

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: STUDENT AND PRACTITIONER EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19



# Contents

## Executive Summary pg. 4

Background  
Study Overview  
Findings

## Introduction pg. 9

Where are we now?  
City Year Overview

## Methodology pg. 13

Primary Data Sources  
Participant Selection  
Secondary Data Sources

## Findings pg. 15

Part 1: Supporting Attendance During COVID-19

Student Experiences  
AmeriCorps Member Experiences  
Teacher/Principal Experiences

Part 2: Supporting SEAD During COVID-19

The Importance of SEAD  
Perceptions of Students' Academic Experiences  
Perceptions of Students' Social-Emotional Well-being  
AmeriCorps Member Experiences  
Teacher/Principal Experiences

Part 3: Supporting Equity During COVID-19

Perceptions of Student Experiences  
Supporting ELLs and Diverse Learners

Part 4: Emerging Effective Practices during COVID-19

## Conclusion: How do we support recovery and renewal post-COVID-19? pg. 30

A new way forward

<sup>1</sup> Analytical support provided by the Everyone Graduates Center.

City Year published this report with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the foundations' positions or policies.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the students, AmeriCorps members, Impact Managers and teachers at the participating City Year sites and Compass Academy who so willingly and beautifully shared their experiences, making this report possible.

I want to thank the staff at the participating City Year sites and Alexis Urquhart, Colby Smith, Brandon Jones and Marcia Fulton at Compass Academy for their collaboration in shaping and implementing the research project.

I thank each of our reviewers whose feedback on earlier drafts greatly improved this report: Carolyn Trager Kliman, Jody Cornish, Tina Chong, Jennifer Jordan, Jim Balfanz, Symia Stigler, Stephanie Wu, Martha MacIver, Vaughan Brynes, Jessica Proett and Matthew Wernsdorfer.

# Executive Summary

## Background

City Year helps students succeed, while preparing the next generation of leaders who can work across lines of difference to make a positive impact. Together with school and community partners, City Year seeks 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. City Year's Whole School, Whole Child™ (WSWC) approach is grounded in decades of research and experience with youth development and social, emotional and academic development (SEAD).<sup>2</sup> City Year AmeriCorps members serve in diverse teams of eight to 15 young adults as full-time Student Success Coaches for a school year.

COVID-19 ushered in unprecedented trials that touch every aspect of our lives. The pandemic prompted school closures, upended the nature of schooling and instruction, and continues to affect students, their families, schools and teachers across the country. During the past year, students' learning trajectories have shifted and many students have experienced numerous interruptions and losses in their lives, even as they have also honed skills such as flexibility, resilience and creativity. When schools began shifting to distance learning there was no playbook for how to best support students. Despite this, teachers, families and others seeking to support student success have risen to the challenge, adjusting their approaches to meet students' expanded needs during this time.

Throughout the pandemic, City Year has sought to support teachers, administrators and families in promoting student success and well-being. AmeriCorps members provide research-based academic and social-emotional supports for students, organize enrichment activities, offer crucial technology and facilitation support to teachers, and contact families to engage them in student learning. Currently, AmeriCorps members are serving more than 300 public schools across 29 U.S. cities, in a variety of local contexts.

## Study Overview

This report elevates the voices of those closest to the work—students, AmeriCorps members and teachers – to bring to life their extraordinary efforts to support student success. It draws insights from City Year's work across the country and highlights how three City Year sites and Compass Academy<sup>3</sup> (a charter public middle school in Denver co-founded by City Year, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, and the Denver community in 2015) have adjusted their practices to respond to the unique challenges that students are facing in the wake of COVID-19-induced school closures.

The primary sources of data for this research project were eight focus groups, two interviews, and one student survey. Secondary data sources for this project include Compass Academy artifacts, 2020-2021 Compass Academy

---

<sup>2</sup> The Aspen Institute defines social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) as the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning in K-12 education.

<sup>3</sup> Compass Academy, a charter public middle school in Denver, supports students in developing integrated academic and social-emotional Learner & Leader competencies that provide pathways from poverty to postsecondary success. Leveraging advances in learning sciences and youth development practices, they enable students to realize their unique talents through a personalized learning environment that fosters deeper learning; challenge them to master the most critical cognitive skills necessary for college and career readiness; and support them in developing linguistic proficiency that prepares them to collaborate with diverse communities and enter the global market.

Mid-Year Survey results as well as the 2020-2021 City Year AmeriCorps member, teacher and principal survey results.<sup>4</sup>

## Findings

### Attendance

The importance of regular school attendance for students so that all students have the opportunity to learn and grow has never been clearer. COVID-19 has exacerbated chronic absence, interrupted schooling, and instructional loss that many students faced prior to the pandemic.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has also significantly reduced data availability and compromised the ability to conduct quality assurance processes for attendance and chronic absenteeism data. Many schools stopped taking attendance when the shift to virtual learning began in spring 2020, and though schools have started collecting attendance data again, districts and schools are struggling to define attendance in remote and hybrid learning environments. It is important to note that attendance is not a proxy for student engagement.

Like most schools across the country, attendance at Compass Academy this school year was significantly lower for in-person students than it was for those attending remotely. Seventy-nine percent of students who responded to Compass Academy's 2021 Mid-Year Survey agreed that attending school is important, and 84% of students agreed that it's important to attend school every day.<sup>5</sup> Notably, 63% of students agreed that situations outside of school can make it difficult to attend school every day. During the pandemic, Compass Academy has broadened its definition of attendance to include engagement as a signal for teachers and staff to track and monitor. AmeriCorps members play an important role in promoting attendance by supporting student engagement.

In focus groups, teachers from two different school districts discussed how AmeriCorps members were in contact with students and families by phone, connecting with them from the beginning of class regarding attendance.

### Social, Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD)

New disruptions necessitate a new focus on social and emotional well-being. Social-emotional health should be a factor when assessing a student's readiness to learn. Integrating academics and social-emotional learning and viewing students holistically was already an increasingly supported framework pre-pandemic but has now become more important than ever. AmeriCorps members' holistic approach is rooted in social, emotional and academic development (SEAD).

Results from a student survey<sup>6</sup> piloted at a City Year site on the West Coast show that the majority of respondents expressed feelings of agency in their interactions with AmeriCorps members, making clear the ways in which AmeriCorps members prioritize student voice. Based on student survey data, 79% of students feel that their City Year AmeriCorps member really listens to them often or almost always, and 75% of students say that their City Year treats them with respect almost always. Survey results also indicate that students have a voice in decision-making, with

---

4 The 2020-2021 Q2/Q3 Service Partner Survey opened in early February 2021 and closed in early March 2021; 825 teachers and 295 principal/administrators from 21 sites responded. Each quarter, City Year conducts a survey of partner teachers and administrators to understand the impact of and inform improvements on the services provided.

5 For the 2020-2021 Q3 AmeriCorps Member Engagement Survey, there were 2,314 responses from AmeriCorps members across the network. The survey had an 83% participation rate. The survey opened on March 1st, 2021 and closed on March 12th, 2021. This survey was designed to measure engagement. For reference, the 2019-2020 Q3 AmeriCorps Member survey received 2,180 responses.

6 The student survey piloted at a City Year site on the West Coast sought to capture student experiences with AmeriCorps members and the learning environment during COVID-19. The survey yielded 487 responses. The survey was administered in English and Spanish and garnered 480 responses in English and 7 responses in Spanish. Survey items included customized questions from Search Institute's Developmental Relationships survey tool and UChicago's Cultivate survey tool. The survey opened on February 10, 2021 and closed on February 26, 2021.

77% of students saying that their City Year considers their ideas when making decisions. A majority of students feel supported by AmeriCorps members as they navigate academic challenges this year.

84% of students feel that their City Year AmeriCorps member teaches them how to self-advocate and ask for help when they need it, which are critical skills for life and workforce success.

63% of students feel that their City Year notices if they have trouble learning something.

64% of students feel that their City Year says it is more important to try in class than to get things right the first time.

76% of students feel that their City Year explains things in a different way if they don't understand it the first time.

The approach that AmeriCorps members take allows students to thrive academically, make meaning of their experiences, and feel that they are safe and that they belong.<sup>7</sup>

COVID-19 ushered in unprecedented disruptions to students' mental and emotional health, social systems of support, and learning environments. AmeriCorps members also struggle with their mental health and well-being. Many are stressed due to technology issues as many do not have working technology. The unpredictability of the pandemic is a burden, and they are stressed due to unexpected challenges that arise.

To mitigate this stress, Impact Managers—City Year school-based staff who guide corps members—sought to provide personal support and give extra grace to AmeriCorps members, specifically encouragement to take time off. Managers at City Year saw the need for more adaptability, flexibility and increased prioritization of mental health and the need for personal time.

