

REPORT

**THE DYNAMICS OF CITY
YEAR INTERACTIONS WITH
STUDENTS AND HOW THEY
CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL-
EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND
ACADEMIC OUTCOMES**

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JANUARY 2023



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CONTENTS

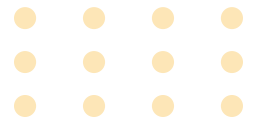
INTRODUCTION3

RESEARCH DESIGN 4

FINDINGS 8

CONCLUSION 22

APPENDIX 24



INTRODUCTION

This study sought to increase understanding about how the work of City Year (CY) influences student outcomes. Phase 1 of the research identified two key findings:¹

- (1) there is a strong connection between social-emotional skill development and academic performance, and
- (2) implementing holistic approaches that aim to develop social-emotional and academic skills in concert is related to stronger student performance.

Phase 2 was designed to understand the role of trust and relationships in supporting students' social-emotional and academic growth, the classroom learning environment, time with students and actions, and meeting student needs in-the-moment. In particular, this research aimed to understand more about the relationships City Year AmeriCorps members build with students and how the different types of interactions they have with students may influence students' social-emotional and academic development.

This report outlines the findings from a qualitative study of schools served by City Year in two regions of focus, supplemented by secondary quantitative data gathered from surveys. Qualitative data were collected between April 7, 2022 and May 18, 2022 across six elementary and middle schools in the western and southeastern regions of the United States. The research team conducted in-person site visits at four schools, four in-person focus groups, two virtual focus groups, and four interviews with City Year AmeriCorps Members (ACMs) and Impact Managers (IMs). Quantitative data collected from City Year-administered surveys of students, teachers, principals, and ACMs at all 13 sites in these two regions provide additional insights to contextualize qualitative findings.

1 Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2020). Connecting social-emotional development, academic achievement, and on-track outcomes: A multi-district study of grades 3 to 9 students supported by City Year AmeriCorps members. Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/201200507_EGC_CityYearReport_BalfanzByrnesFINAL.pdf

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions Guiding Phase Two

The research questions guiding Phase 2 of this study include:

1. How do CY staff describe how they develop relationships with students? What role do they see trust playing in the formation of relationships with students?
2. How do CY staff perceive the strength of the developmental relationship between students and AmeriCorps members? How much do they perceive that it varies across the different students a CY corps member supports? How do they perceive different degrees of developmental relationships affecting students' social-emotional and academic outcomes? What are the challenges staff and teachers perceive as hindering relationship building? What factors do they see as supporting relationship building?
3. How frequently and consistently do CY corps members perceive that they are engaging in a) intentional social-emotional (SEL) skill-building activities with students on their focus list; and b) providing real-time responsive supports to students' "in-the-moment" social-emotional needs? What impacts do they perceive these supports having on students' social-emotional and academic development? What potential changes, if any, in the frequency and consistency of their current practice do CY corps members perceive to be needed to help improve student outcomes?
4. What trainings do AmeriCorps members view as most effective in developing the skills required to effectively support students' and their own social-emotional growth?
5. How do interactions between CY corps members and students on a typical day vary in terms of type (direct instruction vs. spontaneous), focus (academic vs. social-emotional), frequency, location (classroom, hallway/lunchroom, afterschool activity), CY staff member, and ambiance/character?

Participants: The qualitative study was designed to collect data directly from City Year ACMs, IMs, and teachers who had City Year corps members in their classrooms. In total, 33 ACMs and IMs participated. Teachers did not respond

to requests to participate in virtual focus groups, and were not included in the qualitative research. Perspectives of teachers, principals, and students are captured in their quantitative survey responses.

Recruitment: Principals at all schools working with City Year in the two selected cities were contacted via email for permission to conduct in-person and online focus groups with ACMs, IMs, and teachers. We also requested principals' permission to conduct site visit observations at two schools in the western region and two schools in the south-eastern region. An initial email about the focus groups was sent to all ACMs and IMs at the participating schools, as well as to teachers with ACMs in their classrooms. Those who responded to those emails were sent consent forms and information about the focus groups. ACMs at schools agreeing to site visits received recruitment emails inquiring about their willingness to be shadowed by a member of the research team during one school day, and then consent was also sought from the ACM's teacher for classroom observations.

Methods

The Everyone Graduates Center research team conducted a qualitative study to answer the above research questions. Data collection methods included site visits, focus groups, and interviews. Quantitative data collected via City-Year administered surveys serve to supplement and contextualize qualitative findings.

In-Person Site Visits. A total of eight ACMs across four sites agreed to be "shadowed" during day-long site visits. A member of the qualitative research team followed each of these participants throughout their daily activities, which included City Year service responsibilities before school, in classrooms, out of classrooms, during break periods such as lunch and recess, and after school. Researchers took positions that enabled observations through a variety of perspectives. This involved sitting at the back of the classrooms, joining individual and small group "pull-out" sessions, navigating collective social spaces during lunch and recess, and walking alongside AMCs in many different campus settings. All throughout, researchers took detailed field notes documenting interactions between corps members and students, and capturing behavioral observations and verbatim quotes. Observation data also detailed a breadth of student support provided by corps members, including

in-the-moment guidance and planned academic and social-emotional activities, individually and in small groups. Whenever possible, ACMs proactively debriefed the observations regarding their interactions with the students with the researchers. Researchers also intentionally invited participants' feedback and reflection on the observations whenever ACMs had brief periods of time to speak with the researchers in-between classes or on short breaks during the day.

Table 1: In-Person Site Visits

Location	Site Visit Dates	Notes
Site A: South-eastern Region	May 16-18, 2022	Monday, 5/16: Orientation meeting with national CY Director of Education Research and Strategy, regional CY Impact Directors, and JHU Qualitative Research Team Two focus groups with elementary and middle school ACMs across multiple sites Tuesday, 5/17 - Site visits for field observations Wednesday, 5/18 - Site visits for field observations
Site B: Western Region	May 2-4, 2022	Monday, 5/2: Orientation meeting with national CY Director of Education Research and Strategy, regional CY Impact Directors, and JHU Qualitative Research Team Two focus groups with elementary and middle school ACMs across multiple sites Tuesday, 5/3 - Site visits for field observations Wednesday, 5/4 Site visits for field observations

Focus Groups and Interviews: Researchers used a semi-structured protocol when facilitating all focus groups and interviews. While the pre-determined questions on the protocol were used to guide the focus group conversations, the semi-structured format enabled participants

to engage in spontaneous dialogue with the facilitator and one another, and offer their own follow-up thoughts and questions throughout the focus group. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the qualitative research team.

In-Person Focus Groups. In the southeastern region, two focus groups were held with a total of 11 participants. One group included five middle school ACMs and one middle school IM. The other group consisted of five total participants spanning elementary and middle school levels, including four ACMs and one IM. In the western region, two focus groups were also held with a total of 11 participants. One group consisted of five middle school ACMs and the other focus group included six elementary school ACMs. Each focus group lasted between 60-80 minutes.

Virtual Focus Groups: Two virtual focus groups were conducted via Zoom. One focus group consisted of five IMs and the other was composed of two ACMs. Virtual focus groups lasted between 50-60 minutes.

Virtual Interviews: Virtual interviews were conducted with two ACMs and two IMs via Zoom. Virtual interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes.

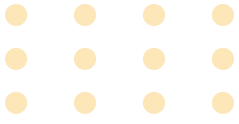
Surveys: City Year asked a convenience sample of students, principals, teachers, and ACMs at all schools working with City Year in the two selected cities (13 sites/schools total) to complete surveys to complement the qualitative data. Two student surveys were conducted. The University of Chicago's Cultivate Survey² (Tables A1-A4) was completed by 407 students and used a 5-point scale to examine students' classroom conditions, specifically their perspectives regarding their relationships with ACMs, how well supported they felt toward reaching their learning goals, and how students experienced their classroom community. The second, the Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Survey³ (Tables A5-A8), was completed by 437 students. Using a 4-point scale, the Developmental Relationships survey explored students' understandings of the ways ACMs expressed care, provided support, challenged their social-emotional and academic growth, shared power, and broadened the ways they imagined their future possibilities. All student survey data were then analyzed by district/site, grade level, and subject areas to examine variation. In addition, 12 principals and 44 teachers completed surveys (Tables A9-A12) describing how ACMs supported stu-

2 The Cultivate Survey was customized by City Year and the survey developers to include questions about interaction with CY corps members that are not part of the publicly available surveys from the survey developers.

3 The Developmental Relationships Survey was customized by City Year and the survey developers to include questions about interaction with CY corps members that are not part of the publicly available surveys from the survey developers.

dents' social-emotional learning (SEL) within their schools, including fostering notions of belonging and promoting students' engagement and participation. Finally, 84 ACMs completed a 5-point scaled survey (Table 13), examining their relationship with their partner teachers. Summary results of all surveys are provided in the Appendix.

Data Analysis: Observation, focus group, and interview data were organized and coded by the research team through several phases of qualitative analysis. This iterative process aimed to build in-depth understandings of corps members' experiences during their service year, explore the role of relationships and trust in providing student support, and gain insights about the impact of corps members' daily work on students' academic and SEL outcomes. Without formally comparing individual participants, classrooms, or school sites, the analysis attended to contextual factors of different learning environments that affected participants' experiences, while also illuminating shared themes that spanned multiple participant groups, schools, and regions. Quantitative surveys were analyzed alongside the qualitative findings and then integrated as supplemental data throughout the report.



