



CITY YEAR WHITE PAPER

Building networks of relational trust:

How consistent and caring
relationships support students
and adults in schools

By Jade Eckels, City Year Director of Education
Research and Strategy

February 2023



- 1 Overview
- 2 Introduction
- 5 The Impact of Trust and Relationships
- 7 The Impact of Learning Environments
- 9 The Key Drivers for Effective Student Success Coaching
- 10 Conclusion & Resources

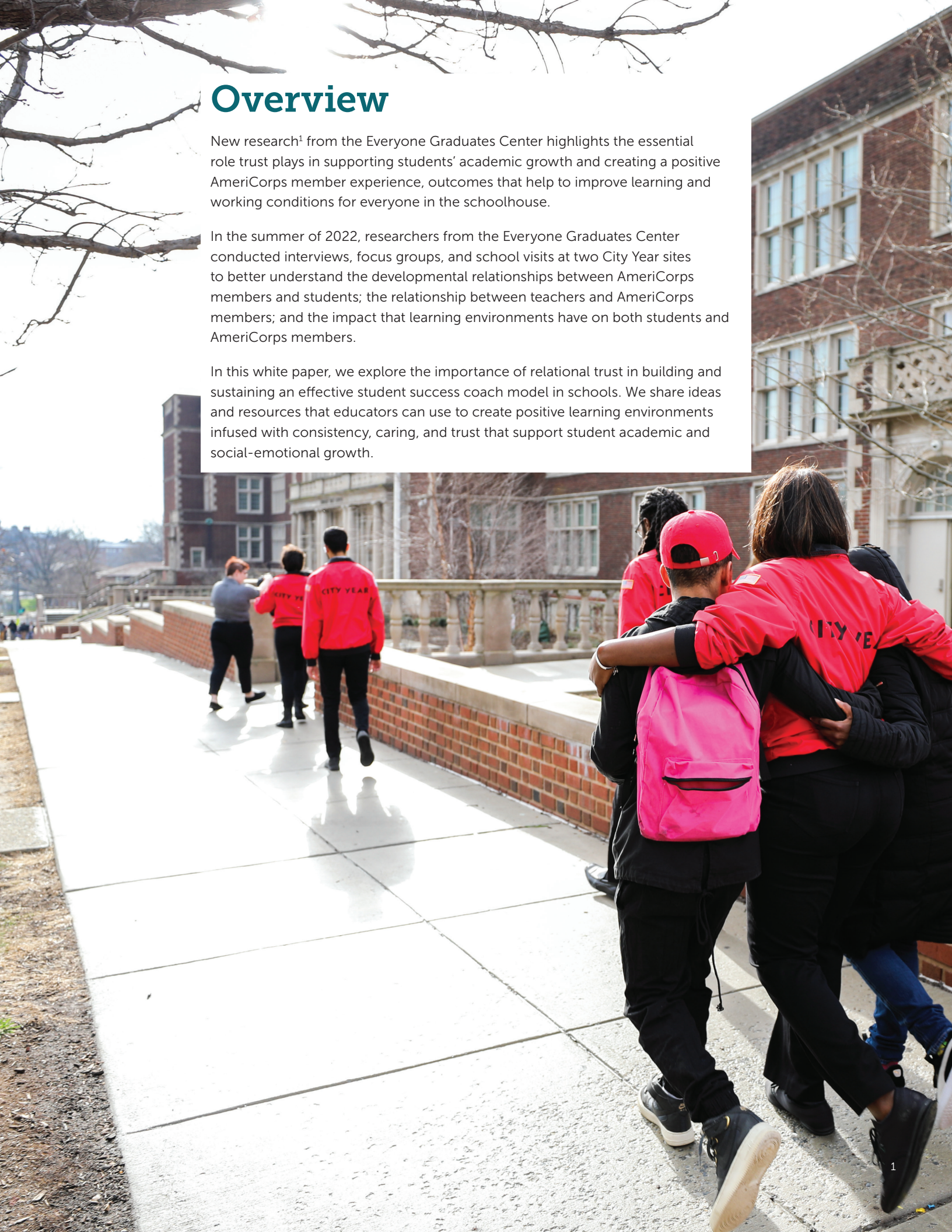
City Year wants to thank the AmeriCorps members, staff, partner schools, and Everyone Graduates Center team who brought this work to life and who shared their experiences and insights with us.