Given the disruption to students' social systems of support, the relationship between AmeriCorps members and students is crucial. AmeriCorps members have worked hard to build relationships with students during COVID-19 but a virtual setting presents challenges. One AmeriCorps member in the focus groups shared:

*I think what I would say is the emotional and social aspect of what we're doing, connecting with students, has not been the same at all. The ability to have, you know, the one-on-one conversations or just, you know, walk a student to class, and that's where you kind of get to hear what's going on in their life.... And we're not able to be one-on-one with students in the virtual space, which means that we don't get to have those kind of open and personal conversations anymore.*

An AmeriCorps member serving at Compass Academy felt that it was difficult to build relationships with students at the beginning of the year because, initially, she was talking to several black screens.

One strategy she used to break the ice was private messaging students to ask how they're doing. She found success by talking to students about more than school, which resulted in students opening up to her more. She made a concerted effort to remember what students told her. For example, if a student had a soccer game on Saturday, she made sure to ask them about it on Monday. One teacher in the focus groups noted:

*My City Year corps member I had in the first semester, she definitely was helping ... a lot with relationship-building and making contact with all of my students that I had.... Definitely the students felt like somebody was paying attention to them ... because there [were] two or three sets of eyes in the classroom.... And I notice the*

---

<sup>7</sup> Research Base Supporting City Year's Whole School Whole Child Services (WSWC). City Year, 2019. Web.

*students that she did build a bond with, their attendance was a lot better, and they were turning in more work. And I kind of understood their personal lives a lot more.*

AmeriCorps members in the focus groups shared that instruction in a virtual space is difficult, and instructional time has been cut in half by the shift to online learning. They have observed some students struggling to understand teacher instruction in a virtual environment. In many ways, students have more independence than ever before, and some of them are having a difficult time coping with self-directed instruction from platforms. Teachers and AmeriCorps members have found that getting creative with technology and finding workarounds make instruction more engaging and effective for students.

In many schools, COVID-19 has allowed for even deeper collaboration among AmeriCorps members and teachers. Focus group participants mentioned several ways in which AmeriCorps members provided general support to teachers. AmeriCorps members helped with technology, administrative and management tasks in the classroom (like admitting students, taking attendance, connecting students to the online platforms, managing the chat function in Zoom, etc.). Principals strongly agree that City Year has supported their school's implementation of multiple learning models (e.g. virtual, hybrid, in-person), and that City Year has supported their school's transition from one type of learning structure to another. Ninety-four percent of partner principals agree that City Year has supported their schools' transitions between in person and distance or hybrid learning, and 95% of partner principals and partner teachers say City Year AmeriCorps members have supported the engagement and participation of students in school during the pandemic. One principal/administrator shared their gratitude in the Q1 Service Partner Survey:

*City Year corps members have been an integral part of our virtual synchronous learning time. They support, and in some cases, they take the lead. They have even helped my teachers with learning new virtual platforms. They are very strong. I appreciate the flexibility of City Year this year in helping us specifically with what our school needs. Thank you!*

During COVID-19, in about 86-90% of school districts served by City Year, AmeriCorps members were able to provide schools and classrooms with virtual support services such as academic and social-emotional support in small and large groups and phone calls home several times a week. In about two-thirds to three-quarters of districts, AmeriCorps members were also able to facilitate support for virtual group management, enrichment activities, and social-emotional support in small groups several times per week.

## Equity

The pandemic has not impacted us all equally. Folks who were already marginalized have been the hardest hit by COVID-19. People of color and low-income individuals have been disproportionately affected in terms of infection rates and deaths. Given that City Year primarily serves Black/Brown and low-income students, the students and families in the schools with which City Year partners may be experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, job loss, lack of access to healthcare, lack of transportation and other challenges.

Numerous AmeriCorps members discussed student needs and experiences based on their observations and service this year. Students will routinely disappear without notice during instructional time to take care of a mess, cook a meal for a family member or deal with a family issue. Teachers and AmeriCorps members in the focus groups have observed students dealing with distractions both at home and in the virtual space. During instructional time, some students are even in a car or at their parents' places of work. They shared that a lack of privacy in some students' households is affecting their ability to be successful academically. A focus group participant explained:

*Some kids are still engaging more than others.... It's the kids who are certain that nothing's going to happen in the background that's going to embarrass them while they're talking or that, like, loud music is playing or parents arguing or whatever.*

Lack of student engagement in the virtual classroom has been related to other issues besides distractions in their learning environment. Adults are suffering from Zoom fatigue; the problem is multiplied for youth accustomed to being

more active. One City Year Impact Manager described the difficulty of helping AmeriCorps members with disengaged students:

*I have corps members coming to me [saying], "I just got a student who's just not doing anything, just sitting there. The camera, just looking at, the camera's on, but just not responding or doing anything." And you know normally I would have all these different things that you could probably tell them to do in that space, if we were in person. But it's just like, "I don't know, how do you get a student involved and engaged in the online space?"*

Another prominent issue for students is technology access. In the virtual focus groups, teachers and AmeriCorps members shared that students often experience technical issues, online access issues, and computer hardware issues (including lack of microphone, camera, and headsets). Some students have limited experience using computers.

Diverse learners need additional attention and care right now as they weather the storm of COVID-19. The term 'diverse learners' is used to describe students with a wide range of abilities. In order to ensure that the needs of diverse learners are being met, Compass Academy released a [report](#) on diverse learner support during COVID-19 that highlights the conditions in place pre-COVID that supported diverse learners and the shifts made to their approach post-COVID induced school closures to support students in a virtual setting.

## Emerging Effective Practices

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, a silver lining emerging is that COVID-19 has required practitioners to get creative about pedagogical practices, class material, service delivery, and more. Practitioners have had the opportunity to resist stagnation and test new approaches. This innovativeness has yielded several effective practices that practitioners want to continue to incorporate into their classrooms post-pandemic. During virtual focus group conversations with teachers, AmeriCorps members and Impact Managers, participants identified lessons learned and positive results stemming from the pandemic that they want to leverage in the future:

- Practitioners have increased their technology experience during virtual schooling, which has proven useful for teachers and students.
- Some students have thrived using online programs, and some programs have increased student engagement.
- Practitioners want to continue to build their computer literacy and skills once they return to in-person instruction.
- Practitioners think it's important to maintain the increased family engagement that occurred during COVID-19.
- Practitioners want to expand City Year afterschool programming to include additional extracurricular activities aside from academic supports. Practitioners have also formed connections and partnerships with afterschool providers that they wish to maintain post-pandemic.

Virtual schooling has also made the value of AmeriCorps members, who serve as Student Success Coaches, undeniable. They have a vital role to play in recovery efforts post-COVID. A locally driven, nationally supported action framework that utilizes local decision-making and community assets to assess students' needs is crucial. City Year is partnering with the COVID Collaborative, Everyone Graduates Center, MENTOR and Voices for National Service to promote one such framework – [the Corps for Student Success](#).

# Introduction

**PITW #086: View Every Crisis, Need or Challenge as an Opportunity to Move Forward or Get Someone Involved.<sup>8</sup>**

## Where are we now?

### New Challenges

COVID-19 ushered in unprecedented trials that touch every aspect of our lives. When a national emergency was declared and states began issuing stay-at-home orders in the United States in March 2020, profound social, emotional, economic, health and safety challenges followed. The pandemic has impacted the education sector in many consequential ways. COVID-19 prompted school closures, upended the nature of schooling and instruction, and continues to affect students, their families, schools, and teachers across the country. During the past year, students' learning trajectories have shifted and many students have experienced numerous interruptions and losses in their lives, even as they have also honed skills such as flexibility, resilience and creativity. Given that our country has not experienced a pandemic of this scale in over a century, when schools began moving to distance learning there was no playbook for how to best support students. Despite this, teachers, families and others seeking to support student success have risen to the challenge, adjusting their approaches to meet students' expanded needs during this time.

### City Year's Service During COVID-19

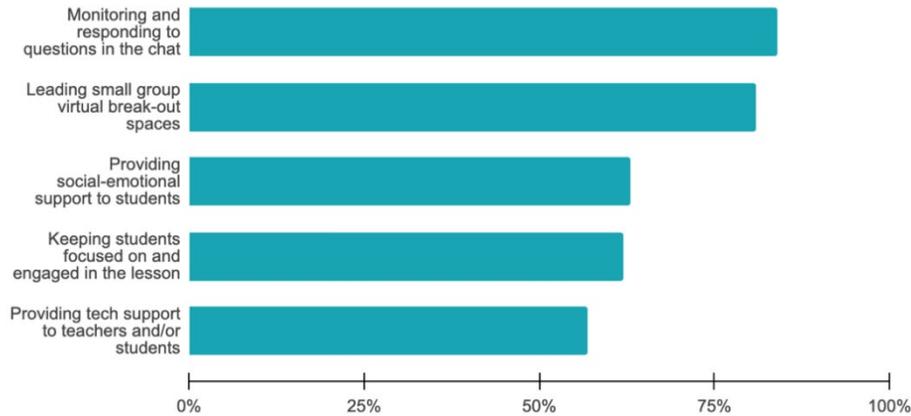
Throughout the pandemic, City Year has sought to support teachers, administrators and families in promoting student success and well-being. AmeriCorps members provide research-based academic and social-emotional supports for students, organize enrichment activities, offer crucial technology and facilitation support to teachers, and contact families to engage them in student learning. Currently, AmeriCorps members are serving in 29 U.S. cities, 51 districts, and 320 public schools in a variety of local contexts. As of October 2020, 11 of the 29 City Year site locations are providing in-person services, nine sites are providing hybrid services, 20 sites are providing virtual services, and seven sites are providing fully virtual services with AmeriCorps members working in-person in schools. The chart below highlights what virtual service looks like during COVID-19 and represents practices that teachers identified as most effective in the 2020-2021 Q2 and Q3 Service Partner Surveys.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Note: Putting Idealism to Work (PITW) is a collection of ideas written and edited by City Year Co-Founder and Senior Advisor Michael Brown with input from many people. It contains 184 pieces of collective City Year wisdom that guide the organization's service and serve as a reference for ways to implement City Year's mission and daily work. They serve as a way of keeping AmeriCorps members and staff inspired about the work. They are continually being revisited.

