**PRACTITIONER GUIDE**

# Leaning into personalization to support students and adults during COVID-19
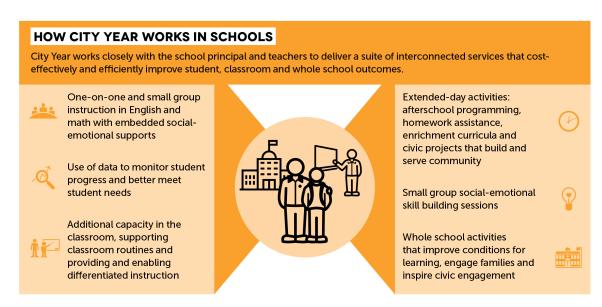
# Introduction

## Purpose of this guide

We seek to provide the adults who work with students every day with practices, tools and recommendations for taking a relationship-driven approach to supporting student social, emotional and academic development in ways that also help teachers and other school-based staff, including City Year AmeriCorps members. The guide draws upon what City Year has learned from years of partnering with educators, schools and communities that are disproportionately affected by systemic inequities, and highlights key lessons learned in Spring and Fall 2020 when the organization adapted its personalized approach to meet student needs via distance learning due to COVID-19 induced school closures.

As City Year continues to learn and innovate alongside our school and district partners, we strive to share practices and contribute to a broader conversation about how best to support students and ensure equitable access to high-quality opportunities in the wake of the global pandemic. We invite you to share your feedback with us as we continue to learn in this work together by contacting us at: jproett@cityyear.org.

## What City Year Does

City Year is an education and human development organization that works with school and community partners to support student success, advance educational equity, and contribute to systems-level changes in policies and practice that address the root causes of inequitable educational outcomes. Founded in 1988, City Year recruits a diverse group of 3,000 AmeriCorps members, ages 18-25, to spend a year in full-time service in public schools, where they serve as student success coaches—near peer tutors, mentors and role models who provide holistic, personalized support to students as they cultivate foundational social, emotional and academic skills that are essential for success in school and in life. Through their service experience, AmeriCorps members gain critical skills that prepare them for workforce, civic and life success. City Year operates in 29 U.S. cities (local City Year offices are referred to as "sites") and partners with more than 300 schools nationwide to deliver its Whole School, Whole Child® (WSWC) services.

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**HOW CITY YEAR WORKS IN SCHOOLS**

City Year works closely with the school principal and teachers to deliver a suite of interconnected services that cost-effectively and efficiently improve student, classroom and whole school outcomes.

- One-on-one and small group instruction in English and math with embedded social-emotional supports

- Use of data to monitor student progress and better meet student needs

- Additional capacity in the classroom, supporting classroom routines and providing and enabling differentiated instruction

- Extended-day activities: afterschool programming, homework assistance, enrichment curricula and civic projects that build and serve community

- Small group social-emotional skill building sessions

- Whole school activities that improve conditions for learning, engage families and inspire civic engagement

## Evidence of Effectiveness Prior to and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

For over 30 years, City Year has been at the frontlines of addressing educational inequities. City Year's research-based, holistic approach is grounded in key learnings from the science of learning and development and supported by third-party research that demonstrates its effectiveness. Schools that partner with City Year are up to two to three times more likely to improve in English and math assessments, and the more time students spend with AmeriCorps members, the more they improve on social, emotional and academic skills—skills that help students thrive in school and contribute to their community. AmeriCorps members also benefit from their time with City Year with 94% of alumni stating that serving with City Year had a positive impact on their lives.

The communities served by City Year have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, so the organization is finding new ways to support students, teachers and classrooms, while also continuing to nurture and develop its diverse AmeriCorps members. Partner teachers and administrators are responding positively to the adaptable, responsive and critical capacity City Year brings. In a November 2020 survey of more than 180 partner administrators, 95% reported that City Year has supported their school's implementation of virtual, hybrid and/or in person learning. A survey of nearly 500 partner teachers revealed that 94% recognize that City Year provides high-quality service and 90% agree that City Year AmeriCorps members help students feel a stronger sense of belonging. AmeriCorps members also reported the highest engagement scores to date during this period according to the annual survey of AmeriCorps members.