FINDINGS

Five major findings emerged from the qualitative data:

- ACMs framed their roles and responsibilities in various ways, including serving as a “tutor,” “mentor,” and a “constant” in students’ lives, while also working “in-service” to the broader school community.
- Across contexts, ACMs described trust as the foundation for developing relationships with students. ACMs relied on a multitude of strategies for cultivating trust, including establishing clear boundaries and being authentic with students.
- Within the classroom, ACMs’ partner teachers often prioritized academic support, resulting in reduced opportunities for ACMs to consistently provide planned and intentional SEL skill development activities. Thus, ACMs relied heavily on offering in-the-moment SEL interventions.
- Throughout their interactions with students, ACMs valued holistic approaches and leveraged various strategies to maintain what an ACM referred to as a “people first, students second” mentality. These included asking students about their well-being, family, and friends before moving into lesson content, and showing students respect by encouraging their autonomy.
- Overall, the environmental contexts of the classrooms, school, and community as well as the organizational culture of City Year at large significantly impacted ACMs’ service year experiences. In some cases, highly supportive contexts enabled ACMs and students to thrive. In others, ACMs voiced how the learning environment posed challenges to navigating their roles.

These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

FINDING 1:

FRAMING ACMs’ ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

To help frame the findings that follow, we first share how ACMs understood their role. ACMs defined their position as a “tutor,” “mentor,” and a “constant” for students, and de-

scriptions of their work tended to focus on their individual impact. However, they also perceived their role as “flexible” and “in service” to students, teachers, and the overall school community. One ACM believed it was their responsibility to “help out students as much as I can to make sure the teacher can be successful.” Another ACM explained:

I think the word we use at City Year which is very accurate is “in service.” There is very little we do in any given workday that is not in service of student, teacher, school, or City Year [...] There are various forms of service in micro and macro ways.

This combination of service and support was observed throughout the site visits. Across sites and grade levels, different school contexts and individual learning environments shaped how ACMs understood and acted upon their roles, from before school to after school activities. At some sites, ACMs sang “welcome to school” songs to students arriving for the day. Many students relished in the attention while others avoided being noticed by walking around the greeters. Regardless of each student’s reaction, an ACM explained their intentions were clear – to bring fun to the students and the school:

I think it’s really important that we provide fun. Even if they don’t want the fun, we are providing it. We are there to have a good time with them and be there, we are their peer mentor. The less school provides fun for them, the more important it is to have someone in the classroom who can be fun and support them academically.

While some ACM teams began each morning with this traditional City Year “power greeting” routine of singing, clapping, and cheering for students as they arrived on campus, others intentionally fostered a more calming environment. The ACM Team Leader at one site explained that they aimed to be mindful of the high levels of social stimulation that students experienced as they returned to in-person school after distance learning during the pandemic. Thus,

this team said they opted out of the “power greeting” because they “do not want students to feel overwhelmed during the first part of the school day.” Instead, as the first adults the students would see upon entering the school, the ACMs calmly greeted students with a “hello,” “welcome,” or “good morning,” and took time to speak with individuals who stopped for a conversation. ACMs’ understanding that some students appreciate the power greeting, while others benefit from a less stimulating welcome to their school day, reflects their awareness of and respect for students’ needs. As discussed throughout this report, these essential elements of fostering trust and building relationships spanned multiple findings.

The notion of fostering fun experiences at school while being supportive of students’ learning environment and academic success was seen across sites during observations and discussed during ACM focus groups. Elementary and middle school ACMs were observed greeting students entering the classroom with short check-ins by asking, “How are you?” and offering “fist bumps” or high fives. In turn, several students offered ACMs hugs, briefly held their hands, or showed them items of importance, such as art pieces they had created, or small “fidget toys” they carried with them at school. Then, throughout each class period, ACMs provided one-on-one academic support during partner teacher lessons to assist students with the content. The student-centered supports provided by ACMs effectively aided teachers as well. For example, ACMs provided students with the materials needed to be engaged learners, such as distributing pencils, papers, and laptops. Partner teachers relied on ACMs to work with students in need of support or guidance, and to redirect students who were engaging in peer-to-peer conversations or other distractions during class. In several elementary school classrooms and across multiple subject areas including math, reading, and English language learning, ACMs took some students to the back of the classroom or outside, where they provided individual and small group assistance as needed. The breadth of support provided by ACMs was apparent throughout the additional four findings.

Reinforcing ACMs’ framing of their duties, quantitative survey data showed that principals and teachers also believed ACMs fulfilled a valuable role within the school community. Across middle and elementary school sites, those surveyed reported that ACMs supported students’ engagement and sense of belonging (Tables A9 - A12). These goals were at the forefront of ACMs’ minds as well, and one noted how the consistent nature of ACMs’ role appeared to become even more important during the middle school years, “when [students] are trying to fit in and trying to find a place to belong,” An ACM noted,

The different periods of the day means they only see their teachers once. But being that constant, we also see them at lunch, events, and after school. We see them more than their teachers do, but in elementary, they see the same teacher and City Year every day, so it’s like an equal access. I talk to my kids more than my teacher because I have the time, lunch, and space.

Similarly, ACMs across school site and service regions noted the importance of their role as someone who is “constantly in the students’ faces throughout the day [...] a friendly, helpful face who is willing to help, and also just have fun with them in any of the spaces that we serve.”

Several factors, including teacher turnover, the nature of changing classes in middle school, and the inconsistency that some students experienced at home, magnified the criticality of the ACMs’ role as “a constant” in the students’ school day and lives. When asked specifically about the criticality of ACMs in middle school, ACMs identified several reasons they needed to be a constant for middle schoolers. ACMs noted that these students are navigating more complex friendships and new relationships begin to develop, students are trying to “fit in” and “belong,” and some middle schoolers are the oldest child in their family.

At the elementary school level, ACMs spoke to inconsistencies in the classroom, such as “a lot of turnover for the teacher,” as the primary issue magnifying their importance on campus. Struggling to keep track of the seemingly constant rotation of educators in their classroom throughout the year, one ACM noted, “I think they’re on the fifth teacher now, or something.” For this reason, many elementary-level ACMs described their role as a “consistent primary adult” in students’ lives.

I’ve been the consistent person in the classroom. They have had substitute teachers throughout the year, so they’ve seen me as a primary adult figure, and they really attach themselves, which I like, but it comes with a lot of responsibility for me to be present mentally. Some students need help academically, but sometimes it’s about reaching them emotionally.

Notably, this ACM connected the systemic challenge of teacher turnover to the expectation that ACMs carry “a lot of responsibility” to “be present” in not only supporting students’ academic progress, but also their social-emotional

needs. Additionally, ACMs' understanding of their roles and responsibilities were relevant to their relationships with other members of the school community, which impacted how they supported students.

FINDING 2:

TRUST AS THE FOUNDATION OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

ACMs across sites and grade levels stressed the importance of building trust with students as essential to building relationships and supporting students' academic growth. ACMs' beliefs about the importance of strong developmental relationships aligned with students' self-reported feedback on quantitative surveys (Table A5). On this topic, over 95% of students surveyed indicated that their ACMs regularly express care, challenge their growth, provide support, and share power. As discussed in the following sub-sections, ACMs attended to these dimensions of developmental relationships when establishing trust with students. One ACM shared,

When I think about an effective relationship, I really start thinking about trust. If a corps member has established trust with a student, and that trust translates into, whether that be academic supports, or whether that be social and emotional supports [...] I see that trust being the foundation from where they build on.

Likewise, another ACM expressed a sentiment that was shared among many of the ACMs' understanding of relationship building. She explained, "I think what it really boils down to is trust. Because if you don't have that first and foremost and you are trying to tell them $2+2=4$, they are not going to believe you even if they know it equals 4." Another ACM stated, "trust and academic success go hand in hand." Both statements represent ACMs' awareness that in order to impact students' academic growth and overall well-being, they had to first develop trusting relationships with students. Data obtained during school site visits and focus groups showed that ACMs used a range of strategies to build trust with students, including allowing themselves and students to be vulnerable and authentic, establishing and maintaining clear boundaries, and being a friend and mentor for students.

Developing Trust through Vulnerability and Validation

Developing trusting relationships did not always take as long of a time as some may imagine. ACMs often described

trust-building happening during in-the-moment playful interactions with the students, or when an ACM was supporting a student through a conflict. Both kinds of situations provided ACMs and students space to be vulnerable, which ACMs described as essential to building trust. For example, an ACM reflected on a time when one of her students shared with his classmates that his father passed away at a young age. Following class, the ACM noticed he was quiet. She shared with him that she could relate, because she also lost her father at a young age. She explained how her willingness to be vulnerable and honest with the student enabled him to develop trust with her quickly. Following that interaction, the student often reached out to her for social-emotional and academic support.