<sup>9</sup> The 2020-2021 Q2/Q3 Service Partner Survey opened in early February 2021 and closed in early March 2021. 825 teachers and 295 principal/administrators from 21 sites responded. Each quarter, City Year conducts a survey of partner teachers and administrators to understand the impact of and inform improvements on the services provided. (n=436)

## Which types of virtual support have been most effective?



City Year is committed to equipping practitioners with the training, resources and tools they need to be successful as they strive to meet student needs during this pandemic. City Year has been intentional about providing resources to practitioners as they navigate the transition to virtual and hybrid learning. In 2020, City Year provided [free distance learning resources](#) for teachers and families on supporting students' academic and social-emotional learning during COVID-19 and released a [Virtual Facilitator Playbook](#) to help practitioners effectively engage students in online learning spaces. City Year also created guides that provide educators with effective practices to promote student belonging, resilience and engagement during COVID-19. These resources address the multifaceted nature of the challenges practitioners and students are facing, specifically instructional loss, mental health challenges and the loss of a sense of school community. In addition to providing AmeriCorps members with training and support on new strategies to engage students virtually, City Year has expanded its [mental health resources](#) for AmeriCorps members and staff.

COVID-19 has provided us all with an opportunity to find new and creative ways to stay connected to and support student learning. This report elevates the voices of those closest to the work—students, AmeriCorps members, and teachers – to bring to life their extraordinary efforts to support student success. It draws insights from City Year's work across the country and highlights how three City Year sites and Compass Academy<sup>10</sup> (a charter public middle school in Denver co-founded by City Year, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, and the Denver community in 2015) have adjusted their practices to respond to the unique challenges that students are facing in the wake of COVID-19-induced school closures.

## City Year Overview

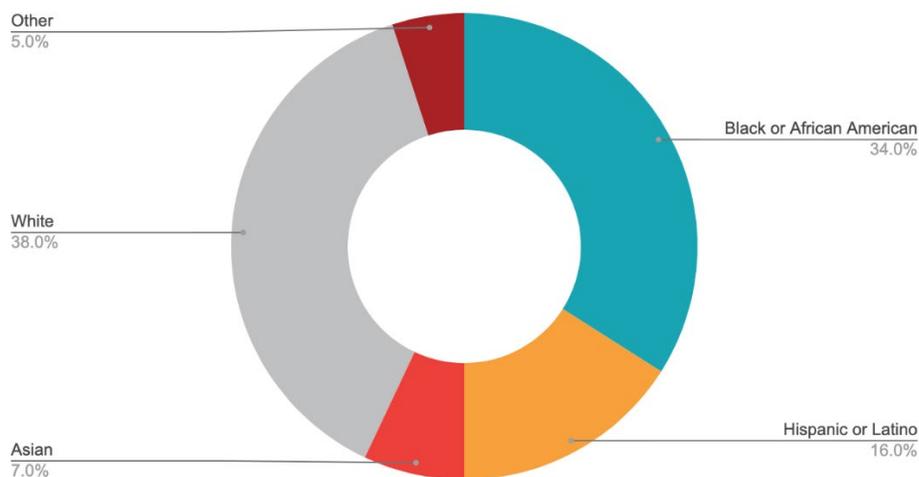
City Year helps students succeed, while preparing the next generation of leaders who can work across lines of difference to make positive impact. City Year believes that supporting children and young adults contributes to just, equitable and vibrant communities, and that when students rise, we all rise. While we know more than ever about how young people learn and develop, too many students do not have access to the learning environments they need to thrive due to systemic failings that have contributed to inequitable access to educational opportunities. Together with school and community partners, City Year seeks to support student success, advance educational equity, and

---

<sup>10</sup> [Compass Academy](#), a charter public middle school in Denver, supports students in developing integrated academic and social-emotional Learner & Leader competencies that provide pathways from poverty to postsecondary success. Leveraging advances in learning sciences and youth development practices, they enable students to realize their unique talents through a personalized learning environment that fosters deeper learning; challenge them to master the most critical cognitive skills necessary for college and career readiness; and support them in developing linguistic proficiency that prepares them to collaborate with diverse communities and enter the global market.

contribute to systems-level changes in policies and practice that address the root causes of inequitable educational outcomes.

City Year's Whole School Whole Child (WSWC) approach is grounded in decades of youth development and research on social, emotional and academic development (SEAD).<sup>11</sup> City Year AmeriCorps members serve in diverse teams of eight to fifteen as full-time Student Success Coaches for a school year. AmeriCorps members reflect the diverse population of students that City Year serves. Fifty-seven percent of alumni are people of color; 34% of alumni are Black and 16% are Hispanic/Latino according to City Year's 2020 National Alumni Survey results.<sup>12</sup>



AmeriCorps members serve as near-peer mentors and role models who help students recognize and leverage their potential, strengths and assets. AmeriCorps members foster students' social, emotional and academic skills, skills that will set students up for success as they pursue postsecondary education and eventually in the workplace.

AmeriCorps members partner with teachers and other school administrators to assess student needs, personalize learning, and provide individualized attention to students. AmeriCorps members support teachers by ensuring students are engaged in class, providing supplemental academic support, running afterschool programs, organizing school-wide events and more. Each AmeriCorps member team is led by an Impact Manager who supports AmeriCorps members in their efforts to monitor student progress and establish positive relationships with school partners. Impact Managers also provide leadership development and facilitate skill-building for AmeriCorps members that they can leverage in their careers after the completion of their service.

## Evidence of Impact

For three decades, City Year has been at the frontline 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.

- **ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT:** Studies show that schools that partner with City Year are up to two to three times more likely to improve in English and math assessments.

---

<sup>11</sup> The Aspen Institute defines social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) as the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning in K-12 education.

<sup>12</sup> In 2020, City Year conducted its second biannual [alumni survey](#) and received 4,453 responses, a statistically significant response rate. Fifty-five percent of survey respondents graduated from City Year between 2015 and 2019; therefore, the data is most reflective of recent alumni sentiments. Race/ethnicity data is based on end-of-year AmeriCorps member data from 2018 to 2020.

- **HOLISTIC GROWTH:** The more time students spend with AmeriCorps members, the more likely they are to improve on social, emotional and academic skills and on attendance, with students who are furthest behind benefitting the most.
- **STUDENT VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT:** A 2021 student survey found that 84% of students feel that their City Year AmeriCorps member teaches them how to self-advocate and ask for help when they need it, which are critical skills for life and workforce success.
- **ON-TRACK INDICATORS:** There's evidence that our work has an impact on reducing the number of students who are off track to high school graduation.
- **EDUCATOR SUPPORT:** Our partners find our work valuable: 94% of partner principals agree that City Year has supported their schools' transitions between in person and distance or hybrid learning, and 95% of partner principals and partner teachers say City Year AmeriCorps members have supported the engagement and participation of students in school during the pandemic.
- **COST-EFFECTIVENESS:** A 2017 analysis by Deloitte showed that for the schools we partner with, City Year is 78% more cost effective than contracting with individual providers to deliver the same set of services.
- **WORKFORCE AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:** City Year's 35,000 alumni continue to lead and serve across a broad range of professions, including education. According to the latest alumni survey, nearly half of AmeriCorps members—44%—remain in the community where they served, contributing to the local economy, workforce and social fabric.

# Methodology

## Primary Data Sources

The primary sources of data for this research project were eight focus groups, two interviews, and one student survey. Quotes from the focus groups and interviews have been slightly edited for length and clarity.

AmeriCorps members, partner teachers and Impact Managers affiliated with two City Year sites in the Midwest and a City Year site on the West Coast shared their experiences navigating COVID-19 in virtual focus groups conducted in January 2021.

Two first-year AmeriCorps members at Compass Academy described their experiences serving students during COVID-19 in virtual interviews conducted by the author in March 2021.