# Study Overview

## What we sought to learn

In alignment with the organization's equity-based approach to research, City Year conducted an RFP process to identify the best partner to explore the practices and conditions that best support personalizing learning for students, specifically within the context of a global pandemic. The organization selected Jacquie Beaubien of Motivation, Mindset & Equity Consulting. This project was a follow-up to a May 2020 report, which revealed that the supports provided by City Year AmeriCorps members are associated with improved student outcomes but did not reveal the specific practices that most effectively support student success. Through this project City Year sought to learn:

- how City Year's personalized learning approach enhanced AmeriCorps member capacity to support their school partners (teachers and principals), students, and where possible, families during the COVID-19 school shutdown

- the highest impact practices, strategies and behaviors for building strong developmental relationships between AmeriCorps members and students during the school shutdown

- the most impactful context conditions, at the student and school levels, that shaped City Year's ability to support student learning and build strong developmental relationships with students during this unprecedented time

For the full list of research questions, developed in partnership with those most affected by the research to align with an equity-based approach, see the full qualitative report.

Data was collected in the spring, summer and fall of 2020. Primary data collection included 25 semi-structured interviews and one focus group with stakeholders at City Year headquarters and three City Year sites: Columbus, Los Angeles and Memphis. Secondary data sources included informational meetings, review and analysis of approximately 200 artifacts (e.g., social media posts, emails, etc.), and survey data from AmeriCorps members and City Year's partner teachers and administrators.

## Findings

- Modeling a personalized approach to learning and development at all levels of the organization allowed for nimbleness and innovation during a global pandemic.

- Prioritizing trust and strong relationships is the foundation for successful personalization of learning for young people. Key elements of building strong, trusting relationships include: expressing care and warmth; persistence and dependability; transparency, vulnerability and emotional safety; and sharing power.

- An increased focus on social-emotional learning and equity that ensures inclusive human-centered practices and approaches throughout the organization was a silver lining in the wake of the pandemic and racial justice reckoning.

- Leaning into building strong developmental relationships proved critical for maintaining student engagement.

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**How City Year Defines Personalized Learning**

Personalized learning is the term used to describe the process of tailoring learning to focus on each student's strengths; addressing their specific gaps (i.e., differentiating learning); ensuring that they have strong relationships with the adults and peers they are learning with and from; and supporting them to develop the agency and confidence needed to take ownership of their learning (e.g., developing a growth mindset, making productive choices, making personal connections to the content, skillful self-reflection and goal setting). Creating conditions that ensure personalized learning enhances students' intrinsic motivation to learn, academic engagement, and learning outcomes.

# Recommendations for Practice

City Year's experience in schools offers a unique lens through which to understand this study's findings and apply them in practice. It is our hope that these practices are helpful to schools, teachers and organizations partnering with schools to support student success.

*Suggested resources and tools connected to all of Jacquie Beaubien's recommendations from the qualitative report can be found at: https://www.edwheelhouse.org/city-year.*



## Build a strengths-based culture that prioritizes trust and relationships

**Prioritize supporting social-emotional development for adults as part of your strategy for supporting student success**, including all staff, student support personnel, and AmeriCorps members.

- Offer community meetings, reflection activities, coaching, self-care classes, and mental health support or leverage school or community partners, such as City Year, to help create these opportunities.

- Provide space for reflection on individual adult assets and strengths.

  - City Year Columbus provided spaces for reflection on individual staff assets and strengths related to social-emotional development and cultivated meaningful relationships by providing one-on-one mentoring for their AmeriCorps members through a partnership with Deloitte, LLP and gave staff the option to take the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder survey.

  - Prioritizing adult social-emotional development also earned City Year Memphis high levels of trust within their team, enabling AmeriCorps members to take an asset-based approach to personalizing learning environments and build deeper relationships with partner teachers and administrators.

- For people who work or volunteer in a school who are not proximate to the day-to-day classroom experience of students or lived experience of the school's community members, create empathy-building opportunities such as shadowing, using brainstorming and feedback sessions regularly, conducting empathy interviews or engaging in community-based participatory action research.

**Maintain an equity focus throughout all levels of the organization**

- Expand awareness of structural factors contributing to educational inequity.

- Create frequent and intentional spaces for reflection and shared learning among adults around equity-centered topics.

- Reflect on current organizational or school-wide practices and approaches to ensure they are inclusive and human-centered.

  - Form and track schoolwide goals through continuous improvement cycles where next steps and results are identified and tracked.

- Enhance adult skills in recognizing and responding to inequity to ensure learning environments are equitable.

  - To ensure learning environments are equitable for all, it is crucial that those working in schools enhance their skills in recognizing and responding when the school environment or an educators' actions may be inadvertently demotivating their students because they are replicating inequitable access to opportunities, structural racism and/or implicit bias. Helpful tools can be found at: https://equitablelearning.org/.

- Elevate all voices, particularly those of students and those working most proximate to students, when making changes to current practices.

  - Encourage and incorporate student voice in creating and implementing school discipline policies and in-school culture initiatives and conduct equity checks to ensure that opportunities to participate are available to all students, such as in Compass Academy's Student Governance Approach.

- Foster a sense of belonging among staff by creating a space for people with similar identities to connect.