Similarly, another ACM successfully developed trust "rather quickly" with new students by validating their emotions and being vulnerable about her own insecurities. She described an interaction with a student she was supporting in math for the first time, who was struggling with the content and became visibly upset during a one-on-one tutoring session. The ACM expressed that initially she did not know how to handle the situation. She explained that unlike the trusting relationship she built with her "focus list" students, this was her first time working with this student. She chose to be a compassionate listener who validated the student's experience without trying to fix the situation. After actively listening to the student express his frustrations, the ACM shared how she struggled in certain areas as well. The ACM attributed her ability to establish trust with the student to three things that she did during that in-the-moment interaction: validating the student's emotions, supporting student agency by providing the student with options to manage their emotions, and sharing her struggles with learning in certain content areas.

These examples of ACMs' trust-building approaches offer a lens into real-world practices that enable caring relationships with students. As indicated in survey responses, students believed that in showing care, ACMs listened, helped, and encouraged them through navigating challenges (Table A5). ACMs' expressions of vulnerability and validation may have provided an important foundation for these supportive actions.

Building Trust Through Honesty and Authenticity

ACMs expressed the importance of vulnerability as intertwined with honesty and authenticity, which were all necessary approaches to building trusting relationships. ACMs shared that students were more likely to express their authentic selves when ACMs were their truest selves. They described how youth wanted adults to be "honest with them and not sugar coat" anything. As one ACM stated, "The biggest thing I learned is, kids just want you to be real with them. They don't want you to sugar coat it and paint this nice picture." In one case, a middle school ACM explained a

situation where a student was upset that they were always placed in the front of the classroom. When they asked the ACM why, she offered a straight-forward answer:

I said, "All right, do you want to know the truth? Here's the thing, you went from an F in Q1 to a B+ in Q2. Guess what happened between Q1 and Q2? They put you in the front. Do you want to get an F again? Then you have to stay in the front because you need to see the board and you do better."

The above quoted ACM highlighted that students simply responded more positively to academic support when adults at school were honest and straight-forward. An ACM succinctly stated, "I think getting to know them, being consistent and being honest is a good strategy." Survey data suggest that students' perceptions of ACMs' interactions with them aligned with ACMs' efforts towards supportive, reciprocal authenticity (Table A5). Here, the majority of student respondents reported that ACMs challenged their growth by expecting them to do their best, and holding them responsible for their actions. Additionally, most students felt that ACMs shared power through treating them with respect.

Beyond engaging honestly about students' academic progress, ACMs across contexts also pointed out how being "real" with students created opportunities for students to bring their whole selves to school. A middle school ACM explained that she used games and sought out commonalities with students to bring out their personalities. She described her strategy of creating opportunities for students "to be seen" holistically.

Getting to know them. Trying to see if we have something in common like TikTok, dancing, or music or something like that [...] Opportunities for them to get up and move or play games. My students love card games. I started out playing Uno with them and that is where all personalities come out because everything is off the table [...] It also engages their personality and just a different side of them, so you not only get to see them academically but you get to see them as a whole human being, and I think they really want to be seen like, "I'm really a human being, I'm really a whole person." And it's fun.

When asked to describe the characteristics of a healthy relationship, another ACM noted the importance of ACMs and students mutually honoring one another's needs and boundaries.

Being your authentic self and allowing the students to be their authentic self while maintaining boundaries. If they let them know they're having a bad day, I may know not to mess around too much, whereas the teachers may not be as sympathetic toward that, so there is a give and take. If the student is having a bad day, I am going to do whatever I can to help them out, or if the student knows I am having a bad day, most of the time they will act accordingly.

This ACM emphasized the importance of being authentic with his emotions while also respecting his students' emotions. Importantly, he noted the significance of maintaining boundaries as essential to building healthy and trusting relationships with students.

Trust and Boundaries

Across grade levels and school contexts, ACMs emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining clear boundaries with students, particularly given the fluidity of their role as a near-peer, and as someone guiding students' academic growth. An ACM explained how students are respectful of boundaries when they have established a trusting relationship:

I think you can set those hard boundaries, but as long as kids know you have their best interest at heart, I feel like that's what really matters.

While the boundaries did not need to be age- or role-specific, ACMs stated that they did need to be clear and consistent. This was especially important, given that ACMs acted as friends and mentors to students. For example, one noted:

Mutual respect and boundaries, but not strict age and role-based boundaries. The students I get along with best – we are all cool with each other. They know I am a City Year, I am not their friend, but they also know I am friendly with them, and I am here with them, so they won't cross too many language or familiarity lines, but they feel comfortable telling me what up and talking with me about how they are and being real with me and not shining me off.

ACMs often described boundaries and vulnerability as interconnected. As one ACM shared:

Even if it seems like opposites, both vulnerability and boundaries [...] Having those boundaries and not changing them I think is the biggest part. You don't have to have authoritarian boundaries with this student, you can have friendly nice boundaries but as long as you don't leave them, they can respect you. But in terms of vulnerability, I tell my students this all the time and I show them that I mess up and I feel like a culture of mistakes is really important for creating that vulnerability that goes both ways.

Quantitative survey responses also captured the regularity of boundary-setting between ACMs and students (Table A5). Almost 80% of students reported that their ACMs make it clear “what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable.” Echoing this language, an ACM put it this way:

You need to be able to have boundaries with the students and be clear about what's ok and what's not. If there are no boundaries then they will step all over you, you have to stand your ground. The goal is to be warm-strict, but I know that is a high bar to achieve.

Establishing a “warm-strict” relationship with students seemed to be challenging for some ACMs as a result of

their role as near-peers with students and the minimal age difference between some ACMs and students. Nonetheless, ACMs’ “near-peer” positioning enabled them to foster unique developmental relationships with students overall, as addressed next.

Developing Trust as a “Near-Peer”: The Multiple Roles of ACMs

ACMs also explained how their positioning as “near-peers” helped them build trusting relationships with students. This created the unique dynamic of “a close relationship,” similar to an “older sibling” with a “level of respect.” Other ACMs described themselves as “a friend with authority,” or, “a leader in the classroom, or a mentor.” One ACM explained, “I joke around with my kids, they roast me, I roast them back. I’m a friend, but we still know the boundaries.” Another ACM added, “To get there, a big thing is patience, because you can’t really push those relationships.”

Additionally, quantitative survey data suggest that near-peer relationships may serve an important purpose within the classroom community (Table A1). Students’ responses to community-focused survey questions indicated that while their teacher made sure the classroom was a “welcoming place” where students “get to know each other,” peer-to-peer encouragement “to work hard” was less common. Given this context, it is notable that nearly 80% of these students reported that their ACM regularly supported their learning. Additionally, over 70% of students believed their ACM helped them understand their academic progress (Table A1). This data may point to the value of ACMs’ unique contributions as near-peers, in encouraging students’ success and helping to cultivate a supportive classroom community.

The near-peer positioning of ACMs also distinguished their role from the other kinds of relationships that students may have with adults at school. One ACM stated, “The relationship is obviously different than the one between [students] and their teacher, in the sense that you spend a lot more time with them outside of the strictly academic space.” ACMs agreed it was important for students to know they are “not only there to keep [students] focused on assignments.” ACMs’ out-of-classroom interactions, as well as “conversations with students about things that are not related to school at all,” were crucial in sustaining students’ engagement in school, developing “a foundation of trust,” and “keeping [students] focused academically.”

ACMs expressed that the near-peer dynamic helped foster strong relationships with students in different ways, depending on the context of the interaction. Some ACMs described having consistently strong relationships with all students they supported, whether those students were part of their “focus list” group, or were part of the broader classroom community, or were even in a different class-

room or grade level. Other ACMs described having stronger relationships with specific individuals or groups of students (e.g., English language learners (ELL) students, LGBTQ+ students). One ACM explained, “The students who I believe I have benefited the most are students who are openly queer, because I am openly gay in the classroom.” Another Spanish-speaking ACM shared:

I would say the students that have benefited the most from my being in the classroom are the English immersion students, particularly the Spanish-speaking students, because that is what I can speak. But I know there are other English language learners that are not supported as well because we don't have the capacity or resources. With those students that want to learn, they ask for help, and in my case when I am not there, they just don't learn that day.

Overall, while ACMs used various terminology to describe their relationships with students, they agreed that across school sites and classroom contexts, their roles were distinctive from those of teachers. ACMs' involvement in the classroom as near-peers contributes to the diversity of relationships that young people have access to. Highlighting their approach to building connections, one ACM said, “I talk to [students] like they're human.” Other ACMs made efforts to build on positive interactions between teachers and students. As some ACMs explained, “With teachers, [students] feel like they can't be or say certain things,” and, “There are not a lot of people the kids trust at school.” Ultimately, the strong foundation of trust between ACMs and students enabled ACMs to provide robust “in-the-moment” and planned supports.

FINDING 3:

MEETING STUDENTS IN-THE-MOMENT ACROSS LEARNING CONTEXTS

Focus group conversations and school site observations revealed how ACMs supported students' academic and SEL development frequently and consistently, through in-the-moment interactions as well as some planned and intentional interventions. As addressed throughout this report, ACMs' partner teachers often prioritized academic support, and thus, some ACMs could not consistently provide planned and intentional SEL skill development activities during class time. In such cases, ACMs heavily relied on providing in-the-moment supports to meet students' SEL needs, while planned and intentional SEL interventions occurred more consistently in classrooms where ACMs were afforded greater agency by their partner teachers. Addi-

tionally, across school sites, ACMs' understanding of their roles and responsibilities informed how they were able to offer support within and beyond the classroom.