The student survey piloted at a City Year site on the West Coast sought to capture student experiences with AmeriCorps members and the learning environment during COVID-19. The survey yielded 487 responses. The survey was administered in English and Spanish and garnered 480 responses in English and seven responses in Spanish. Survey items included customized questions from Search Institute's Developmental Relationships survey tool and UChicago's Cultivate survey tool. The survey opened on February 10, 2021 and closed on February 26, 2021.

## Participant Selection

The three participating sites opted in based on their interest in the research project. Recruitment for the focus groups and interviews was conducted by the sites and Compass Academy, respectively. The table below provides more information about the focus group and interview participants.

Table 1. Summary of Focus Group & Interview Participation

	AmeriCorps members	Impact Managers	Teachers	Total
Eastern Time Zone City	4	5	0	9
Central Time Zone City	6	7	3	16
Pacific Time Zone City	6	3	4	13
Compass Academy	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	18	15	7	40

## Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources for this project include Compass Academy artifacts, 2020-2021 Compass Academy Mid-Year Survey results as well as the 2020-2021 City Year AmeriCorps member, teacher and principal survey results.

Many Compass Academy artifacts were shared that provided additional information, background and context that informed the content of this report.

The 2020-2021 Mid-Year survey for Compass Academy was administered to sixth, seventh and eighth graders in December 2020. The survey included 29 questions on topics including belonging, attendance, safety, academic clarity, overall satisfaction and growth mindset. There were 232 student responses (out of 284 total students enrolled in December), or a 81.6% response rate.

Results from the 2020-2021 AmeriCorps member, teacher and principal surveys (which included Likert scale and open response answers) were included when relevant.

The 2020-2021 Q1 Service Partner Survey opened on November 9, 2020 and closed on November 20, 2020. There were 487 responses from teachers and 180 responses from principals across the network. Most recent responses are from December 2020 after some requested an extension. Respondents were asked to reflect on the start of the year.

The 2020-2021 Q2/Q3 Service Partner Survey opened in early February 2021 and closed in early March 2021; 825 teachers and 295 principal/administrators from 21 sites responded. Each quarter, City Year conducts a survey of partner teachers and administrators to understand the impact of and inform improvements on the services provided.

For the 2020-2021 Q3 AmeriCorps Member Engagement Survey, there were 2,314 responses from AmeriCorps members across the network. The survey had an 83% participation rate. The survey opened on March 1, 2021 and closed on March 12, 2021. This survey was designed to measure engagement. For reference, the 2019-2020 Q3 AmeriCorps Member survey received 2,180 responses.

# Findings

## Part 1: Supporting Attendance During COVID-19

PITW #127: Embrace Change!

### Student Experiences

The importance of regular school attendance so that all students have the opportunity to learn and grow has never been clearer. COVID-19 has exacerbated chronic absence, interrupted schooling, and instructional loss that many students faced prior to the pandemic. Attendance Works argues that students who are chronically absent (which is defined as missing 10% or more of the academic year) are more likely to struggle with literacy in their early years and are less likely to graduate from high school. Chronic absenteeism is a measure for and driver of educational inequities. Students from historically disenfranchised groups, including students of color and students growing up in low-income households, are more likely to be absent.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has significantly reduced data availability and compromised the ability to conduct quality assurance processes for attendance and absenteeism data. Many schools stopped taking attendance when the shift to virtual learning began in spring 2020, and though schools have started collecting attendance data again, districts and schools are struggling to define attendance in remote and hybrid learning environments. Early attendance data from the 2020-2021 school year, as reported by Attendance Works, indicates that the number of students missing significant amounts of school has increased exponentially.<sup>14</sup>

Like most schools across the country, attendance at Compass Academy during the pandemic was significantly lower for in-person students than it was for those attending remotely. Again, it is difficult to draw further conclusions without more context. Though quantitative data on attendance and other student outcomes may be in short supply due to the pandemic, survey data can be a powerful way to capture student voice during this time.

Seventy-nine percent of students in Compass Academy's 2021 Mid-Year Survey agreed that attending school is important, and 84% of students agreed that it's important to attend school every day. Notably, 63% of Compass students agreed that situations outside of school can make it difficult to attend school every day.

Lack of transportation, housing insecurity, inadequate healthcare, punitive and discriminatory disciplinary policies, a dearth of culturally relevant classroom material and instruction, language barriers, and lack of quality instruction are all factors that may contribute to chronic absenteeism for marginalized students, according to Attendance Works.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, interventions and policies must be put in place to address the issues that impact students' ability to learn during the pandemic. Attendance Works emphasizes that COVID-19 has exposed the need for schools across the country to halt the practice of viewing absence as a disciplinary infraction and punishing students for missing school as a deterrent. Investment in strategies that address the root causes of systemic inequities and barriers to attendance is the first step to tackling chronic absenteeism for the long-term.<sup>16</sup> Compass Academy recognizes that it is vital that students have the necessary resources to ensure that they are able to attend school

---

<sup>13</sup> Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data. Rep. Attendance Works, Feb. 2021. Web.

<sup>14</sup> Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Issue brief. Attendance Works, January 2021. Web

<sup>15</sup> Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data. Rep. Attendance Works, Feb. 2021. Web.

<sup>16</sup> Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data. Rep. Attendance Works, Feb. 2021. Web.

daily if they are struggling. Seventy-two percent of Compass students agreed that they know who to go to if they need help figuring out how to attend school regularly.

## AmeriCorps Member Experiences

It is important to note that attendance is not a proxy for student engagement. During the pandemic, Compass Academy has broadened its definition of attendance to include engagement as a signal for teachers and staff to track and monitor. Attendance tracking includes participation and completion of work for some grade levels to account for students who log into virtual schooling but do not engage with the course material.

Two first-year AmeriCorps members at Compass Academy described their experiences with student attendance in virtual interviews conducted by City Year in March 2021. Both AmeriCorps members support Pack<sup>17</sup>, a 50-minute morning block of time centered around belonging and explicit competency instruction designed to foster social-emotional development for students and instructors and afterschool enrichment. They have observed lower than expected attendance in both areas. However, students who do engage have reaped benefits and “formed their own community.”

City Year partner teachers and principals recognize the role that AmeriCorps members play in promoting student attendance. AmeriCorps members, partner teachers, and Impact Managers affiliated with two City Year sites in the Midwest and a City Year site on the West Coast shared their experiences navigating COVID-19 in virtual focus groups conducted in January 2021<sup>18</sup>. In the focus groups, teachers from two different districts discussed how AmeriCorps members were in contact with students and families by phone, connecting from the beginning of class regarding attendance.

## Teacher/Principal Experiences

Each quarter, City Year conducts a survey of partner teachers and administrators to understand the impact of and inform improvements on the services provided.

In the first survey administered in school year 2020-21<sup>19</sup>, when prompted to select all that apply from a list of interventions, 37.7% of teachers cited getting students to attend/login to class as one of the types of virtual support from City Year that has been most effective. Similarly, 40.5% of respondents cited calling absent/disengaged students as one of the types of virtual support that has been most effective.

---

<sup>17</sup> The name is derived from the school's mascot, which is the *lobo* (the Spanish word for *wolf*).

<sup>18</sup> A total of 38 individuals participated in these eight discussions (16 AmeriCorps members, 15 Impact Managers, and 7 teachers).

<sup>19</sup> The FY21 Q1 Service Partner Survey opened on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and closed on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. There were 487 responses from teachers, and 180 responses from principals across the network. Most recent responses are from December 2020 after some requested an extension. Respondents were asked to reflect on the start of the year.

## Part 2: Supporting SEAD During COVID-19

PITW #050: We Must Never Lose the Human Aspect of What We Are Doing.

### The Importance of SEAD

Social, Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) is “the comprehensive development of the whole student throughout K-12 education. At its core, SEAD calls for the integration of social and emotional development with academic learning.”<sup>20</sup> The value of this approach is well-documented<sup>21</sup>.

Students are most successful and classrooms are most effective when managing emotions, navigating relationships with peers and adults, tenacity in the face of challenges, problem-solving, and applying academic knowledge are all placed at the forefront.

New disruptions necessitate a new focus on social and emotional well-being. Social-emotional health should be a factor when assessing a student’s readiness to learn. Integrating academics and social-emotional learning and viewing students holistically was already an increasingly supported framework pre-pandemic but has now become more important than ever. For some students, school was a stabilizing force. Many students are now learning in the same environments where their parents are working, experiencing food insecurity, and experiencing homelessness<sup>22</sup>.

AmeriCorps members’ holistic approach is rooted in social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD). AmeriCorps members take an asset-based, growth mindset approach when supporting and building positive developmental relationships with students. This allows students to thrive academically, make meaning of their experiences, and feel that they are safe and that they belong<sup>23</sup>.

### Perceptions of Students’ Academic Experiences

In determining how to assess students’ social-emotional health in a virtual learning environment, we can leverage tools developed and validated pre-pandemic. Having a comprehensive system for monitoring student well-being allows for tiered referrals for special services to better support students<sup>24</sup>.