Overview

New research¹ from the Everyone Graduates Center highlights the essential role trust plays in supporting students' academic growth and creating a positive AmeriCorps member experience, outcomes that help to improve learning and working conditions for everyone in the schoolhouse.

In the summer of 2022, researchers from the Everyone Graduates Center conducted interviews, focus groups, and school visits at two City Year sites to better understand the developmental relationships between AmeriCorps members and students; the relationship between teachers and AmeriCorps members; and the impact that learning environments have on both students and AmeriCorps members.

In this white paper, we explore the importance of relational trust in building and sustaining an effective student success coach model in schools. We share ideas and resources that educators can use to create positive learning environments infused with consistency, caring, and trust that support student academic and social-emotional growth.



Introduction

Relationships and systems of support have long been understood to play major roles in shaping student experiences and learning environments, and this is arguably even more true as we navigate schooling post-pandemic. For the relationships between students, teachers, other school-based adults such as student success coaches, and the school system itself to be positive and effective, these human connections must be undergirded by relational trust.


Several years of third-party research on City Year's holistic model indicates that bringing additional capacity into systemically under-resourced schools, in this case AmeriCorps members serving as student success coaches, strengthens interpersonal relationships, boosting a sense of trust and belonging. Teaching and learning can then happen in optimal ways and enhance positive student outcomes.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RELATIONAL TRUST?

Relational trust is fostered in schools when all members of the school community respect one another's opinions and ideas, genuinely listen to one another, and show personal regard for one another's well-being, all of which promote a sense of security and belonging. Relational trust recognizes each person's responsibilities and areas of skill while also underscoring the interconnected nature of teaching and learning. Everyone is held to the same standards of competence in their role and integrity in the way they do their work. Finally, strong and positive school leadership plays a crucial role in creating the conditions necessary for relational trust to take root and flourish.²

"...Talking to [students] about their personal life, really putting in an effort to get to know them in the first couple of weeks of school ... and then ... using that to develop a foundation of trust... The student then believes that you have the best intentions in helping them in the classroom, and they know that 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."

FROM AN AMERICORPS MEMBER INTERVIEW, EDITED FOR CLARITY

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a young boy with glasses and a dark hoodie is sitting at a desk, writing in a notebook. To his left, another student's hand is raised. In the background, a teacher is standing and looking towards the students. The classroom has posters on the wall and fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

When trust is present at all relational levels—teachers with students, teachers with other teachers and AmeriCorps members, teachers and AmeriCorps members with parents, and all groups with the school principal and administration—learning environments are equitable, nurturing, and engaging.

Relational trust propels learning

Relational trust creates the overall conditions (both structural and psychosocial) necessary for principals, administrators, teachers, and AmeriCorps members who serve as student success coaches, to effectively support student growth.³

Therefore, relational trust has a profound indirect impact on student learning.

At the core of relational trust is a recognition of the interconnected nature of teaching and learning that happens in schools, exemplifying one of City Year's key values—the Zulu proverb Ubuntu. Ubuntu means "I am a person through other people; my humanity is tied to yours."

Student success coaches

This concept of Ubuntu shows up in how City Year AmeriCorps members understand their role as student success coaches. When asked, corps members define their position as a “tutor,” “mentor,” and a “constant” support for students. In addition to supporting students, corps members also perceive their role as “flexible” and “in service” to teachers and the overall school community. One AmeriCorps member described their commitment to “help out students as much as I can to make sure the teacher can be successful.”