Turning Obstacles into Opportunities

During site visits, ACMs were frequently observed engaging in in-the-moment interventions with students. A middle school ACM knelt down and spoke quietly to a student who put his head down after being called to the board and answering a question incorrectly. Students laughed at his answer and he immediately retreated by resting his head on the table. The ACM later reflected that she viewed those obstacles as opportunities to engage in SEL interventions. The ACM shared that student had been struggling with low self-esteem. She reminded him that he did a good job trying, and encouraged him to keep problem-solving with the class and to ignore the other students. Eventually, that student raised his head and next his hand to successfully answer another question. As highlighted in the quantitative data, such actions may point to the value of ACMs encouraging students to work hard and learn from mistakes (see Table 1A). When asked about ACMs' supportive actions, 70% of students reported that in most or all cases, ACMs emphasized students' effort over their ability to “get things right the first time.” Also, over 75% of students indicated that in most or all cases, ACMs normalized making mistakes as opportunities to learn (Table 1A). However, the majority of students believed that peer-to-peer encouragement was not present, a little present, or somewhat present in the classroom. Thus, SEL interventions to cultivate students' academic confidence and persistence may be especially impactful in classroom contexts where students report feeling limited support from peers.

During focus groups, ACMs reflected on countless times where they intervened to help students with daily challenges with friendships, relationships, and academic support. They considered these in-the-moment interventions as opportunities to build students' social-emotional skills. When asked how much of their time was spent supporting students' social-emotional learning (SEL), ACMs described working with their “focus list” students about twice a week for 15 minutes, but most ACMs estimated their time spent on SEL at about 75-100% of the time. One ACM expressed:

We only get 15 minutes if we are doing one-on-one and that is one day a week. That is only 2% really. But that is why I say 75% because during the week, it is consistent. I have two students that I must go up to everyday. There are some things that I must do every day. It is a daily thing for us, particularly at this campus. We are always talking to kids during lunch.

A fellow ACM explained SEL as happening 100% of the time and emphasized the importance of taking the time to dig deeper into students' behaviors without jumping to negative conclusions.

I think for me, and everyone actually, it's 100% of the time, because imagine coming into a class and not even knowing. You see them with their head down and you think that's just what they do, then you find out they are hungry, they didn't get breakfast this morning.

Another ACM described social-emotional development as something as simple as saying "good morning." She reiterated that her role as a near-peer comes with a lot of opportunities to have thoughtful conversations with the students. She explained that her role also enables her to work one-on-one with students who need additional attention and support before, during, and after school.

I think even just saying "good morning" to a student is SEL. We spend a lot of time taking kids to the restroom or finding them in the hall or seeing them sit in certain spots [...] A lot of times, the teacher doesn't have time to step out of the classroom to do the one-on-one. So when you see the child is not meeting the behavior, you can pull them in the hallway and talk about what's going on.

This ACM's reflection highlights the countless moments ACMs are engaging in in-the-moment SEL interventions during lunch, recess, while walking through the hallway, and taking students to the restroom. Two ACMs noted that some of their best interventions happened while walking the halls with a student. Both ACMs explained they did not set any expectations for the walk. Students were allowed to just walk and not even engage in conversations with the ACM.

Another strategy I have been using is they are not having a good time, they let me know if they want to take a walk to give them some autonomy. When we are on a walk, I don't ask them anything school-related.

Similar to the above ACM who understood the student's needs at that moment, another ACM highlighted the value of understanding timing. She described a moment when a

student became very frustrated with a peer. When the ACM asked if they wanted to talk about it, the student declined. When asked if they wanted to take a walk, the student replied positively. Throughout the walk, the ACM was silent, and the student voluntarily expressed their frustrations. The ACM concluded their approach involves "sometimes not pushing it, because the emotion is so intense that [students] just need to get it out of their physical bodies first before they can intellectualize it." ACMs across contexts recounted in-the-moment interventions with students and often attributed their ability to offer SEL support to their role as a near-peer, the amount of time spent with the students, and the trusting relationships they worked to build with the students.

Weaving Together Academic Tutoring with Intentional and "Real-Time Responsive" SEL Supports

Observation data collected during school site visits indicated that ACMs were highly committed to supporting students through a multitude of approaches. ACMs were rarely still or quiet, as students of all grade levels constantly initiated interactions with the ACMs, and vice versa. ACMs' involvement in students' schooling experiences spanned the entire day's activities, including the whole-class academic setting, small group pull-out sessions for "focus list" students, and social settings during lunch and recess. They were also present in the hallways during passing periods between classes, as well as during student arrivals and departures before and after school. Thus, ACMs' engagement with students remained constant throughout the school day, covering a wide breadth of topics relevant to students' academic progress, SEL development, and their holistic lives within and beyond the school context.

ACMs across sites identified these consistent and multifaceted interactions with students as a critical and unique element of their role. However, ACMs were often guided by partner teachers to prioritize academic support, as discussed later. They leveraged many strategies to meet this goal. ACMs were observed motivating students in-the-moment during passing periods to ensure they reached their next classes on time. They also assisted individual students with academic content in-the-moment during whole-class lessons, and when applicable, they provided planned academic pull-out sessions for students on their "focus list."

One ACM explained that they support students during class by ensuring students have the necessary materials for each lesson (e.g., paper, pencil, laptops) and by providing social-emotional support. While ACMs were observed walking around the classroom reminding students to be quiet when the teacher was presenting, and to sit up and attend to the lesson, ACMs were more often seen cheering students on when they were actively engaged. An ACM later described the practice of uplifting students as an SEL intervention. She explained that many of her students

struggle with self-confidence and by cheering her students on, she hoped to build their confidence so they would continue to take chances and build confidence in their abilities.

Despite a greater age difference compared to middle schoolers, near-peer interactions were also observed at the elementary school level. An elementary school ACM joined students in a Kahoot game, cheering them on and engaging in friendly competition. ACMs were also observed encouraging students when they made mistakes and posing questions to help them problem-solve. Reflective of ACMs' understanding of the importance of students' social-emotional development on academic success, they integrated other questions to check in on the students' well-being, such as, "How are you today?" "How is your sister?" "Why are you so tired – what time did you go to sleep last night?" and "What did you eat for breakfast?"

Throughout these interactions, ACMs' depth of knowledge about students' holistic lives pointed to the strength of the trusting relationships they had established. For instance, when one student initially struggled to engage in a pull-out session for academic support, the ACM met them in-the-moment by gently asking, "Do you miss your dog today? [...] You gave her a really good life when she was alive, and that's what you have to remember. I'm really glad you came to school today, but do you want me to give you a moment alone?" The student emphatically said "No," while shaking their head, and after further conversation with the ACM, they made progress on their academic assignment.

When ACMs' supportive interactions fluidly spanned multiple contexts throughout the school day, their persistent presence across social and academic environments became especially apparent. For example, one student experienced a peer conflict at lunch time and began to cry. The ACM met the student in-the-moment by approaching them to say, "Hey, hey, hey. That's ok. [...] if something ever comes up, just call me over. I'll be there." Then, upon returning to the classroom with the student, the ACM immediately followed up with them by facilitating an intentional SEL skill-building activity one-on-one, which focused on practicing self-calming breathing exercises. The ACM began the SEL activity by asking the student to share an "intention" they wanted to center throughout the exercise. The ACM concluded the activity with encouragement by saying, "Good job! Nicely done! We can do this every day if you want," further indicating their availability for support if the student needed it in the future. After this intentional SEL skill-building activity, the student joined the whole class to learn the academic content and focused on completing their assignments for the duration of the period.

As in the above scenarios, ACMs recognized that students' academic and SEL skills were interconnected. Thus, ACMs' frequent in-the-moment supports and periodic planned activities relating to both academic and SEL development

were often interwoven throughout many fluid interactions with students. One ACM working with upper elementary aged students also provided contextual information by associating the importance of SEL development with students' pandemic-driven social needs.

Missing those two years of socializing really showed, and of course the academics was a whole other thing. City Year members would really have to get involved in the playground. We usually do structured recess with different activities the kids can choose to participate in, and it was crucial at the beginning, because kids didn't know how to talk to each other and didn't know how to settle disputes [...] that was huge with playground behavior.

Notably, ACMs' capacity to provide intentional SEL activities was often enabled or constrained by their partner teachers' degree of support for the work – an effect of the learning environment discussed further later. One ACM spoke to this in how they chose to focus their efforts.

At lunch time I'm pulling three students. [...] I have a different student every day this week. [...] [Teacher] lets me do whatever I want. Usually about two days a week I will take an actual lunch break, but most days I only eat for like five minutes and go back out with the kids. I like to keep the momentum up.

In these instances, teachers who allowed ACMs to have more flexibility throughout the day and greater agency over their use of time and space fostered learning environments that were more conducive to planned and intentional SEL skill-building activities. Nonetheless, given the common intersection of academic and social needs, distinct academic or SEL supports were rarely provided in isolation, which became evident throughout school site observations and focus group dialogues.