While data on student academic achievement is scarce, we can glean how students are feeling through survey data. A student survey piloted at a City Year site on the West Coast sought to capture student experiences with AmeriCorps members and the learning environment during COVID-19. The survey results show that the majority of respondents expressed feelings of agency in their interactions with AmeriCorps members, making clear the ways in which AmeriCorps members prioritize student voice. Seventy-nine percent of students feel that their City Year really listens to them often or almost always, and 75% of students say that their City Year treats them with respect almost always. Survey results also indicate that students have a voice in decision-making, with 77% of students saying that their City Year considers their ideas when making decisions.

Additionally, a majority of students feel supported by AmeriCorps members as they navigate academic challenges. Sixty-three percent of students feel that their City Year notices if they have trouble learning something, and 64% of students feel that their City Year says it is more important to try in class than to get things right the first time.

---

<sup>20</sup> “Determining Readiness for Social Emotional Academic Development.” *Compass Academy and City Year*.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, Stephanie M., and Jennifer Kahn. *The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students’ Social, Emotional, and Academic Development*. Rep. The Aspen Institute: National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017. Web.

<sup>22</sup> Hough, Heather, Joe Witte, Caroline Wang, and Dave Calhoun. *Evidence-based Practices For Assessing Students’ Social And Emotional Well-being*. Issue brief. February 2021. Web.

<sup>23</sup> Research Base Supporting City Year’s Whole School Whole Child Services (WSWC). City Year, 2019. Web.

<sup>24</sup> Hough, Heather, Joe Witte, Caroline Wang, and Dave Calhoun. *Evidence-based Practices For Assessing Students’ Social And Emotional Well-being*. Issue brief. February 2021. Web.

Seventy-six percent of students feel that their City Year explains things in a different way if they don't understand it the first time.

In a virtual interview, one Compass Academy AmeriCorps member shared that ensuring that every student understands the material in a virtual setting is particularly challenging. When students are confused about a concept, utilizing the Chat feature on Zoom is a helpful way for students to reach out to their AmeriCorps member or teacher. Students can also share understanding in the chat on a scale of 1-5 (1 being completely lost and 5 being expert level). AmeriCorps members monitoring the chat during a live virtual session helps prevent students from falling behind, but it is an imperfect solution. One of the most frustrating aspects of virtual learning for students is trying to get questions answered. An AmeriCorps member serving Compass Academy shared that students get frustrated when they're chatting her a question and she can't understand them, because they're not looking at the same materials. She also struggles to answer their questions in a written format. In person, she'd be able to give verbal feedback.

Based on the virtual interviews, some of the most effective instructional tools for AmeriCorps members are platforms like DESMOS and Pear Deck. DESMOS is an online platform used for math instruction that allows every student to either go at their own pace or follow along with the teacher's slides. Teachers and AmeriCorps members can see students' answers, and the platform includes other interactive features such as polls and a slide bar where students can indicate how confident they feel about a concept. These tools allow practitioners to monitor student progress during a lesson even when students are not engaging in the chat and/or have their cameras off. The whiteboard feature on Zoom can also be used to annotate as an AmeriCorps member is sharing their screen. When AmeriCorps members have access to these platforms, this form of supporting students can work very well, but focus group findings indicate that districts do not always provide such access to online platforms for City Year, and this makes it difficult to support students.

Additionally, focus group participants shared that instruction in a virtual space can be difficult, and instructional time has been cut in half by the shift to online learning. Research shows that this can have a detrimental effect on students. Reduced learning time impedes student learning and negatively affects whole child development. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the amount and quality of instructional time needs to be increased post-pandemic through strategies like extended schedules, summer enrichment, afterschool programming, personalized instruction, and reduced class sizes.<sup>25</sup> Teachers and AmeriCorps members in the virtual focus groups have observed some students struggle to understand teacher instruction in a virtual environment. In many ways, students have more independence than ever before, and some students are having a difficult time coping with self-directed instruction from platforms. In some classrooms, students experienced active instruction from their teacher that included small group breakouts and personal feedback, but in other classrooms students had to negotiate self-directed learning platforms that did not always meet their needs.

Teachers and AmeriCorps members have found that getting creative with technology and finding workarounds make instruction more engaging and effective for students. Specifically, virtual field trips have been an effective instructional practice.

Despite the difficulties, 85% of student survey respondents feel that their teacher makes sure they know what they're supposed to learn that day, and 77% feel that their teacher makes clear to them how the work they do for class connects to bigger learning goals. Clarity from teachers can help mitigate feelings of anxiety in a time defined by uncertainty.

---

<sup>25</sup> Garcia, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. COVID-19 and Student Performance, Equity, and U.S. Education Policy: Lessons from Pre-pandemic Research to Inform Relief, Recovery, and Rebuilding. Rep. Economic Policy Institute, 2020. Web.

## Perceptions of Students' Social-Emotional Well-Being

COVID-19 ushered in unprecedented disruptions to students' mental and emotional health, social systems of support, and learning environments. Student social-emotional development has undoubtedly been impacted by the pandemic. One Compass AmeriCorps member shared that a lot of students are missing out on social-emotional connections.

Just 18% of Compass students who participated in the 2021 Mid-Year Survey said that they have made new friends this year during online classes.

The number of students experiencing anxiety and depression has increased, and students with disabilities are experiencing developmental regression.<sup>26</sup>

One Compass AmeriCorps member in an interview argued that the students who are attending Compass in-person for part of the week are getting this connection back. Seeing teachers, AmeriCorps members and other students in person has been great for in-person students.

AmeriCorps members have worked hard to build relationships with students in the ways they can. Both Compass AmeriCorps members interviewed are intentional about building relationships with students and helping them build community with one another.

Seventy-one percent of Compass student respondents on the 2021 Mid-Year Survey agree that they have an adult at Compass Academy they can trust, and 73% agree that there is an adult at school who encourages and believes in them.

One Compass AmeriCorps member said that he has had great success building relationships with students virtually. He builds these relationships by just "being a person" and talking to students. He greets students and engages with students about their personal lives and interests. This helps build a relationship and encourages more active classroom participation.

*"You're talking to them as people. Rather than trying to talk to them about math...they're getting to know me."*

He also stated that it is easy to build relationships with students, but it's harder to encourage students to form relationships with one another. He has implemented strategies like Fun Fridays to mitigate this issue.

For Fun Fridays, students in one grade level will join a Zoom call and then go into a breakout room where they can interact with other students. He has also used an activity called Pack Buddies to build community. Sixth-grade students made a personal profile that included their name, picture, and other relevant information about themselves, such as what they look for in a friend and their social media handles. Students are able to see what other students are interested in, discover shared interests through the profiles, and find a go-to person to connect with.

Another Compass AmeriCorps member felt that it was difficult to build relationships with students at the beginning of the year because, initially, she was talking to several black screens. One strategy she used to break the ice was private messaging students to ask how they're doing. Like her fellow Compass AmeriCorps member, she found success by talking to students about more than school, which resulted in students opening up to her more. She made a concerted effort to remember what students told her. For example, if a student had a soccer game on Saturday, she made sure to ask them about it on Monday.

AmeriCorps member focus group respondents echoed many of these themes in the ways they have been seeking to build relationships with students. As one explained:

---

<sup>26</sup> Hough, Heather, Joe Witte, Caroline Wang, and Dave Calhoun. *Evidence-based Practices For Assessing Students' Social And Emotional Well-being*. Issue brief. February 2021. Web.

*I also try to individually seek out our students who I feel [are] struggling or maybe I see that they're off track... I also try to reach out to [students with their] cameras off, maybe they are there and their videos just isn't on. In person I used to greet all my students and so that small check in of like "hey, I'm glad you're here" and really kind of increasing that attendance initiative aspect of it. And so I do the same thing, whether I get a response or not. Sometimes I feel like I'm talking to myself, but I hope that one day, they're able to see that. There are students where I'm like, this student is usually not here, but I'm going to send my normal message and one day they're just like, "Good morning [to] you too," and I was like, wow.*

Students appeared to appreciate and respond to their efforts. One teacher in the focus groups noted:

*My City Year corps member I had in the first semester, she definitely was helping ... a lot with relationship-building and making contact with all of my students that I had.... Definitely the students felt like somebody was paying attention to them ... because there [were] two or three sets of eyes in the classroom.... And I notice the students that she did build a bond with, their attendance was a lot better, and they were turning in more work. And I kind of understood their personal lives a lot more.*

However, building community among students has proven more difficult, particularly when they have never met each other face to face (as is the case for most sixth and ninth graders who have transitioned to a new school in a completely virtual space). In addition, most students didn't know the new teachers they were assigned to at the beginning of the school year and many also didn't know most of their classmates. As one AmeriCorps member in the focus groups noted:

*A lot of them are coming from different ...middle schools so they don't know each other right off the bat.... It's hard for them to build a relationship with each other, just like through the computer and a lot of them don't ever really turn their cameras on so it's difficult to like, know them in that way.*

## AmeriCorps Member Experiences

During COVID-19, in about 86-90% of school districts served by City Year, AmeriCorps members were able to provide schools and classrooms with virtual support services such as academic and SEL support in small and large groups and phone calls home several times a week. In about two-thirds to three-quarters of districts, AmeriCorps members were also able to facilitate support for virtual group management, enrichment activities, and SEL support in small groups several times per week.