  - One way to do this is by forming affinity groups among staff as spaces to connect and cultivate belonging.

    - City Year recently created both local and national affinity groups. This created a safe space for AmeriCorps members from specific communities (Black/African American, Mi Gente, Indigenous Peoples, Asian Pacific Islander Desi American, LGBTQ++, etc.) to connect, heal, process feelings and develop a sense of belonging.

    - Additionally, City Year recently created an Anti-Racist White Learning Series as a part of the national affinity group initiative organized by the Office of Equity. The goal of the Anti-Racist White Learning Series is to cultivate a space where white staff and AmeriCorps Members explore their white identity and contribute to City Year's commitment to being an Anti-Racist organization through self-reflection work in community.

### As much as possible, allow for flexibility and iterative collaboration throughout your organization or school

- Allow for those implementing school-wide or organizational-wide approaches and practices to contextualize their implementation of these approaches and practices and to inform future changes to organization-wide or school-wide approaches and practices.

  - Through a collaborative design process, the headquarters team at City Year delivered a set of guidelines that allowed sites to be flexible and nimble in meeting school partner needs while also staying true to the core WSWC services. City Year leveraged learnings from sites to inform the resources and guidelines being developed.

### Align your work with partners to effectively support student success

- Align with partner goals and practices

  - Columbus City Schools implements restorative justice and trauma-informed care in many of its schools, so City Year Columbus works with school partners to understand how they are integrating these initiatives before training the school's AmeriCorps members on the relevant core concepts and language.

  - City Year Memphis and Whole Child Strategies share a goal of understanding family needs to best support their success. To meet this shared objective, Whole Child Strategies launched a family needs survey, and City Year encouraged families to complete the survey, leading to higher response rates.

### Use evidence-based curriculum while integrating academics with social-emotional learning and development (SEL/SED)

- According to a recent report by the Everyone Graduates Center, greater student growth is seen when social-emotional skills are integrated into math and English Language Arts (ELA)

interventions, such as when an AmeriCorps member demonstrates how to persist through challenges to complete a task while teaching a math lesson.

- How to incorporate social-emotional skills into academic curriculum is demonstrated in this 6th-grade science example from Compass Academy.

- City Year Memphis's successful implementation of Leveled Literacy Intervention and Do the Math curriculum included incorporating social-emotional development into their tutoring sessions.

### Ensure trust and strong developmental relationships are the foundation of the work

- Trust within school systems has been shown to impact school performance and student outcomes. If data is available, examine interpersonal and institutional trust at your school, determine where there are deficits, and strive for continuous improvement.

- Use Search Institute's Developmental Relationship Framework to build strong interpersonal relationships.

# Leverage technology, frameworks and tools to foster personalization

## TECHNOLOGY

### Incorporate data visualization and student support mapping to inform continuous improvement efforts

- City Year Los Angeles leverages data visualization tools, such as PowerBI, to personalize learning for students. The site monitors progress, tracks formative assessments, and updates individualized student support maps every six weeks. This allows AmeriCorps members to draw on all of the data collected to create a differentiated plan for academic and social-emotional development support for each student.

### Address technology skill gaps and collaborate with education technology organizations to personalize learning for students

- **Integrate online learning and engagement tools**

  - During distance learning, it is critical to keep students engaged. ClassDojo can help track student engagement. Zoom polling and Mentimeter can help educators understand how much students are engaging with the material. And Kahoot, an app-based game similar to jeopardy, can help students engage with content in new and exciting ways.

- **Collaborate with education technology organizations that align with school and student needs**

  - Finding an education technology organization that aligns with your particular school or organization's needs can help to support student growth during distance learning. To support student growth in literacy online, City Year Memphis partnered with BookNook because of how it aligned with school and student needs.

- **Upskill impact staff and corps as <u>virtual facilitators</u>**

## FRAMEWORKS AND TOOLS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS

**Use frameworks with asset-based approaches grounded in developmental relationships that support student engagement** and growth such as <u>Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework</u> alongside <u>PEAR: Partnerships in Education and Resilience's Clover Model</u>.

- **Leverage frameworks to create space for student voice and leadership**

  - For example, co-developing community norms with students that are posted where they are visible, revisited regularly, and used to support student engagement is an example of a practice that promotes the "Assertiveness" domain (need for choice and participation in decision-making) from the Clover Model, and the "Share Power" aspect in the Developmental Relationships Framework.

**Utilize <u>Check-in, Check-out protocol</u>** with students to set goals and give students voice.

**Use research-based SED practices when interacting with students:**

- **Implement *High Standards with Reassurance* practices** (i.e., holding high standards while supporting students to achieve them).