FINDING 4:

“PEOPLE FIRST, STUDENTS SECOND”: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PROVIDING SEL AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT

ACMs shared the importance of having a “people first, students second” approach to interactions, which characterized their efforts to connect with students on a “human” level beyond focusing on their academic progress. One ACM emphasized the shared sentiment that, “We see them as more than just students.” ACMs used various intentional strategies to maintain a “people first, students second” mentality, such as asking students about their well-being, family, and friends before moving into lesson content, and showing students respect by encouraging their autonomy. One ACM described how they always initiate conversations by centering the child as a person and not just a student:

For example, on Monday, the first time I see them, the first question I always ask them is, “How was your weekend? How’s the family? How’s your siblings?” So the next time I talk to them, I will say, “Oh, you said you were going to a party with your family, how was it?” And they will say, “Oh wow you remembered.” It makes it easier to drop down the walls so when you need to talk to them about academics it makes it easier.

An IM explained how they remind ACMs to be intentional about getting to know the students. IMs and ACMs explained that they ask questions about students’ lives outside of school, play games with them so students can feel comfortable being themselves, and try to identify common interests (e.g., TikTok, dancing, basketball, listening to music, watching anime, reading comics). During a focus group an IM reflected:

I think at the beginning of the year, we put a lot of intention into thinking about, “How are corps members building out their relationship with students?” and it’s all about, “Don’t jump into the academics because you haven’t built a relationship with them.”

In addition to getting to know the students as whole people, ACMs stressed the importance of building student’s agency as critical to maintaining a “people first” approach.

One ACM underscored the importance of agency when centering the person first: “Respect that they know what they want, and know what they need, and if they don’t, they will show you in some way.” Quantitative data aligned with this finding, based on students’ perceptions of ACMs’ efforts to “share power” (Tables A6-A8). Over 70% of students indicated that ACMs considered students’ ideas when making decisions, and over 80% felt that when students faced a challenge, ACMs collaboratively worked with them to find a solution. This consideration and collaboration alongside students was crucial as another ACM described giving students options as a way to promote their agency:

A strategy that helped me as a mix of classroom management and relationship-building was offering the students options. If I had a student that didn’t want to work on something, I would say, “If you are tired right now, you can sit this one out, you can draw a picture, you can come in during lunch, you can work on it on your own, with a partner, or we can work on it together. It gave them a little bit of power over the situation and some trust in me because it showed that I valued their opinion, and I value that, “You know what’s right for you, so let’s figure out what’s right for you.”

Overall, in maintaining a “people first, students second” approach, ACMs identified two essential strategies: getting to know the whole individual beyond their role as a student, and honoring and promoting student agency. As discussed next, this approach was a necessary component to supporting students’ social-emotional development and academic growth.

SEL Development as an Essential Precursor to Academic Progress

In ACMs’ experiences, SEL development was an essential precursor to academic progress. They believed that prioritizing a strong foundation of SEL support – preceding, during, and following academic support – was essential to cultivating a learning environment that would enable students to thrive. One ACM expressed “reorienting” their approach upon realizing the primacy of SEL skills:

I was very academically oriented coming into City Year, thinking I had to get [students] up to A’s and B’s from C’s. And now I’m like, “Wow, they have so many social-emotional needs, and if those are not met, then the academics are not going to come.” That’s something that I really reoriented for myself.

During a virtual interview, another ACM reiterated the need to develop trust by getting to know the student before jumping into academics:

So talking to them about their personal life, really putting in an effort to get to know them in the first couple of weeks of school when you're first meeting them. And then yeah, kinda using that to develop a foundation of trust. You know the student then believes that you have the best intentions in helping them in the classroom, and they know that, you know, you're not only there to keep them focused on assignments or whatever else. They kind of view you in a more positive light as a bit of a friend. That's key to keeping them focused academically.

ACMs' beliefs about the necessity of SEL foundations were further validated by students who often raised topics relating to SEL development during academically-focused interventions. These included challenges with self-confidence, peer social dynamics and bullying, teacher relationships, sense of belonging at school, and struggles students faced at home, such as experiencing deaths in their families.

The vulnerability expressed by these students seemed to reflect a high degree of trust in ACMs. One ACM highlighted that, "Of everybody in the school [students] could talk to, when it could be a past teacher or current teacher, they seek out City Year all the time." Likewise, ACMs believed that the combination of developing trusting relationships and offering consistent student support contributed to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes. Additionally, student survey findings suggest that the relationships that ACMs established with students provided a necessary foundation for them to effectively support youths' social-emotional development and academic outcomes. However, according to student surveys, students did not always translate the support within their current learning environments as contributing to their future growth (Tables A6-A8).

Indicators of Success Reflecting Academic and SEL Developmental Outcomes

ACMs described various indicators of academic and social-emotional growth they observed in students. One middle school ACM shared, "When students tell me they got accepted into a high school, I feel really proud and excited [...] feel like I'm doing something." This ACM's Impact Manager provided contextual details to validate the ACM's contribution, noting, "Most of their kids did not plan on going to high school or going to college, and [ACM] made it their business to talk to them about different college or

high school experiences they could look forward to [...] they took that time to bring them to the reality of things."

Several other ACMs believed students' social-emotional growth was most noteworthy, which they attributed to the robust SEL support they provided across classroom and non-classroom contexts. These ACMs recalled numerous elementary and middle school students learning to "thoughtfully communicate their emotions," building skills in "de-escalating situations," and ultimately "having a positive outcome" from interactions with peers and adults at school.

Additionally, one ACM shared a detailed example of guiding a student through repairing a relationship with a teacher after a "disruptive" classroom experience. In this situation, the student was reprimanded for being "disrespectful." While such situations may have reflected broader conditions of the school climate, the ACM leaned into their role of providing in-the-moment support as students navigated power dynamics largely beyond either of their control. Such examples revealed how the unique combination of ACMs' trusting relationships, near-peer positioning, and SEL support contributed to students' growth, and how a foundation of SEL skills was often necessary for students to engage academically.

Complementing ACMs' accounts of their impact, quantitative data show that principals and teachers also perceived positive effects on students' academic and SEL outcomes. Most principals surveyed agreed that ACMs supported students' "engagement and participation at school," and they strongly agreed that ACMs helped students feel a "sense of belonging" (Tables A9-A10). Teachers reported similar feedback about ACMs' impact on engagement and belonging at their schools (Tables A11-A12).

While many participants framed students' developmental outcomes within the schooling context, one IM referenced the enduring effects of SEL development in students' lives "beyond the school:"

Sometimes you forget about conversations you've had on [students] being self-aware or patient, and they will bring that back to you and say, "Look what I did!" You can see you really helped a kid, and helped them learn something they will take beyond the school, for the rest of their life.

Furthermore, one ACM reflected on a community-based experience when they realized that City Year's work was recognizable not just by students within their own school site, but throughout the region:

Students know that City Years, or anyone wearing a yellow jacket, is someone they can go to, to tell them something is wrong, ask for help, or say hello and just be a friend. The impact we are making is leaving a trail of people to help [students]. [...] We were volunteering at a community center, and as soon as we walked in, all the kids were like, "City Year! City Year!" and I was like, "I have no idea who you are. You don't even go to my school. What's happening?" But they were all so excited we were there. So, the impact we made transcends. It's not just at this school, this year.

Thus, the positive impact of City Year's constant, familiar, and trusted presence within the school and broader community was notable, although ACMs also spoke to organizational dynamics that affected their service year experience in different ways.

FINDING 5:

SITUATING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Although survey data show most ACMs reported feeling supported by their partner teachers within their learning environments (Table A13), data from interviews and focus groups during site visits provided insight into ACMs varying experiences and levels of support. The qualitative data also show specific elements shaping ACMs and partner teacher's relationships. ACMs' service year experiences were impacted by the environmental contexts of the classroom, school, and community, as well as the organizational culture of City Year at large. Such structural and cultural dimensions of schooling, including the physical environment, social climate, and academic norms at each site, shaped the nature of ACMs' contributions to student development. Broadly, these environmental contexts fostered some enabling and constraining conditions with respect to trust and relationships, ACMs' supportive roles and actions, and students' SEL and academic outcomes. In some cases, highly supportive contexts enabled ACMs and students to thrive. In others, ACMs voiced how the learning environment posed challenges to navigating their roles. This was especially apparent when ACMs encountered disconnects in the philosophies of partner teachers, IMs, and City Year

leadership, and ACMs' understanding of their responsibilities and the expectations of the service year.

Environmental Conditions Supporting ACMs' Effectiveness

ACMs identified that quality time with students, a strong sense of belonging at school, and a supportive learning environment were key factors that could help enable relationship-building, as well as academic and SEL growth. Aligning with findings addressed earlier in this report, ACMs associated high degrees of trust with a greater capacity to support students. As one ACM put it, "Trust is the only reason that [students] are going to listen to you, take your advice, and follow along with you – it's only if they trust you to take them to where they need to be." While ACMs said it took various amounts of time (e.g., "one month," "three months," "a semester") to develop trusting relationships, they emphasized that this was a gradual process that could not be "rushed," given that rapport was established through consistent interactions as ACMs "spend more time with students." Additionally, ACMs perceived benefits of working frequently with their "focus list" of students. As one put it:

Especially if a student is in my small group – my focus list of students that I pull – my relationships with them, just because I spent more time with them in a small group or one-on-one setting, are a lot stronger than my relationships with other students. And you know, small groups, I think, are a big reason that students get excited to come to school, and they view it as kind of an escape from the classroom [...] it gets them excited about their day, and it gets them excited in the material and they may not be excited in the same way if they went over it inside the classroom.