### Deeper collaboration

*In many schools, COVID has allowed for even deeper collaboration among AmeriCorps members and partner teachers. For example, at Compass Academy, after the shift to virtual learning, AmeriCorps members and Impact Managers were actively included in the planning process for determining how to respond. One Impact Manager participated in several response planning meetings to share her perspective on how her AmeriCorps members could leverage their unique strengths and assets to support virtual learning. AmeriCorps members across the network feel that they have more decision-making power during the pandemic.*

In the 2020-2021 Q3 AmeriCorps Member Engagement Survey, 68% of respondents agreed that they are appropriately involved in decisions that affect their work, up from 56% the previous year. Additionally, 76% of respondents across sites believe that they have enough autonomy to perform their jobs effectively. This is up from 59% last year. AmeriCorps members and teachers worked together to create lessons plans to maximize adult touchpoints and instructional support in virtual learning spaces at Compass. A content teacher, a diverse learner teacher, and an AmeriCorps member work together to lead a small group breakout room, ensuring that there is high practitioner-to-student ratio and differentiated supports for targeted groups. AmeriCorps members have been given additional leadership roles during COVID at Compass and across the network.

## New challenges

Despite enhanced collaboration with teachers and 98% of AmeriCorps members reporting a clear understanding of City Year's mission to help students build the social-emotional and academic skills to achieve their goals,<sup>27</sup> some AmeriCorps members report challenges in their efforts to serve students.

In the virtual focus groups conducted in 2021, AmeriCorps members expressed their difficulty translating City Year's expectations to a virtual space given decisions made by districts, schools, and teachers that affect how they can support students. Districts have largely restricted one-on-one interactions with students online. AmeriCorps members lack privacy for in-the-moment and proximate interactions with students that were possible during in-person learning, making it more difficult to have the one-on-one conversations with students that AmeriCorps members are accustomed to given some of the district restrictions on use of virtual space. As a focus group respondent put it:

*I think what I would say is the emotional and social aspect of what we're doing, connecting with students, has not been the same at all. The ability to have, you know, the one-on-one conversations or just, you know, walk a student to class, and that's where you kind of get to hear what's going on in their life.... And we're not able to be one-on-one with students in the virtual space, which means that we don't get to have those kind of open and personal conversations anymore.*

Developing relationships with students requires AmeriCorps members to think of new and creative ways to engage students, especially those who are slow to respond to outreach. In a virtual setting, interactions with students may not feel as rewarding. Many AmeriCorps members also lack access to online platforms used by students. Additionally, for AmeriCorps members, the teacher-AmeriCorps member relationship fundamentally shapes the quality of service they can provide—a reality during school-based service also that has been heightened during distance learning. For example, some AmeriCorps members have partner teachers who have decided not to use breakout rooms. Some teachers are not communicating with AmeriCorps members on a regular basis or sharing instructional plans with them in a collaborative way.

## AmeriCorps member well-being

City Year prioritizes the health and well-being of both the students and AmeriCorps members that the organization serves. As AmeriCorps members work to support students, they are also facing their own complex social-emotional challenges. Given the demands of service and the added effort of virtual service, AmeriCorps members are fatigued and exhausted from online work. They are also stressed due to technology issues as many do not have working technology. The unpredictability of the pandemic is also a burden, and they are stressed due to unexpected challenges that arise. Additionally, AmeriCorps members do not feel that their training could fully prepare them for the issues that are prevalent due to the pandemic.

Recognizing the complexities of supporting students during a global pandemic, City Year has supported its staff by: 1) buffering them from organizational pressures and allowing sites to contextualize organizational guidance to meet local needs, 2) adapting and individualizing training support, 3) bonding and building team relationships, and 4) modeling and supporting self-care during stressful times. Regarding mental health, AmeriCorps members have access to a service called Talkspace. [Talkspace](#) is a secure, confidential online therapy platform that makes it simple and convenient to connect with fully licensed, respected therapists via video, text or phone. AmeriCorps members have three free months of services. AmeriCorps members also had access to the Ten Percent Happier app, which provides mindfulness and meditation courses. In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, City Year also shared mental health resources weekly.

City Year managers who participated in virtual focus groups described personal and professional supports and solutions to mitigate the difficulties faced by AmeriCorps members. They sought to provide personal support and give extra grace to AmeriCorps members, specifically encouragement to take time off. Regarding City Year workplace

---

<sup>27</sup> There were 2,750 responses from AmeriCorps members across the network. The survey had a 91% participation rate. The survey opened two weeks after AmeriCorps members started service. This survey was designed to capture start of the year experiences.

norms, managers saw the need for more adaptability and flexibility and increased prioritization of mental health and the need for personal time.

Managers sought to support AmeriCorps members through positive feedback and more ownership and autonomy. They provided opportunities for team bonding among AmeriCorps members through creative use of virtual meeting platforms. Some managers sought to initiate more intentional one-on-ones with corps members while other corps members preferred less structured one-on-ones or open office hours as an optional resource. Managers also sought to buffer their staff from overload, giving AmeriCorps members a more streamlined flow of information. In terms of professional development, AmeriCorps members want their ongoing training to be more adapted to their needs this year in addition to individualized one-on-one meetings with their manager. AmeriCorps members also want the opportunity to engage in professional development as a team.

## Teacher/Principal Experiences

Though there are some exceptions, a significant number of AmeriCorps members and teachers worked closely together this year to meet student needs. According to 2020-2021 Q1 service partner and AmeriCorps member survey data, almost all teachers and AmeriCorps members were still able to have a start-of-year meeting where they could discuss roles, expectations, student needs and City Year's approach in the 2020-2021 school year. In a remote setting, just over half of teachers were able to schedule regular check-ins with their AmeriCorps members where they could discuss lesson plans and student supports as well as offer feedback and appreciation.

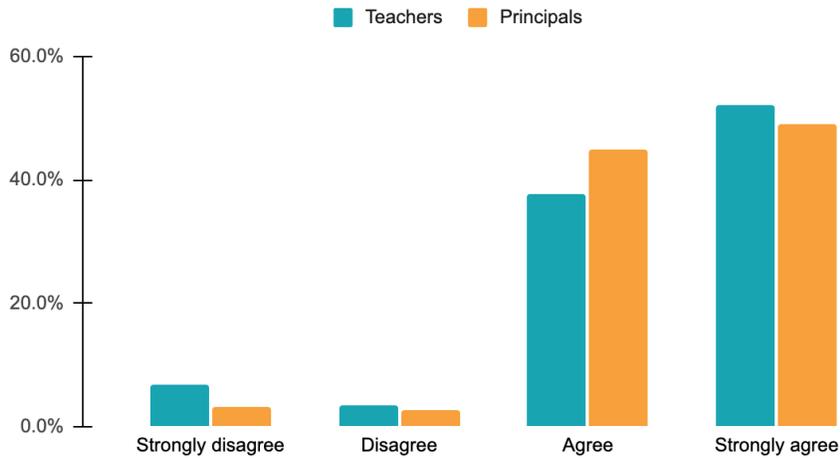
### Flexible partnership

Principals strongly agree that City Year has supported their school's implementation of multiple learning models (e.g. virtual, hybrid, in-person), and that City Year has supported their school's transition from one type of learning structure to another. One principal/administrator shared their gratitude in the Q1 Service Partner Survey:

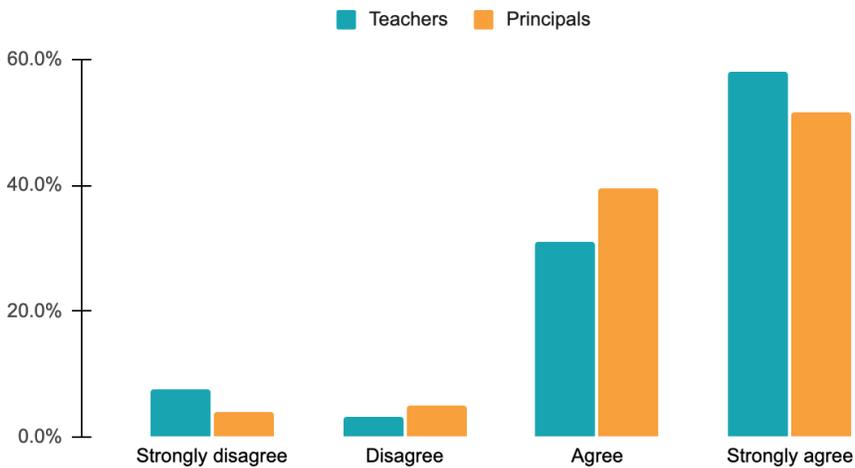
*City Year corps members have been an integral part of our virtual synchronous learning time. They support, and in some cases, they take the lead. They have even helped my teachers with learning new virtual platforms. They are very strong. I appreciate the flexibility of City Year this year in helping us specifically with what our school needs. Thank you!*

They also report that City Year has been adaptable and flexible in responding to their schools' needs this year. Despite the transition to virtual/remote learning, principals and teachers recognize that AmeriCorps members support the engagement and participation of students and continue to help students feel a sense of belonging during an unusual year. Teachers are largely satisfied with the quality of virtual student support provided by their AmeriCorps members, with 92% of teachers believing that AmeriCorps members provide valuable support to their classrooms and students.