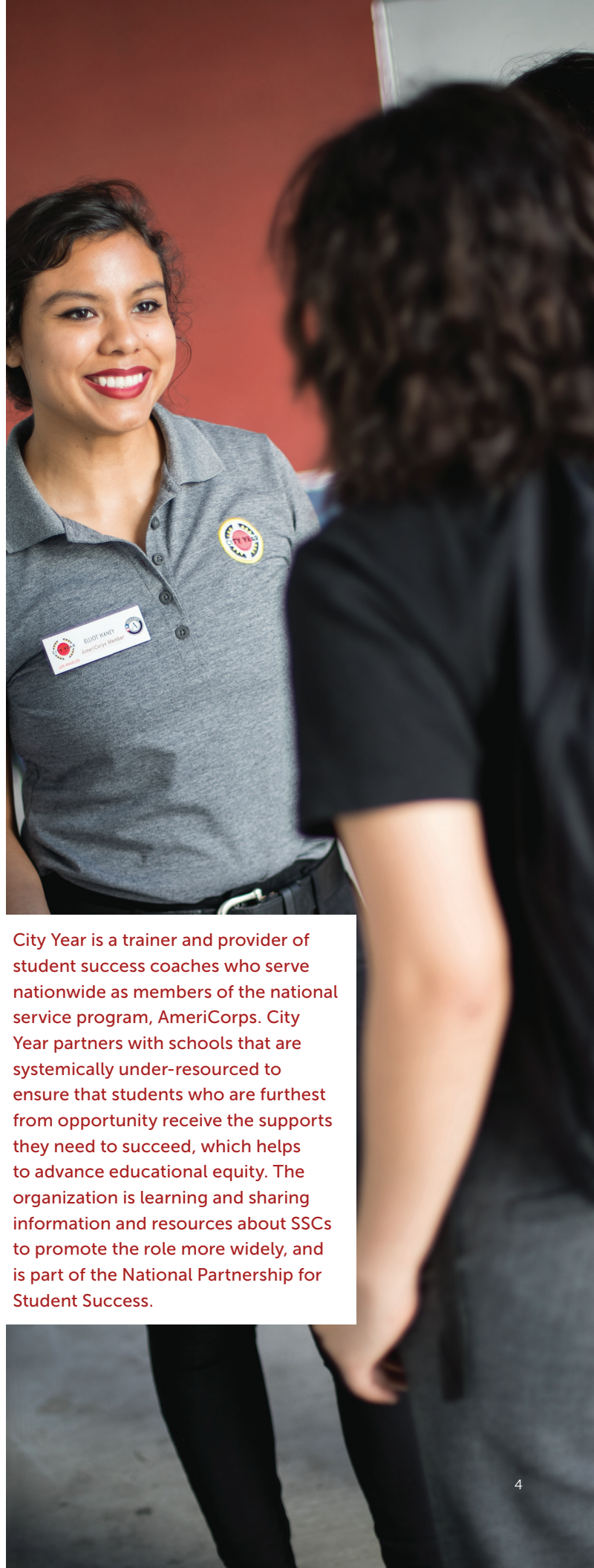
ANOTHER AMERICORPS MEMBER EXPLAINED:

“I think the words we use at City Year, which are very accurate, are “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.” Corps members’ service and support fosters trust and relationship-building.

WHAT IS A STUDENT SUCCESS COACH?

Student success coaches (SSCs) serve in public schools, building positive developmental relationships with students, which Search Institute says ultimately “help young people become their best selves.” SSCs offer students research-based, holistic support designed to advance academic and social-emotional learning. By providing critical additional capacity to educators and school communities, SSCs allow for more personalized learning and deeper engagement—and contribute to more welcoming, joyful and equitable learning environments for all members of the school community. SSCs partner with classroom teachers to provide one-on-one tutoring, small group instruction, social-emotional skill building, mentoring, after-school enrichment programs, and more, helping students build on their strengths and hone skills they need to thrive in school, college, and career.

▶ [Learn more about Student Success Coaches in this 2-minute video](#)



City Year is a trainer and provider of student success coaches who serve nationwide as members of the national service program, AmeriCorps. City Year partners with schools that are systemically under-resourced to ensure that students who are furthest from opportunity receive the supports they need to succeed, which helps to advance educational equity. The organization is learning and sharing information and resources about SSCs to promote the role more widely, and is part of the National Partnership for Student Success.

The Impact of Trust & Relationships

As student success coaches, AmeriCorps members recognize that developing caring and consistent relationships with students and building trust over time are foundational steps that influence students' academic and social-emotional growth. As near-peer mentors, tutors, and role models who are mature enough to offer guidance yet young enough to relate to students' perspectives, SSCs are uniquely positioned in schools to develop positive relationships with the students they serve.

ONE AMERICORPS MEMBER EXPLAINED:

“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.”

Another AmeriCorps member stated, “trust and academic success go hand in hand.” Student success coaches employ various strategies and tools to intentionally build trust through developmental relationships with students, including resources that help them to build, sustain and close out positive relationships.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIP FRAMEWORK ARE:

EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you

CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better

PROVIDE SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals

SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say

EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me to people/ places that broaden my world

Student success coaches mentor and act as role models for students while still establishing and maintaining clear boundaries. Trust-building often happens during in-the-moment playful interactions that student success coaches have with students or when a corps member is helping a student navigate conflict. Both scenarios allow SSCs and students to be vulnerable, which corps members described as essential to building trust. Students feel comfortable being their authentic selves when their AmeriCorps members express themselves authentically and honestly.



