



OVERVIEW OF

How a Personalized Approach to Learning Helped One Organization Quickly Adapt in a Global Pandemic—a City Year case study¹

March 2021 marks one year since the COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt closure of schools in the U.S. and a shift to distance learning. In response, City Year—leaning into our evidence-based, holistic [Whole School, Whole Child \(WSWC\) approach](#) and our ability to respond to local needs—quickly adapted operations to continue serving school partners, students and communities in 29 cities across the country.

A qualitative study² by [Jacquie Beaubien](#) of Motivation, Mindset & Equity Consulting captures emerging lessons from the spring and early fall of 2020 about the practices and conditions that enabled the organization to successfully adapt to distance learning, with a focus on the service of AmeriCorps members at three City Year sites in Columbus, Los Angeles and Memphis.

The [report](#) offers valuable insights as schools, educators and organizations seek to mitigate educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic and navigate the challenges of student disengagement, learning loss and social-emotional needs.

Key findings

Personalized approach to learning

Modeling a personalized approach to learning³ and development at all levels of the organization allowed for nimbleness and innovation during a global pandemic.

Trust and strong relationships

Prioritizing trust and strong relationships is the foundation for successful personalization of learning for young people.

Social-emotional learning and equity

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

Student engagement

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

Evidence of City Year's effectiveness

City Year's [research-based](#), holistic approach is grounded in 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.

City Year sites studied

Three sites with different core strengths that City Year considers essential for successful personalization of learning were selected for the study:



City Year Columbus excels at developing social-emotional skills, intentional learning environments and professional development opportunities for AmeriCorps members. Columbus was the first City Year site to use Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework⁴ alongside PEAR's Clover Model⁵, helping AmeriCorps members to internalize how an asset-based approach grounded in developmental relationships accelerates student growth.



City Year Los Angeles, which uses data to inform decision making and continuous improvement, leveraged advanced data analytics to identify students who could most benefit from AmeriCorps member support, an approach that has contributed to improved student outcomes. This work pushed City Year headquarters to adopt more sophisticated data visualization tools for the whole organization and allow AmeriCorps members to better personalize supports to meet student needs.



City Year Memphis demonstrates strong outcomes through its use of evidence-based curriculum and its work integrating academics with social-emotional learning and development. Their work has earned them high levels of trust within their team, enabled AmeriCorps members to take an asset-based approach to personalizing the learning environment, and strengthened relationships with partner teachers and administrators.

Practitioner guide

An accompanying practitioner guide: [Leaning into personalization to support students and adults during COVID-19](#) draws upon City Year's experience to provide practices, tools and recommendations for taking a relationship-driven approach to supporting student social, emotional and academic development for teachers and other school-based staff, including City Year AmeriCorps members.

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.



1 Beaubien, Jacquie. How a personalized approach to learning helped one organization quickly adapt in a global pandemic. (2021). Motivation, Mindset and Equity Consulting. Retrieved from: <https://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/City-Year-Adapting-in-Global-Pandemic.pdf>

2 City Year created this report with support from The Leon Lowenstein Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within do not necessarily reflect the foundation's positions or policies.

3 How City Year defines personalized learning: the process of tailoring learning to focus on each students' strengths, addressing their specific gaps, 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.

4 Search Institute's Developmental Relationship Framework. Retrieved from: <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>

5 Noam, Gil. Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) Institute. The Clover Model of Youth Development. Retrieved from: <https://www.pearinc.org/clover-model>

6 City Year. Practitioner Guide: Leaning into personalization to support students and adults during COVID-19. (2021). Retrieved from: https://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LowensteinCaseStudy_CompanionGuide_03.15.21.pdf



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