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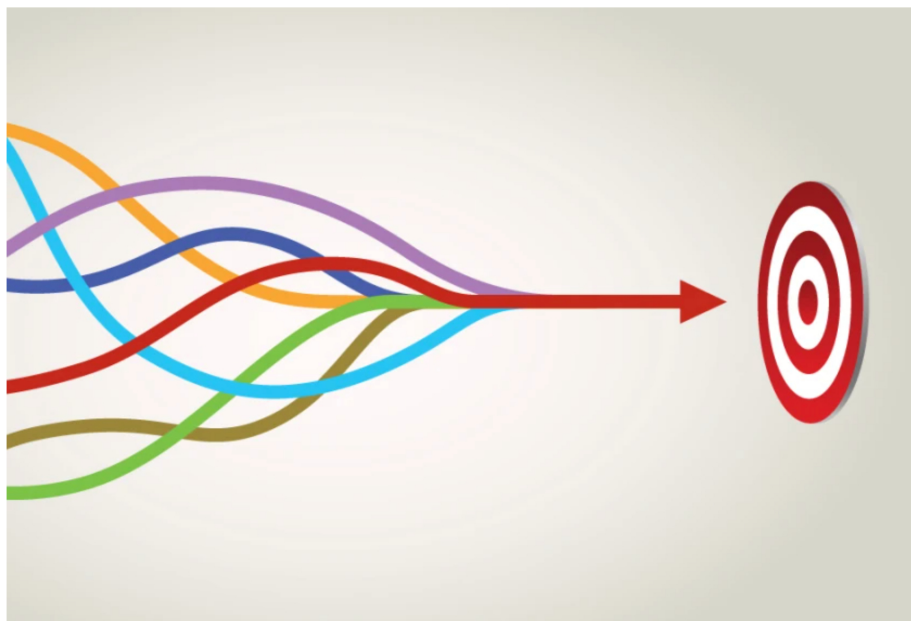
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City Year CEO on Supporting Students Through the Pandemic



By Rick Hess — March 31, 2021 ⌚ 6 min read

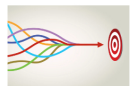


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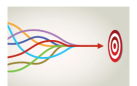
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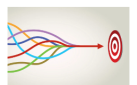
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Rick Hess is a resident scholar and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He writes the Education Week opinion blog "Rick Hess Straight Up."



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City Year partners with public schools in 29 cities across the U.S., where its AmeriCorps members provide full-time support to students and teachers. Especially in light of the pandemic, I was interested in learning how City Year has adapted its approach to meet student needs. Recently, I spoke with CEO Jim Balfanz, who served as a City Year corps member in Boston 25 years ago, about the program and its response to COVID-19.

—Rick

Rick: So, what is City Year, and how did the program get started?

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Jim: City Year, which was founded in 1988, partners with 320 systemically under-resourced public schools in 29 communities across the U.S. to place 3,000 AmeriCorps members, who serve as “student-success coaches.” More than 90 percent of the students we serve are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and the majority are students of color. Our AmeriCorps members provide students with additional resources and relationships that support their learning and success, while strengthening their own professional and leadership skills through a year or two of service. Additionally, City Year works with partner schools and districts on opportunities to redesign what schools look like so students can experience school and learning in a more equitable way.

Rick: What's a typical day at school serving as a student-success coach look like?

Jim: As student-success coaches, AmeriCorps members form developmental relationships with students, partner teachers, and teammates to provide integrated academic, social, and emotional support to students. AmeriCorps members tutor students one-on-one or in small groups and lead activities during class so partner teachers can differentiate instruction. They plan schoolwide events to make school a more engaging and welcoming place to be.

Rick: How has the pandemic affected the work your members do?

Jim: The fundamentals of our work—building relationships with students, engaging them in learning, offering tutoring and skill-building support—have remained the same. They just look different, as our dedicated AmeriCorps members find creative ways to connect with students, whether they are serving virtually or in person. They're supporting teachers in virtual classrooms, monitoring chats, and reaching out to ensure students are showing up and signing on. They're on the lookout for students who have technical issues or problems staying online and they follow up with students to catch them up on discussions they may have missed or answer their questions. They're creating and sharing videos with short lessons and activities: One AmeriCorps member shared a love of anime with her students and created an original series full of book recommendations for her students. Additionally, in recognition that many students and adults are experiencing personal losses and toxic stress, AmeriCorps members are intentionally checking in with both students and adults to see how they are doing; for example, one AmeriCorps member helped a student through a loss of a loved one by suggesting a letter-writing exercise. AmeriCorps members have also made a point of acknowledging the stress on parents and caregivers through regular phone calls to families.