A strong sense of belonging and trusting relationships with adults in schools not only benefits students but student success coaches. In one classroom where an AmeriCorps member felt highly effective, the teacher gave a lot of trust and agency to the corps member. This corps member described having autonomy to create a list of students they identified as needing additional social-emotional support. These students received planned academic and social-emotional interventions and spent more time with the corps member. When there is trust between a student success coach and their partner teacher, students reap the benefits.

TRUST IS INTENTIONALLY CULTIVATED IN OTHER WAYS, AS WELL:

Family outreach

Student success coaches are often asked to reach out to parents and family members, making calls home to check in on a student who may be ill or frequently absent. They also plan fun school-wide events that celebrate meaningful moments for the school community and run afterschool programs. These points of contact can strengthen the connection between families and the schoolhouse and facilitate a growing sense of trust.

Team structure

City Year AmeriCorps members serve in teams. The relationships they forge with their teammates are among the most important and sustaining during their service experience—and even beyond, as many corps members develop lifelong friendships with their teammates.

Multi-year partnerships with schools and districts

Though AmeriCorps members typically serve for only one or two years, a sense of continuity, familiarity, and trust with schools is established by City Year site staff, including Impact Managers, who can serve in this role for multiple years. In addition to supporting student success coaches in schools, Impact Managers maintain relationships with the school principal, administrators, and teachers over time, deepening these connections and giving each City Year site a better understanding of each school's improvement goals and how student success coaches can help achieve the school's vision. This intentional design strengthens school and district partnerships in the 29 U.S. cities where City Year operates and allows for a localized approach to how AmeriCorps members support students.



The Impact of Learning Environments

A leading expert on trust in schools, Barbara Schneider, argues that in a school system, all the stakeholders mutually depend on one another. Even though school systems are hierarchical, and some community members have more power than others, everyone is nonetheless dependent on one another to reach their collective goal—supporting student growth.

“Distinct role relationships characterize the social exchanges of schooling: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and all groups with the school principal. Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role’s obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties. For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship in terms of the understandings held about these personal obligations and expectations of others.”⁴

BARBARA SCHNEIDER, THE JOHN A. HANNAH UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR IN THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

As with all relationships, sometimes conflict, miscommunication or misunderstandings occur. Some student success coaches report they’ve encountered disconnects between the philosophies of partner teachers, Impact Managers, City Year site or HQ leadership, and AmeriCorps members’ understanding of their own responsibilities and the expectations for service.

For example, when teachers prioritize academic support, corps members are not always able to consistently provide planned and intentional social-emotional skill development activities during class time. In these cases, student success coaches have leaned on in-the-moment supports to meet students’ social-emotional needs. In the moment support looks different for every day and for every student. One student success coach described kneeling down by a student who had his head down on his desk after being laughed at by classmates for answering a question incorrectly. The corps member praised him for his effort and encouraged him to keep trying. He eventually raised his head and hand and answered a question correctly.

Context and culture matter

All learning is influenced by context and relationships, among other factors. Research on City Year's model shows that student success coaches' experiences are similarly shaped by the environmental contexts of the classroom, school, and community where they serve, as well as by the organizational culture of City Year. The physical environment, social climate, and academic norms at each school shape what AmeriCorps members' student supports look like, as do their relationships with their teammates, partner teacher and Impact Manager. The mid-year and end-of-year feedback from City Year's partner teachers and principals has helped City Year to continuously refine and improve the ways we support our AmeriCorps members, students and school partners.

An AmeriCorps member who felt highly supported in the classroom largely credited their effectiveness to the inclusive culture created by their partner teacher, who fostered a learning environment that enabled the student success coach to successfully implement a variety of academic and social-emotional interventions. Despite the high teacher turnover and institutional challenges occurring at this school, the corps member was able to be effective, which speaks to the potential of just one supportive partner teacher to elevate the positive impact of a corps member in the wake of challenges in the overall school environment.

AmeriCorps members noted that administrators also play a role in fostering learning environments and a school culture that encourage students' sense of belonging, which in turn increases students' trust in educators and other caring adults in schools, including student success coaches.

ONE AMERICORPS MEMBER SHARED:

“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.”



Key Drivers for Effective Student Success Coaching

The latest research from the Everyone Graduates Center highlights the significance of authentic student success coach-student relationships as well as intentional school integration and holistic supports, which are two of the six key drivers for effective student success coaching.