Building on the importance of getting students "excited to come to school," other ACMs noted administrators' roles in fostering learning environments that encouraged student's sense of belonging. This also cultivated students' trust in educators, including City Year ACMs. One ACM observed:

The students here at the school that I work with have a great relationship with the admin [...] You know, it does feel like a home. And there is such a culture of forgiveness here at [school], behaviorally, that, you know the students feel like the admin or their City Year has their back. That helps them feel like they belong or feel comfortable here.

The benefits of a strong sense of belonging and trusting relationships with school adults not only impacted students, but seemed to extend to ACMs as well. In one classroom where the ACM felt highly effective, the teacher extended a high degree of professional trust to the ACM. This ACM described having autonomy to create their own focus list of students needing social-emotional support, who then benefited from spending more time with the ACM and each another via planned academic and SEL activities:

[Students] were just very closed off and didn't know how to do the face-to-face interactions. They've come out of their shells, and I picked them for the small group for a reason, so they could get to know other kids. My second small group is the same way, and it's a really interesting dynamic. I hand-picked all of them because they were very socially awkward, and now they've become their own friend group.

This ACM concluded, "I'm really lucky," when speaking to the comradery they felt with their partner teacher, which supported the ACM's sense of belonging in the classroom and the school.

At a different school, in another classroom where the ACM felt highly supported, the partner teacher was a former ACM who had "an SEL background." This teacher intentionally built "a strong classroom community," and started each day with a whole-class group meeting and a game. This ACM largely credited their effectiveness to the classroom culture created by their partner teacher, who fostered a learning environment that enabled the ACM to successfully provide a wide range of academic and SEL supports. Notably, this occurred at a site facing high teacher turnover and multiple institutional challenges during a tumultuous school year. Thus, this ACM's experience points to the potential of just one supportive partner teacher to elevate the positive impact of an ACM, despite complex conditions of the broader school environment that may otherwise impede ACMs' effectiveness.

Environmental Conditions Constraining ACMs' Effectiveness

Learning environments that were highly rigid and focused on punitive disciplinary practices potentially constrained ACMs' relationship development with students, and in some cases, obstructed connections entirely. As one ACM explained, "Some students I formed connections with did not stay at school – they went to independent study or were expelled."

Given such conditions, some ACMs expressed navigating perceived philosophical differences with their partner teachers and expectations communicated by their Impact Managers and City Year at large. ACMs sought to prioritize developmental strategies as part of monitoring student behavior, whereas their partner teachers often employed more traditional classroom discipline and student compliance strategies. Given this context, ACMs sometimes described teachers as "old school," "very strict," and "very frustrated." Such learning environments characterized multiple elementary and middle school sites in different service regions throughout the country. In these circumstances, ACMs found opportunities to contribute positive energy while acknowledging that, like students, they were navigating the norms of the established school culture. As one ACM explained:

When we can, we give the kids a break. [...] We don't want to undermine the leaders of the school, but we try to put in that little extra oomph where we can. [...] It's very, very rigid, and not just for the students, but City Year. We very much sometimes feel like, "Okay, this is a little too rigid." And so it's been interesting for us to try to figure it out for ourselves, and just following a very strict routine has been – it's been an experience, is all I can say.

Thus, ACMs collectively voiced feelings that they must balance classroom rules and school norms with the equity-focused values of the City Year organization. One IM explained, "This is City Year culture. You're taking this [philosophy] into a school that doesn't do this at all. That is a very real thing when it comes to City Year."

However, some challenges of the learning environment persisted even when ACMs had positive relationships and a shared philosophy with individual partner teachers. For instance, one ACM who connected strongly with their partner teacher described other experiences across classroom, school, and community contexts as “emotionally taxing” for ACMs and students alike:

A teacher was fired, a class was split up, another class was split up and brought back together, a shooting happened across the street. There were so many emotionally taxing things that elementary school kids shouldn't have to deal with or go through. That's been the most challenging. I don't think I was emotionally prepared to support them. It was a lot more emotionally taxing than I thought it would be. But I use positive framing to show the kids that it's ok to feel these things and push through them, and it doesn't mean you won't succeed.

One Impact Manager related these kinds of “real life experiences” to the “disconnect” that ACMs often felt between their expectations of the service year and the reality of their daily work. From the IM's vantage point, the perceived friction between the distinct cultures of City Year, schools, and communities in different service regions posed challenges for IMs and ACMs trying to make sense of their roles and fulfill their duties:

The evolution of City Year has been beautiful [...] we are trying to be on this progression of being inclusive and equitable. [...] But at the same time, you gotta take into account where we at. [...] My kids are experiencing stuff that kids in Chicago or Los Angeles or Louisiana are not – they're just not. So it's like I'm being immersed in a culture while being immersed in another culture, and they bumpin' heads, so where do I fit? And it has to do with the intention of the ACMs – they did this for one year and don't want to do it again because of real life experiences [...] things they were not expecting coming into this work. [...] So there is a disconnect on the recruitment end.

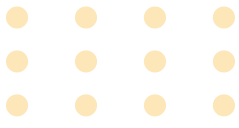
Validating this IM's perception, an ACM spoke to the necessity of City Year leadership “educating people on the culture of where you're about to go:”

I didn't know anything about [city], and it was a culture shock coming down here, living, working in schools. A lot of people felt [city] was completely different. So in recruitment, it might be helpful to give [ACMs] a forewarning of cultural aspects they should know about.

Ultimately, ACMs indicated that misalignment of expectations between ACMs, partner teachers, school leaders, IMs, and City Year leadership contributed to inconsistencies in the kinds of support that could or could not be provided to address students' behavioral, academic, and social needs. One ACM noted, “the main thing missing in my classroom is consistency,” and they reasoned that the effects “kind of trickle down to student behavior.” Moving forward, several ACMs expressed a desire for school personnel to have a more thorough understanding of City Year's purpose and the appropriate roles of ACMs. As one put it:

Just like the trainings we do, I feel like there should be trainings for the schools. So that coming in, they know about City Year. [...] They need to sit in on a training that's like, “Hey, here's what you need to know.” [...] When we went in, we had that responsibility of going to our partner teachers.

Overall, when ACMs struggled to reconcile the conflicting philosophies and differing expectations of leaders they looked to for guidance, they faced difficulties navigating their roles and responsibilities.



CONCLUSION

This study illuminated the critical role of AmeriCorps members in supporting students' developmental outcomes across a breadth of diverse classroom, school, and community contexts. Analysis of participants' service year experiences and interactions with students yielded new insights about the importance of trust-building and holistic relationships, the effects of the learning environment, and the value of in-the-moment interactions in supporting students' academic progress and social-emotional growth.

Findings suggest that the trusting relationships that ACMs established with students – and in some cases, with partner teachers – provided a necessary foundation for them to effectively support youths' academic and social-emotional development. ACMs drew on a breadth of strategies to build trust and offer guidance, while grounding their approach in a philosophy of respecting students' holistic identities within and beyond the school context. They placed particular importance on social-emotional development as a precursor to academic achievement and viewed relational skill-building as essential to students' thriving at school. ACMs perceived that their daily work positively impacted students' developmental outcomes, as evidenced by numerous indicators of success that they shared.

The student surveys illuminated a possible area of growth for City Year. Students felt highly supported by their ACMs, but students did not always perceive that the support provided within their current learning environments contributed to their future outcomes (Tables A5-A8). This suggests City Year might want to consider including formal and informal opportunities for ACMs to discuss and support students' career and postsecondary pathway goals. Building on ACMs' strengths in cultivating developmental relationships, next support efforts might include ACMs talking with students about future possibilities, exploring students' interests, and connecting them with other supportive adults and resources.

Additionally, ACMs' capacity for providing student support was largely affected by complex structural and cultural dimensions of their respective learning environments, which enabled and constrained ACMs' effectiveness in different ways. Participants indicated that misalignment of philosophies and expectations among key stakeholder groups was a common source of frustration. Unclear and conflicting messaging about ACMs' roles and responsibilities ultimately posed challenges to their ability to meet students' needs.

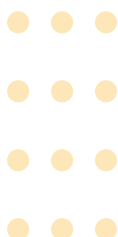
Nonetheless, ACMs demonstrated agency and adaptability in their constant efforts to bring positive energy into their classrooms and school communities, and in their creative approaches to providing in-the-moment and planned support activities across a breadth of learning environments. ACMs also spoke to specific forms of support offered by City Year leadership and partner teachers that facilitated their success, such as extending professional trust to ACMs, fostering a culture of belonging, and providing professional support toward ACMs' future goals within and beyond City Year.

