages the learnings from this investment across more than 50 regions and nationally. The model designed to attract new talent and retain teachers in Prince George’s County is replicable across rural and urban school districts.

"The investment was instrumental to shifting the way the TFA–DCR team operated, partnered, and maximized impact," said Dr. Fabrikant. "The collaboration we forged across sectors resulted in improved teacher practice, teacher retention, and ultimately student outcomes."

Photos provided by Teach for America–DC Region

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