The six drivers listed below represent the essential components needed to set student success coaches up for success:



Authentic coach/student relationship



Data-informed programming



Diverse group of skilled coaches



Intentional school integration and holistic support



Ongoing learning and development



Supportive program structure

As near-peers, AmeriCorps members serving as student success coaches are powerfully positioned to develop authentic relationships with students, connections that benefit both students and corps members. They can also help elevate student voice to teachers and administrators. For this relationship-building to happen, student success coaches must be fully and intentionally integrated into the school community. When there is intentional school integration, the work of student success coaches is aligned with school culture and goals and can help to advance educational equity.

“Student success coaches (SSCs) represent an intentional counter to inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits, through the intentional promotion of thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice. This intentionality is reflected by where SSCs serve, the diversity of SSC teams, and their asset-based approach to the work.”⁵

Close teacher collaboration is a critical part of intentional school integration. Teachers and student success coaches must invest time in building relationships with one another starting at the beginning of the school year. It is also important that teachers continue to foster a sense of belonging for student success coaches in the classroom throughout the year and that student success coaches engage in regular dialogue with partner teachers to plan and reflect on their work. As student success coaches follow the lead of their partner teacher, they will gain trust over time in addition to more responsibility and autonomy in the classroom, which in turn can improve student outcomes.

Conclusion

This new research exploring relational trust in schools highlights the critical role that AmeriCorps members serving as student success coaches play in building relationships that foster trust and belonging while they support students' academic and social-emotional learning. The research also shows how the classroom, school, and community contexts that corps members operate in shape their service experience and the holistic supports they provide to students.

The 2023 study, [The Dynamics of City Year Interactions with Students](#), makes clear that trust and relationship-building between AmeriCorps members and students and between corps members and teachers are foundational to student success coaches' work and impact. When student success coaches are fully integrated into the school community, enjoy close collaboration with their partner teachers, and feel supported by their teammates and impact managers, SSCs can help to strengthen relational trust in schools, a transformational element in any healthy learning environment and essential for optimal learning, teaching, and development to happen.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on learning environments. When combined with [earlier research from the Everyone Graduates Center](#) that found the more time a student spends with an AmeriCorps member, the better the student's academic and social-emotional outcomes and attendance rate, these new insights on the importance of relational trust in schools further buttress the argument for expanding student success coaching into more schools at a critical moment when students are experiencing unprecedented levels of loss, mental health issues and feelings of disconnection. To help educators navigate these issues, we created a [practitioner and policymaker guide](#) to accompany the research from the Everyone Graduates Center.

We invite you to explore our [other publications](#) and [additional tools](#) from peer organizations that have influenced and guided our work, including [Search Institute's Developmental Relationship Framework](#), research from the [SoLD Alliance](#), and the [Clover Model](#) from Partnerships in Education and Resilience, which are part of AmeriCorps members' training and development.

As we continue to deepen our understanding around trust and relationships within the context of this work, we are eager to learn from others along the way and welcome your questions, feedback, and insights. In addition to reading and sharing the report and this white paper, please feel free to reach out to us at ERSteam@cityyear.org as we are grateful for the collaboration and learning.

Endnotes

- 1 Herelle, T., Yoshisato, M. The dynamics of City Year interactions with students and how they contribute to social-emotional learning and academic outcomes. (2023). Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved from: https://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/EGC_Dynamics_CityYearInteractions_Report_FINAL_01-11-2023.pdf
- 2 Leis, M., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Paxton, C. L. C., & Sandilos, L. E. (2017). "Leading Together: Strengthening Relational Trust in the Adult School Community." *Journal of School Leadership*. 27(6), 831–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461702700603>
- 3 Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020) Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development1, *Applied Developmental Science*, 24:1, 6-36, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650
- 4 Schneider, Barbara. (2003). "Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform." *Creating Caring Schools*, vol. 60, no. 6. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/trust-in-schools-a-core-resource-for-school-reform>.
- 5 Student Success Coach: Target Program Profile. (2022). *Intentional Futures*. <https://www.cityyear.org/student-success-coach-target-program-profile/>

Author: City Year Director of Education and Research, Strategy Jade Eckels
Reviewer: City Year Chief Transformation Officer, Stephanie Wu
Editor: City Year Sr. Communications Director, Jennifer Jordan
Design: City Year Art Director, Laurie Heller