Overall, the value of in-the-moment SEL interventions was evident across all findings of this study. This dimension of ACMs' responsibilities proved crucial to their ability to address students' academic and social-emotional development within and outside the classroom, in addition to honoring students' holistic needs as whole people beyond the schooling environment. These interactions served to build students' school-related self-esteem, support their academic resiliency and agency, and problem-solve relational conflicts with teachers and peers. ACMs also used in-the-moment SEL interventions to guide students through challenges outside of school, including social, family, and financial concerns. In these ways, in-the-moment interactions created pivotal opportunities for ACMs to provide SEL guidance as an essential foundation for students' academic progress. Complementing structured SEL lesson plans, in-the-moment supports were relevant, timely, and attended to students' most immediate needs and concerns that could interfere with their ability to engage in school. Thus, in-the-moment SEL support was linked to academic learning, as it enabled students to build a sense of belonging at school, cultivate and repair relationships with others, and remain focused on their classwork.

Often due to constraints of the broader learning environment, ACMs relied heavily on in-the-moment interventions rather than planned and intentional skill-building as a way to support students' overall school success. Therefore, in-the-moment support also served as a primary avenue for fostering students' social-emotional growth, especially in classroom and school contexts that did not formally dedicate time and space to offering planned SEL learning activities.

Collectively, the voices of participants in this study offer useful insights about AmeriCorps members' service year experiences and their impact on student social-emotional growth and academic outcomes, which may inform City Year's program development efforts. Ultimately, those who volunteered to be observed and who willingly participated in interviews and focus groups were invested in the mission, philosophy, and goals of City Year. They sought to share feedback with hopes of both reinforcing and improving the organization's equitable aims to support students and their school communities.

More broadly, the insights gained in this study point to the importance of relationships grounded in trust, honesty, vulnerability, and authenticity as a foundation for student growth, as ACMs' interactions meaningfully contributed to students' academic and social-emotional development. This highlights the value of students building relationships with trusted adults in their school contexts who can provide in-the-moment social and emotional supports and problem-solving strategies.



APPENDIX

TABLE A1 – STUDENT CULTIVATE SURVEY – OVERALL RESULTS

N = 407	AVERAGE	NOT AT ALL TRUE	A LITTLE TRUE	SOMEWHAT TRUE	MOSTLY TRUE	COMPLETELY TRUE
My City Year notices if I have trouble learning something.	3.9	4%	10%	18%	29%	40%
My City Year says it is more important to try in this class than to get things right the first time.	3.9	4%	9%	17%	30%	40%
My City Year explains things in a different way if we don't understand it the first time.	4.2	3%	7%	12%	29%	50%
My City Year knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class.	3.2	16%	19%	20%	23%	22%
My City Year emphasizes that it is okay to make mistakes so we can learn from them.	4.2	3%	5%	17%	26%	50%
My City Year helps me understand what went wrong when I make a mistake.	4.3	2%	5%	9%	29%	55%
City Year Support¹	3.9	<1%	3%	17%	58%	21%
This teacher makes sure we know what we're supposed to learn that day.	4.3	2%	5%	9%	26%	58%
Our teacher makes it clear to students how the work we do for this class connects to bigger learning goals.	4.0	4%	8%	19%	29%	41%
When we are learning something new, my City Year helps me understand how it fits in with what we've learned before.	4.1	3%	7%	16%	28%	46%
My City Year helps me see my progress as I get better and learn more.	4.0	3%	10%	17%	29%	42%
Learning Goals¹	4.1	<1%	3%	13%	58%	27%
Most students in this class encourage each other to work hard.	2.9	16%	27%	23%	18%	15%
This teacher is really good at relating to kids.	3.7	6%	14%	21%	28%	32%
This teacher gives us lots of opportunities to work with each other.	3.7	6%	15%	20%	24%	35%
This teacher makes sure that students get to know each other.	3.7	7%	14%	18%	25%	35%
The teacher puts effort into making sure this class is a welcoming place for everyone.	4.2	3%	5%	14%	25%	53%
Class Community¹	3.6	1%	7%	33%	43%	16%

TABLE A2 – STUDENT CULTIVATE SURVEY – BY SITE/DISTRICT

School	Site A	Site B
N =	212	195
My City Year notices if I have trouble learning something.	4.0	3.9
My City Year says it is more important to try in this class than to get things right the first time.	4.0	3.9
My City Year explains things in a different way if we don't understand it the first time.	4.1	4.2
My City Year knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class.	3.3	3.2
My City Year emphasizes that it is okay to make mistakes so we can learn from them.	4.1	4.2
My City Year helps me understand what went wrong when I make a mistake.	4.3	4.3
City Year Support	4.0	3.9
This teacher makes sure we know what we're supposed to learn that day.	4.3	4.3
Our teacher makes it clear to students how the work we do for this class connects to bigger learning goals.	4.1	3.9
When we are learning something new, my City Year helps me understand how it fits in with what we've learned before.	4.1	4.1
My City Year helps me see my progress as I get better and learn more.	4.0	3.9
Learning Goals	4.1	4.0
Most students in this class encourage each other to work hard.	2.9	2.9
This teacher is really good at relating to kids.	3.7	3.6
This teacher gives us lots of opportunities to work with each other.	3.6	3.8
This teacher makes sure that students get to know each other.	3.6	3.7
The teacher puts effort into making sure this class is a welcoming place for everyone.	4.2	4.2
Class Community	3.6	3.6

TABLE A3 – STUDENT CULTIVATE SURVEY – BY GRADE LEVEL

Grade Level	5	6	7	8
N =	50	73	86	104
My City Year notices if I have trouble learning something.	3.8	4.2	3.9	3.9
My City Year says it is more important to try in this class than to get things right the first time.	4.1	4.0	3.7	4.0
My City Year explains things in a different way if we don't understand it the first time.	4.1	4.3	3.9	4.3
My City Year knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class.	2.9	3.0	3.3	3.4
My City Year emphasizes that it is okay to make mistakes so we can learn from them.	4.4	4.1	4.1	4.3
My City Year helps me understand what went wrong when I make a mistake.	4.4	4.4	4.2	4.4
City Year Support	3.9	4.0	3.9	4.0
This teacher makes sure we know what we're supposed to learn that day.	4.4	4.3	4.5	4.4
Our teacher makes it clear to students how the work we do for this class connects to bigger learning goals.	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.1
When we are learning something new, my City Year helps me understand how it fits in with what we've learned before.	3.9	4.3	4.0	4.3
My City Year helps me see my progress as I get better and learn more.	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.0
Learning Goals	4.1	4.2	4.1	4.2
Most students in this class encourage each other to work hard.	2.5	2.9	3.1	3.1
This teacher is really good at relating to kids.	3.5	3.5	3.7	3.8
This teacher gives us lots of opportunities to work with each other.	3.6	3.7	3.8	3.8
This teacher makes sure that students get to know each other.	3.6	3.4	3.7	3.8
The teacher puts effort into making sure this class is a welcoming place for everyone.	4.4	4.1	4.2	4.2
Class Community	3.5	3.5	3.7	3.7

TABLE A4 – STUDENT CULTIVATE SURVEY – BY SUBJECT

Subject	ELA	Math
N =	223	160
My City Year notices if I have trouble learning something.	3.9	3.9
My City Year says it is more important to try in this class than to get things right the first time.	4.0	3.8
My City Year explains things in a different way if we don't understand it the first time.	4.2	4.1
My City Year knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class.	3.4	2.9
My City Year emphasizes that it is okay to make mistakes so we can learn from them.	4.3	4.1
My City Year helps me understand what went wrong when I make a mistake.	4.4	4.3
City Year Support	4.0	3.8
This teacher makes sure we know what we're supposed to learn that day.	4.4	4.2
Our teacher makes it clear to students how the work we do for this class connects to bigger learning goals.	4.0	3.9
When we are learning something new, my City Year helps me understand how it fits in with what we've learned before.	4.2	4.0
My City Year helps me see my progress as I get better and learn more.	4.2	3.8
Learning Goals	4.2	4.0
Most students in this class encourage each other to work hard.	3.0	2.8
This teacher is really good at relating to kids.	3.7	3.6
This teacher gives us lots of opportunities to work with each other.	3.7	3.7
This teacher makes sure that students get to know each other.	3.7	3.7
The teacher puts effort into making sure this class is a welcoming place for everyone.	4.3	4.1
Class Community	3.7	3.6

TABLE A5 – STUDENT DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS SURVEY – OVERALL RESULTS

