



## City Year N.H. works to make a difference Manchester schoolchildren's lives

By ELLEN GRIMM  
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You may have seen them walking around downtown wearing red jackets. If you were outside Beech Street School on a Monday morning, you may have seen - or at least heard - a small group of them led in a cheer by an ebullient John Adams.

"We've got red on! We've got a heart full of grace," shouted Adams to a chorus of "Marvelous Monday!"

They're members of City Year New Hampshire, and they're hoping to make a difference in the lives of Manchester's schoolchildren.

"They have developed positive relationships with the students they're working with," said Ellie Murphy, principal of the school, one of five struggling elementary schools now getting help from 42 City Year New Hampshire members. An additional 13 members work in other schools and programs.

City Year, a member of the AmeriCorps national service network, has existed for about 20 years. About 90 percent of its members - 17- to 24-year-olds - now work in schools across the country.

In recent years, the organization also has teamed up with researchers at Johns Hopkins University who have found that kids with poor attendance, behavior issues, and failing course work - especially in a high-poverty environment - are more likely to drop out of school.

A group such as City Year has been shown to help those kids stay on the path to graduation, said Johns Hopkins education researcher Robert Balfanz.

"They're near peers, which is important because they're not a friend, but they're not an authority figure," Balfanz said. "They're somewhere in between, sort of like that big brother or big sister."

The young people receive a weekly stipend of about \$200 and can qualify for money toward paying off student loans. And they receive basic health care.

"A lot of people like to connect it to a Peace Corps-like experience - that you are sacrificing of yourself in order to give back to others," said Alex Allen, co-executive director of City Year New Hampshire.

The application process is competitive, according to co-executive director Pawn Nitichan, with five applicants for every open slot.

"We select them based on their past experience and willingness and interest in working with young people, their ability to work in a team setting, their leadership potential," Nitichan said.

Once accepted, they undergo a month-long training session before entering the city's schools, and they receive training throughout the year.

A look at the autobiographical entries in the City Year New Hampshire brochure reveals that they are also a literary, philosophical bunch, with frequent references to such figures as Mahatma Gandhi, Shakespeare, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Wordsworth.

### Manchester mission

Trent Smith, 22, is from Mississippi and plans to go to law school. Nowadays, he works with kids at Beech Street School. "I really want them to have fun. I really think that's what City Year brings - these kids are excited to see us," Smith said.

Smith has come across what he calls "spirited" students. "Really trying to gauge what works best for them, how they learn best - that was kind of a challenge," he said.

But he's had some successes. In one case, he said, a student responded to one-on-one reading sessions.

"That story about a talking animal became less about a talking animal and more about how she engages other kids every day and how they treat her and how she should treat them," he said.

City Year has worked around the state for about 10 years, as well as in after-school programs at Hillside Middle School in Manchester. In the fall of 2009, the organization began talking with city officials about expanding those efforts.

Based in part on the Johns Hopkins research, City Year has developed a program called "Whole School, Whole Child," which includes academic support and after-school programming.

"We came here because we're looking for young people who are going to have a challenge succeeding throughout their school career and therefore in life, and we're interested in helping them," said Ken Clark, chairman of the board of City Year New Hampshire.

Scott McGilvray, president of the Manchester Education Association, said City Year members also have participated in MEA training programs dealing with various classroom issues.

"It is the most professionally run, well supervised, outstanding program that I've ever seen," McGilvray said of City Year.

Beech Street School includes many refugee students, said principal Murphy. Some arrive without any experience in a formal education setting.

"We need as much support and help in these schools that we can get," she said. City Year, she said, "is another added piece that will make us reach our goal."

### Fiscal challenges

Ken Clark says it took some convincing for City Year to move its headquarters from Stratham to Manchester in September 2010, as well as to expand its ranks.

"As we looked at the fiscal landscape, we had some serious questions as to whether we can do that," he said.



City Year New Hampshire corps member Jose Villanueva spends time with student Sophie Brown at City Year's Winter Camp for Kids, held during February vacation. (CITY YEAR NEW HAMPSHIRE)

As an AmeriCorps program, the organization gets 30 percent of its funding from federal sources. Another 30 percent of the group's funding is municipal or city money, and the rest comes from the private sector.

But possible major cuts to programs such as AmeriCorps - which have come up in the recent budgetary wrangling in Washington - could seriously impair City Year's ambitions, Nitichan said.

"We are mobilizing our supporters and champions to make calls to voice support for our program," she said.

It was Mayor Ted Gatsas who played a pivotal role in getting City Year to Manchester, Clark said, by offering to get the support of local businesses.

"He got us a good jump-start," Clark said.

The organization has raised more than 80 percent of its total budget, with the help of city funds, as well as corporate partners, such as Timberland, Catholic Medical Center, Dartmouth-Hitchcock and National Grid. Still, \$340,000 more needs to be raised by the end of this June.

The group was hoping for a major boost from a fundraising event on March 26.

City Year meanwhile would like to expand its programs through the city's middle and high schools.

"And as everybody is aware, this is a very difficult economy in which to be doing any expanding," said Ken Clark.

Public Service of New Hampshire pledged \$30,000 over a three-year period, according to Elizabeth LaRocca, PSNH community relations manager for Manchester. Helping children succeed in school, she said, is a workforce, economic development issue.

"We believe City Year is a very effective organization," she said. "And we believe their investing in mentoring younger children - getting to children at a younger age - is an effective strategy."