- **<u>Growth Mindset</u>**

  - 1) Use praise carefully: Students are acutely sensitive to inauthentic praise and are also acutely sensitive to how adults are praising other students in their classes.

  - 2) Address collective narratives for learning and achievement differences: Intentionally cultivate classroom norms that provide a growth mindset supporting narrative on root causes and systemic inequities that help explain why certain learning and performance differences exist. Using collaborative processes to develop these norms elevates student voice and creates structured opportunities for exposing and reframing fixed mindsets.

  - 3) Encourage a growth mindset of emotion regulation as well as skill development.

- **Autonomy**: Listen to and support students in developing their own solutions to challenges. Avoid extrinsic rewards and more authoritarian behavior management strategies.

- City Year, in partnership with MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership and PERTS Lab at Stanford, created and tested a <u>Growth Mindset for Mentors Toolkit</u> that is free and available online to help adults who work with students cultivate a growth mindset.

- Additional resources from Jacquie Beaubien on research-based SED practices in these six domains (the neuroscience of learning and emotions; meaning-making and recursive processes; growth mindset; autonomy; relevance and purpose; identity safety and integrated identity development) can be found at: <u>https://www.edwheelhouse.org/city-year</u>.

# Ideas for supporting students, families, schools, and communities during times of uncertainty

*For more information on resourcing during challenging times, see this digital resource guide for educators and families created by City Year to support student learning during COVID-19.*

**Assess needs of community members and disseminate critical information**

- **Leverage phone calls and social media**

  - City Year supported assessing needs and disseminating information to families via phone calls and social media (specifically needs related to technology and food insecurity). For example, a flyer that was posted to Facebook on March 12th about food distribution sites in Memphis was shared 243 times within a few days.

**Leverage support from partner organizations**

- As school staff, if there are specific areas of need (such as phone calls home, tech support on Zoom calls, social media support, etc.,) ask for support in those areas. If you are unsure of specific needs or don't have time to think about how a partner organization can specifically support you, ask that the organization create options for levels and areas of support for you to choose from.

- As a partner organization, provide a menu of services to share with schools. You can offer tiers or levels of support that the school can choose from as well as specific services that your organization can provide.

- Deploy AmeriCorps members as Student Success Coaches to support teachers in ensuring all students have access to developmental relationships and research-based supports designed to meet individual student needs and create positive, nurturing, culturally responsive, identity-safe, and instructionally rich learning environments.

  - AmeriCorps members are supporting teachers during distance learning by:
    - tracking student engagement (attendance and participation)
    - monitoring the chat in virtual meetings to answer student questions
    - providing technical support for teachers, students, and parents

  - Where AmeriCorps members are more fully integrated into distance learning, they:
    - collaborate with teachers on ways to make distance learning more engaging for students (e.g., by integrating interactive activities into lessons)
    - offer strategies to support struggling students, including checking in with students via the chat or phone calls home
    - lead activities to engage students, including leveraging polling technology

- integrate aspects of social-emotional development (SED) into their work and interactions with students (e.g., by leading whole-class activities such as emotional check-ins and strategies for managing stress during distance learning)
    - provide academic, social, and emotional support in breakout rooms with small groups
- For examples of how specific sites continued to support students and schools during the spring of 2020, see these videos on virtual service and distance learning from Los Angeles and Chicago.

**Create contextualized safe spaces where adults can deepen their commitment to equity and foster a sense of belonging:**

- When events related to upheaval and/or injustice, particularly racial injustice, are taking place, ensure a safe space for reflection, flexibility and DEI training for adults.

    - City Year increased organizational support for affinity groups, launched a white anti-racist group, and commissioned the Black Leadership Response Collective, a task force focused on making recommendations to City Year's Equity Council.
    - City Year sites also held Race and Equity Summits and many provided access to one-on-one counseling and well-being workshops.

**Leverage relationship development for student engagement in the virtual space**

- **Ensure learning is truly student-centered and engaging**

    - When students have greater autonomy in choosing whether to participate in learning, such as in a virtual setting, learning experiences need to become truly student-centered and engaging. AmeriCorps members accomplish this primarily by leveraging relationships.

- **Leverage social media for relationship development**

    - Social media was used as a vehicle to send creative, relevant messages and images that referenced the students' school days and reminded them of school events and school schedules. Leveraging social media also increases visibility of school support to parents, which increases relational trust.
        - AmeriCorps members posted posters to encourage students online, such as the "I wish my students knew..." campaign. Another example is that social media challenges were created for students about what books they were reading.

# Conclusion and Invitation

As you try some of these strategies, please share your thoughts and feedback with us by contacting us at: jproett@cityyear.org. We are consistently seeking new and innovative ways to support student, school and practitioner success.