N = 487	Average	A little like my City Year *(Rarely)	Somewhat like my City Year *(Sometimes)	Mostly like my City Year *(Often)	Extremely like my City Year *(Almost always)
My City Year really listens to me.*	3.3	7%	12%	22%	60%
My City Year does things that make me feel like I matter.*	3.2	8%	16%	28%	48%
My City Year shows me they enjoy being with me.*	3.1	9%	18%	28%	46%
If I have a problem, I know my City Year will help me.	3.4	4%	9%	29%	58%
When I work hard, my City Year encourages me to keep going.	3.4	5%	8%	27%	60%
Express Care²	3.3	5%	23%	73%	
My City Year expects me to do my best.	3.5	3%	10%	23%	64%
My City Year challenges me to try things that are difficult for me.	3.0	8%	19%	33%	40%
My City Year holds me responsible for the things I do and say.	3.1	8%	17%	35%	41%
When I make mistakes, my City Year shows me how I can learn from them.	3.3	7%	11%	31%	51%
Challenge Growth²	3.2	3%	25%	72%	
My City Year makes it clear what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable.	3.2	5%	17%	29%	50%
My City Year teaches me how to ask for help when I need it.	3.2	7%	15%	29%	50%
My City Year helps me figure out how to do things that are new or challenging to me.	3.3	5%	11%	31%	53%
If I am treated unfairly, my City Year says or does something to help.	3.1	10%	16%	28%	45%
Provide Support²	3.2	4%	23%	73%	
My City Year treats me with respect.*	3.5	6%	7%	16%	72%
My City Year considers my ideas when making decisions.	3.0	9%	20%	33%	38%
If I have challenges, my City Year works with me to find a solution.	3.3	5%	13%	32%	50%
My City Year gives me chances to be a leader.	3.0	12%	20%	30%	39%
Share Power²	3.2	5%	25%	70%	
My City Year helps me think of different possibilities for my future.	2.9	10%	20%	36%	34%
My City Year helps me discover new things that interest me.	3.0	10%	18%	34%	39%
My City Year introduces me to other adults who offer resources or support that I value.	2.7	23%	18%	27%	33%
Expand Possibilities²	2.9	12%	33%	55%	

TABLE A6 – STUDENT DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS SURVEY – BY SITE/DISTRICT

School	Site A	Site B
N =	212	195
My City Year really listens to me.*	3.3	3.4
My City Year does things that make me feel like I matter.*	3.2	3.1
My City Year shows me they enjoy being with me.*	3.1	3.1
If I have a problem, I know my City Year will help me.	3.4	3.4
When I work hard, my City Year encourages me to keep going.	3.4	3.5
Express Care	3.3	3.3
My City Year expects me to do my best.	3.5	3.4
My City Year challenges me to try things that are difficult for me.	3.2	2.9
My City Year holds me responsible for the things I do and say.	3.3	2.9
When I make mistakes, my City Year shows me how I can learn from them.	3.2	3.3
Challenge Growth	3.3	3.1
My City Year makes it clear what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable.	3.2	3.2
My City Year teaches me how to ask for help when I need it.	3.2	3.2
My City Year helps me figure out how to do things that are new or challenging to me.	3.3	3.3
If I am treated unfairly, my City Year says or does something to help.	3.1	3.1
Provide Support	3.2	3.2
My City Year treats me with respect.*	3.4	3.7
My City Year considers my ideas when making decisions.	3.0	3.0
If I have challenges, my City Year works with me to find a solution.	3.2	3.3
My City Year gives me chances to be a leader.	3.0	2.9
Share Power	3.2	3.2
My City Year helps me think of different possibilities for my future.	3.0	2.9
My City Year helps me discover new things that interest me.	3.1	3.0
My City Year introduces me to other adults who offer resources or support that I value.	2.8	2.7
Expand Possibilities	2.9	2.8

TABLE A7 – STUDENT DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS SURVEY – BY GRADE LEVEL

Grade Level	5	6	7	8
N =	50	73	86	104
My City Year really listens to me.*	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.4
My City Year does things that make me feel like I matter.*	3.5	3.1	3.1	3.2
My City Year shows me they enjoy being with me.*	3.3	3.2	3.0	3.3
If I have a problem, I know my City Year will help me.	3.5	3.4	3.3	3.5
When I work hard, my City Year encourages me to keep going.	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.4
Express Care	3.4	3.3	3.2	3.4
My City Year expects me to do my best.	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.5
My City Year challenges me to try things that are difficult for me.	3.0	3.1	2.9	3.0
My City Year holds me responsible for the things I do and say.	2.9	3.3	2.9	3.1
When I make mistakes, my City Year shows me how I can learn from them.	3.3	3.4	3.3	3.3
Challenge Growth	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.2
My City Year makes it clear what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable.	3.0	3.3	3.2	3.3
My City Year teaches me how to ask for help when I need it.	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2
My City Year helps me figure out how to do things that are new or challenging to me.	3.3	3.5	3.2	3.3
If I am treated unfairly, my City Year says or does something to help.	3.1	3.3	3.0	3.1
Provide Support	3.1	3.3	3.1	3.2
My City Year treats me with respect.*	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.7
My City Year considers my ideas when making decisions.	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.2
If I have challenges, my City Year works with me to find a solution.	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.4
My City Year gives me chances to be a leader.	2.9	3.2	2.8	3.1
Share Power	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.4
My City Year helps me think of different possibilities for my future.	2.9	3.1	2.9	2.9
My City Year helps me discover new things that interest me.	3.0	3.1	2.9	3.0
My City Year introduces me to other adults who offer resources or support that I value.	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.7
Expand Possibilities	2.8	3.0	2.8	2.9

TABLE A8 – STUDENT DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS SURVEY – BY SUBJECT

Subject	ELA	Math
N =	223	160
My City Year really listens to me.*	3.4	3.2
My City Year does things that make me feel like I matter.*	3.2	3.0
My City Year shows me they enjoy being with me.*	3.2	3.0
If I have a problem, I know my City Year will help me.	3.5	3.3
When I work hard, my City Year encourages me to keep going.	3.5	3.4
Express Care	3.4	3.2
My City Year expects me to do my best.	3.5	3.5
My City Year challenges me to try things that are difficult for me.	3.1	2.9
My City Year holds me responsible for the things I do and say.	3.2	2.9
When I make mistakes, my City Year shows me how I can learn from them.	3.3	3.2
Challenge Growth	3.3	3.1
My City Year makes it clear what behaviors are acceptable and not acceptable.	3.3	3.1
My City Year teaches me how to ask for help when I need it.	3.3	3.1
My City Year helps me figure out how to do things that are new or challenging to me.	3.4	3.3
If I am treated unfairly, my City Year says or does something to help.	3.2	2.9
Provide Support	3.3	3.1
My City Year treats me with respect.*	3.6	3.4
My City Year considers my ideas when making decisions.	3.1	2.8
If I have challenges, my City Year works with me to find a solution.	3.3	3.2
My City Year gives me chances to be a leader.	3.1	2.7
Share Power	3.3	3.0
My City Year helps me think of different possibilities for my future.	3.0	2.8
My City Year helps me discover new things that interest me.	3.1	2.9
My City Year introduces me to other adults who offer resources or support that I value.	2.8	2.6
Expand Possibilities	3.0	2.8

TABLE A9 – PRINCIPAL SURVEY
CITY YEAR AMERICORPS MEMBERS HELP
STUDENTS FEEL A SENSE OF BELONGING

	N =	Average
School A	2	3
School B	2	3
School C	1	3
School D	1	4
School E	1	4
Site A	7	3.3
School C	2	4
School D	1	4
School E	2	4
Site B	5	4

(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree; 1-4)

TABLE A10 – PRINCIPAL SURVEY
CITY YEAR AMERICORPS MEMBERS HAVE SUPPORTED THE
ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOL THIS YEAR

	N =	Average
School A	2	3.5
School B	2	3
School C	1	3
School D	1	4
School E	1	4
Site A	7	3.4
School C	2	3.5
School D	1	4
School E	2	4
Site B	5	3.8

(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree; 1-4)

**TABLE A11 – TEACHER SURVEY
CITY YEAR AMERICORPS MEMBERS HELP
STUDENTS FEEL A SENSE OF BELONGING**

	N =	Average
School A	4	3.8
School B	2	3.5
School C	4	3.8
School D	2	4
School E	1	3
Site A	13	3.7
School A	6	3.7
School B	8	3.3
School C	5	3.4
School D	4	3.8
School E	5	4
School F	3	3.3
Site B	31	3.5

(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree; 1-4)

**TABLE A12 – TEACHER SURVEY
CITY YEAR AMERICORPS MEMBERS HAVE SUPPORTED THE
ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOL THIS YEAR**

	N =	Average
School A	4	3.5
School B	2	3
School C	4	4
School D	2	4
School E	1	3
Site A	13	3.6
School A	6	3.5
School B	8	3.4
School C	5	3.4
School D	4	3.5
School E	5	4
School F	3	3.7
Site B	31	3.5

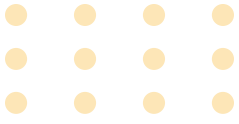
(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree; 1-4)

**TABLE A13 – AMERICORPS MEMBER SURVEY
I HAVE ESTABLISHED A STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE
RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PARTNER TEACHER**

	N =	Average
School A	5	3.2
School B	4	4.3
School C	5	4.2
School D	4	4.8
School E	9	4
School F	4	4.5
Site A	31	4.1
School A	7	3.9
School B	9	3.8
School C	7	3.9
School D	8	4.3
School E	7	4.7
School F	15	3.9
Site B	53	4.0

(1-5)

- ^[1] Percentages in 5 cells in the summary rows are the % of students with average scores within range of 1-1.5; 1.5+ to 2.5; 2.5+ to 3.5; 3.5+ to 4.5; and above 4.5.
- ^[2] Percentages in 3 cells in the summary rows are the % of students with average scores within range of 1-2, 2+ -3, and 3+ to 4 (Weak, Moderate, and Strong)
- ^[3] Percentages in 3 cells in the summary rows are the % of students with average scores within range of 1-2, 2+ -3, and 3+ to 4 (Weak, Moderate, and Strong)





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