### City Year AmeriCorps members help students feel a sense of belonging.



### City Year AmeriCorps members have supported the engagement and participation of students in school this year.



#### Technical support

Focus group participants mentioned several ways in which AmeriCorps members provided general support to teachers. AmeriCorps members helped with technology, administrative and management tasks in the classroom (like admitting students, taking attendance, connecting students to the online platforms, managing the chat function in Zoom, etc.). As one focus group participant observed:

*The corps members are very, like, tech-savvy and can help [teachers] left and right with so many things ... Teachers will reach out to me or to my team leader like, "I don't know how to change this PDF or upload this file here," and just like, something that will take us 20 seconds to show them, and they're very grateful because it's something maybe they spent two hours trying to figure out how to do.*

Teachers deeply appreciated all the technical help they received from corps members, and the pandemic experience provided the opportunity to enhance and further cultivate relationships between City Year and school administrators.

According to service partner survey data, when prompted to select all that apply from a list of interventions, 81.6% of teachers cited monitoring and responding to questions in the chat as one of the types of virtual support from City Year

that has been most effective. Nearly 78% cited leading small group virtual breakout spaces as one of the types of virtual support from City Year that has been most effective. One elementary school teacher in the focus groups described how her AmeriCorps member provided academic support:

*Anytime that we do independent work I use her in small groups, so she goes to a breakout room. Sometimes she has like smaller groups, sometimes she has bigger groups. Every morning she has her own phonics group and then every afternoon she has her own reading group, which has turned into like reading slash like tutoring, catching up on work. And it's been incredibly helpful to have a City Year so that we can break the kids apart because online, even more so than in a classroom, it's hard to support 24 students with just me when I can't see what they're doing. So, to be able to like split them between me and another teacher or particularly to give her students that are more independent, that just need check ins, so that I can focus on students that need more assistance, or she can take one student who can share their screen the whole time, it's been so helpful.*

## Part 3: Experiences Supporting Equity During COVID-19

PITW #092: Seek to Be as Inclusive as Possible.

### Perceptions of Student Experiences

#### Increased awareness of inequities

The pandemic has not impacted us all equally. Folks who were already marginalized have been the hardest hit by COVID-19. People of color and low-income individuals have been disproportionately affected in terms of infection rates and deaths. Given that City Year primarily serves Black/Brown and low-income students, the students and families in City Year partner schools may be experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, job loss, lack of access to healthcare, lack of transportation and other hardships.

Numerous AmeriCorps members discussed student needs and experiences based on their observations and service this year. An AmeriCorps member at Compass Academy shared that students are struggling to balance their home lives with school especially given that all of the students he works with are virtual. Students grapple with how to navigate school with parents and siblings in the background of Zoom calls. One AmeriCorps member in the focus groups explained the difficulty of getting students to unmute themselves and engage:

*“They just usually have other stuff going on, like they have to ... take care of, you know, their siblings, make sure they're doing their work, fix them food or whatever it is, they just have a lot of other things going on”.*

A Compass AmeriCorps member described receiving messages during instructional time from students often saying that they need to step away to take care of a mess or cook a meal for a family member. Students will routinely disappear without notice for 10 minutes at a time to deal with family issues. Teachers and AmeriCorps members in the focus groups have also observed students dealing with distractions both at home and in the virtual space. During instructional time, some students are even in a car or at their parents' places of work. They shared that a lack of privacy in some students' households is affecting their ability to be successful academically. One focus group participant explained:

*Some kids are still engaging more than others.... It's the kids who are certain that nothing's going to happen in the background that's going to embarrass them while they're talking or that, like, loud music is playing or parents arguing or whatever.*

AmeriCorps members and teachers in virtual focus groups shared that they have been challenged by the stark inequity that they are seeing among students during COVID-19. As one participant observed:

*One of the things that I've noticed is just how important resources are for families, especially in this time. More importantly, now I'm able to see who has a good Wi-Fi connection, and that could make or break your ability to be able to function in first grade.*

Seventy-four percent of AmeriCorps members who responded to the 2020-2021 Q1 AmeriCorps Member Survey agreed that City Year's equity work helped them prepare for service with their students. However, in virtual interviews with Compass AmeriCorps members, one AmeriCorps member described feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle the serious challenges that students are facing. She didn't feel prepared when students came to her with issues happening in their personal lives, which happened more often than she anticipated. She expressed that Compass students face hardships all the time, but these hardships are magnified during the pandemic. Students may not have a lot of family support because they're dealing with other things, she said.

Adjusting to being a student and being present for school while navigating their home lives has been difficult for students. AmeriCorps members described seeking to be cognizant of what students may be going through at home and to be aware of their needs. One Compass Academy AmeriCorps member explained how he keeps that extra perspective in mind as he's teaching lesson plans and does not blame students for not always being engaged. He is well aware that students aren't always choosing to not be present. He finds ways to meet students

where they are by catching students up on the class material upon their return after stepping away for 10-15 minutes to ensure that the student is not playing catch up for the remainder of the lesson. Compass Academy has discovered that home visits are an effective intervention and has completed more than twice as many home visits compared to prior years.

### Technological obstacles

Lack of student engagement in the virtual classroom has been related to other issues besides distractions in their learning environment. A 13-inch screen does not always command students' attention. They grow weary, restless and uncomfortable in the virtual space. One AmeriCorps member in the focus groups observed:

*Students feel more comfortable with someone that they can see in the flesh than just seeing a floating head on the screen.*

Adults are suffering from Zoom fatigue; the problem is multiplied for youth accustomed to being more active. One City Year Impact Manager described the difficulty of helping AmeriCorps members with disengaged students:

*I have corps members coming to me [saying], "I just got a student who's just not doing anything, just sitting there. The camera, just looking at, the camera's on, but just not responding or doing anything." And you know normally I would have all these different things that you could probably tell them to do in that space, if we were in person. But it's just like, "I don't know, how do you get a student involved and engaged in the online space?"*

Another prominent issue for students is technology access. In the virtual focus groups, teachers and AmeriCorps members shared that students are dealing with challenges of connection. Students experience technical issues, online access issues, and computer hardware issues (including lack of microphone, camera and headsets). An AmeriCorps member in a virtual focus group conversation spoke directly about the computer resource issues:

*I think there's also a lot of ... hardware specific issues. So students who don't have a camera that works, don't have a microphone that works, don't have speakers that work.*

Some students also have limited experience using computers. In a virtual focus group discussion, one partner teacher shared how they've tried to help students navigate technology issues. This teacher delivered a hotspot to a family whose internet had been turned off. The teacher remarked that internet access should be a human right, especially during a pandemic.

Students often lack sufficient experience with computers to navigate the world of online learning. As one AmeriCorps member in the virtual focus groups expressed it:

*It's just opened my eyes to ... disparities .... I never thought that ... a ninth grader wouldn't know how to work a computer, or they wouldn't even have a computer.*

Research from The Education Trust reflects that this so-called "digital divide" is an unfortunate reality for students across the country. Nationally, many districts and schools have moved learning completely or partially online, but many communities, particularly people of color and low-income folks lack adequate access to the technological resources they need to engage in virtual learning. Arguably, every student should have their own device; reliable, high-speed internet; technical support; and a safe, private place to participate in virtual learning. Teachers should also have access to professional development that details how to effectively implement virtual learning.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> COVID-19 Education Equity Guide: Digital Access. Issue brief. Education Trust, 2020. Web.

## Supporting English Language Learners and Diverse Learners

Diverse learners need additional attention and care right now as they weather the storm of COVID-19. The term 'diverse learners' is used to describe students with a wide range of abilities. In order to ensure that the needs of diverse learners are being met right now, Compass Academy released a [report](#) on diverse learner support during COVID-19 that highlights the conditions in place pre-COVID that supported diverse learners and the shifts made to their approach post-COVID induced school closures to support students in a virtual setting.

### Emphasis on belonging

Before COVID, student belonging was already at the center of Compass Academy's learning model, which is SEAD-oriented. Practices at Compass Academy, such as Pack and student focus lists, were moved to the virtual space, which creates consistent opportunities for belonging for students and a predictable structure. A focus list is a small group of students (generally 4-6) identified as needing support in a particular indicator area (attendance, behavior, math or ELA). Feelings of belonging and community are particularly important for diverse learners, who are more likely to struggle with learning, have engagement issues, and feel disconnected from school due to experiences and perceptions that they don't belong at the school or with their peers.