Rick: Who joins City Year, and what motivates them to do so?



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Jim: City Year AmeriCorps members are young adults, ages 18 to 25, who come from all walks of life—two-thirds are people of color; half qualify for Pell grants in college; and a third are first-generation college students. What unites them is a desire to make a difference. They receive coaching and training before and throughout the school year and are supported by City Year staff members who have strong relationships with school leadership. Nine out of 10 alumni surveyed say that City Year helped them to effectively work and develop relationships with people from different backgrounds and that their City Year experience had a significantly positive impact on their lives. Many of our alums become inspired by their corps experience to go into teaching and education, including in the districts where they served. A majority also say that City Year has increased their civic engagement and commitment to their communities. I can personally attest to this as an alum of the program—City Year truly changed my life, and I learned more from my first few months in service than I had anywhere else.

Rick: How is City Year funded—does it cost anything for schools?

Jim: About half of [our budget](#) comes from corporate donors and philanthropic foundations; a quarter comes from the federal AmeriCorps program; and a quarter from our partner schools and districts. So, schools make a leveraged contribution to City Year. We’ve found that the holistic nature of our work leads to a high return on investment for our school partners. A [2017 analysis by Deloitte](#)  showed that for the schools we partner with, City Year is 78 percent more cost-effective than contracting with individual providers to deliver the same set of services.

Rick: OK, so how well does all this work?

Jim: Studies show that schools that partner with City Year are up to [two to three times more likely to improve](#)  in English and math assessments. The more time students spend with AmeriCorps members, the more they [improve on social, emotional, and academic skills](#) , with students who are furthest behind benefiting the most. And, there’s evidence that our work has an impact on [reducing the number of students who are off-track](#)  to high school graduation. Our partners also find our work valuable: According to recent surveys, 95 percent of partner principals agree that City Year has supported their school’s implementation of virtual, hybrid, and/or in-person learning, and 94 percent of partner teachers say our service is “high-quality.”

Rick: What are some lessons you’ve learned over time about how to do this work better?

Jim: We seek to be nationally aligned as an organization while being locally relevant. We need to be responsive to the different contexts in the 29 cities we serve in, with an awareness that we are doing this work *with* our partners and not *to* them. Our long-term partnerships with schools help to build this trust and cooperation. Over time, we’ve also recognized that our national network positions the organization to identify insights and innovations that contribute to equitable access to high-quality education for all students. This led us to evolve City Year’s work to include partnering with schools on broader redesign challenges to better support students. More recently, we’re thinking about how we can affect systems-level changes in policy and practice: for example, consolidating our work in research and thought leadership to engage with policymakers, practitioners, and funders in critical conversations about the future of U.S. education.



Rick: Can you give me an example of how you are trying to bring about systems-level change?

Jim: This fall, we launched an “Action Community,” supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which brings together educators from across the country to address the social and emotional challenges facing their students as a result of the pandemic. We started by developing a package of practices on supporting student resilience, engagement, and belonging with the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University that could be used across different school contexts. Teachers and school leaders reviewed these practices and decided which ones they could implement at their schools. We are bringing these educators back together regularly to share what they’re learning with each other—which is helping us refine the best practices in the package. This work has also helped us become more responsive to our teachers and school leaders, as we’ve just finished another resource package focused on adult care and adult capacity for supporting students’ social and emotional development. This is just one example of the work we’re doing in collaboration with our partners to advance educational equity. We can only succeed if this work is done together, anchored in the voices and the agency of our young people.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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The opinions expressed in Rick Hess Straight Up are strictly those of the author(s) and do not reflect the opinions or endorsement of Editorial Projects in Education, or any of its publications.

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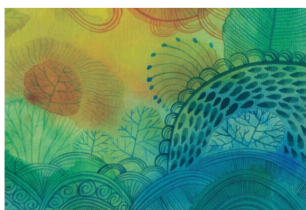
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