Compass Academy's care for diverse learners is felt by the students. On the 2021 Mid-Year Survey, diverse learners' Net Promoter Score for questions in the Belonging category was higher than last year. A Net Promoter Score is the percentage of customers rating their likelihood to recommend a company, a product, or a service.

Prior to COVID, Compass Academy had many practices in place that allowed them to continue to support diverse learners as they transitioned to virtual service. Examples include:

- **TEACHER SELECTION:** Prior to COVID, Compass Academy prioritized hiring teachers who are interested in serving diverse learners. Candidates for teaching positions are required to create and teach sample lessons that specifically address diverse learners. Professional development for teachers is also focused in part on supporting diverse learners.
- **USING DATA:** Compass Academy has also used data to monitor student progress and assess their needs. Before COVID, they used early warning response systems (EWRS) to understand and respond to students' various learning differences and needs.
- **GROWTH OF DIVERSE LEARNERS:** The number of ELL students in classrooms across the country is rapidly increasing. This diverse group of students needs English language development instruction that ensures they have access to academic content. ELL students disproportionately have lower standardized test scores, are less likely to enroll in honors/advanced courses and are less likely to graduate from high school. During the pandemic, ELL students are particularly impacted by the digital divide and are less likely to have access to digital devices and internet.<sup>29</sup> Many school leaders and teachers do not receive the training required to meet the needs of ELL students and provide adequate support. To combat this knowledge gap, Compass provided guidance to practitioners on Supporting ELLs and DLs with Online Learning with helpful strategies and instructional practices.

### Involving Families

Research<sup>30</sup> shows that leveraging the cultural and linguistic assets of ELL students and their families can lead to improved academic performance (specifically higher order language comprehension and literacy) in a student's native language and English. Corresponding consistently with ELL students and their families in their native language promotes trust and engagement, may increase in-home homework support, and can improve family-school relationships. Targeted outreach in ELL students' native language can also help reduce chronic absenteeism.

---

<sup>29</sup>Mavrogordato, Madeline, Rebecca Callahan, David DeMatthews, and Elena Izquierdo. *Supports for Students Who Are English Learners*. Issue brief. 2021. Web.

<sup>30</sup> Mavrogordato, Madeline, Rebecca Callahan, David DeMatthews, and Elena Izquierdo. *Supports for Students Who Are English Learners*. Issue brief. 2021. Web.

However, simply translating content for ELL students and their families is not sufficient. It is necessary for teachers to unpack classroom expectations and norms with ELL families. ELL teachers should also work collaboratively with non-ELL teachers to share teaching practices and ensure that all learning environments are equitable for ELL students. Among all teachers, there should be shared investment in ELL students' learning and success.

### Personalized approach

ELL students that have access to instructional materials that are specifically designed for ELL students outperform their peers without access to such materials.<sup>31</sup> Use of certain technologies (digital learning resources, eBooks, translations, etc.) can promote student achievement and language proficiency. Extended learning time after school or during the summer is particularly helpful for ELL students.

In virtual settings, ELL students also benefit from one-on-one support and small groups with teachers/paraprofessionals/tutors. Small groups comprised of ELL students should address a particular learning need that applies to everyone in the group, such as foundational reading skills. ELL students benefit from in-person instruction more than other students and some states have prioritized in-person instruction for ELL students while keeping other students online.<sup>32</sup>

## Part 4: Emerging Effective Practices during COVID-19

### PITW #121: Use every experience as a learning experience.

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, a silver lining emerging is that COVID-19 has forced practitioners to get creative about pedagogical practices, class material, service delivery and more. Practitioners have had the opportunity to resist stagnation and test new approaches. This innovativeness has yielded several effective practices implemented after COVID-19 induced school closures that practitioners want to continue to incorporate into their classrooms post-pandemic.

During virtual focus group conversations with teachers, AmeriCorps members and Impact Managers, participants identified lessons learned and positive results stemming from the pandemic that they want to leverage in the future post-COVID.

### Technology

Practitioners have increased their technology experience during virtual schooling, which has proven useful for teachers and students. Some students have thrived using online programs, and some programs have increased student engagement. Practitioners want to continue to build their computer literacy and skills once they return to in-person instruction.

### Family engagement

Practitioners also think it's important to maintain the increased family engagement that occurred during COVID-19. This is a trend across the country. Parents and school staff have felt more connected due to being in constant communication. Increased communication has fostered a greater appreciation for the challenges and successes that each group faces. Teachers hope that this positive trend continues in the years following the pandemic.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Mavrogordato, Madeline, Rebecca Callahan, David DeMatthews, and Elena Izquierdo. *Supports for Students Who Are English Learners*. Issue brief. 2021. Web.

<sup>32</sup>Mavrogordato, Madeline, Rebecca Callahan, David DeMatthews, and Elena Izquierdo. *Supports for Students Who Are English Learners*. Issue brief. 2021. Web.

<sup>33</sup>Arundel, Kara. "3 COVID-19 Education Trends Set to Persist Post-pandemic." Article. *K-12 Dive*. 2020. Web.

## Afterschool and enrichment programs

Additionally, practitioners want to expand City Year afterschool programming to include additional extracurricular activities aside from academic supports. Practitioners have also formed connections and partnerships with afterschool providers that they wish to maintain post-pandemic. Community organizations can aid educators in their efforts to meet students' shifting needs. Integrated partnerships between communities and schools improve students' academic performance, attendance and on-time grade progression. These integrated/wraparound services also provide students with direct non-academic supports. Research shows that the most effective of these programs use site-based coordinators to provide services to individual students as well as the whole school. Extended learning time programs at community organizations can play an important role in supporting students during the pandemic. Evaluations of afterschool programs show that they improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes, attendance and engagement.<sup>34</sup>

## Value of Student Success Coaches

Lastly, virtual schooling has also made the value of AmeriCorps members, who serve as student success coaches, undeniable. AmeriCorps members were more integrated into the classroom and schools during COVID, and teachers want to progress further on this front by continuing corps member participation in school staff meetings and maintaining the positive relationships between AmeriCorps members and teachers built through AmeriCorps members providing tech help and other valued assistance.

---

<sup>34</sup> McBride Murry, Velma, Reuben Jacobson, and Betheny Gross. *Leveraging Community Partnerships for Integrated Student Support*. Issue brief. 2021. Web.

# Conclusion: How do we support recovery and renewal post-COVID-19?

## PITW #074: Train Someone Else — Especially a Corps Member — to Do It

During the pandemic, practitioners have adjusted and risen to the challenges presented by COVID-19-induced school closures in remarkable ways. Teachers are communicating with and engaging with families more than ever before and working hard to build relationships with students' families. AmeriCorps members have continued to implement the holistic, asset-based approach that is the foundation of City Year's work with students. This year, AmeriCorps members have been able to support individual and small group instruction, help teachers and students with technology issues, lead small group breakouts, run afterschool programs, make phone calls home, encourage student attendance and engagement, build meaningful relationships with students and partner teachers and deliver meals for students. Teachers and AmeriCorps members have also been able to work together more closely than ever before to strategize and collaborate on how to best meet student needs.

In addition to the successes, practitioners faced many challenges transitioning to virtual learning environments. They struggled to personalize instruction for students and give each student the attention they needed in a virtual setting. Many students, particularly low-income students of color, lack adequate resources to be successful in a virtual classroom, like computers and reliable internet. Students and their families have also faced increased hardships at home (such as food insecurity and job loss) that AmeriCorps members did not always feel equipped to address. Student attendance has lagged, and students are facing instructional loss that will likely have long-term academic consequences. Students have also struggled socially and emotionally due to isolation and a lack of connection with classmates. Relationship-building between students and corps members and relationship-building between students has proven more difficult during COVID-19.

## A new way forward

Schools in under-resourced communities, which have long faced underinvestment, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. A locally driven, nationally supported action framework that utilizes local decision-making and community assets to assess students' needs is crucial. City Year is partnering with the COVID Collaborative, Everyone Graduates Center, MENTOR, and Voices for National Service to promote one such framework – [the Corps for Student Success](#).

One approach highlighted in the framework designed to increase research-based social, emotional and academic supports for students is Student Success Coaches (SSCs). SSCs are diverse AmeriCorps members who serve full time on teams in systemically under-resourced schools, forming developmental relationships and providing near-peer, research-based supports to students and supplemental capacity in classrooms to personalize learning. The unique near-peer relationship between a Student Success Coach and a student enables them to provide customized supports, which accelerate students' social, emotional, cognitive and academic development. By doing so, they enable students to flourish in critical areas—including the early warning indicators of attendance, behavior and course performance in English or math, which are key predictors of the likelihood of high school graduation and success in postsecondary education. During their AmeriCorps service, SSCs themselves develop skills that motivate and support civic and workforce success.

If we work with local communities and continue to learn from the voices closest to our students and schools that are captured in this report, we will be able to respond to benefit all young people while creating a system that provides sustainable support to address long-standing inequities in our most under-resourced communities.