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Ready to Extend A Caring Hand (REACH) Corps

2011-2012

Evaluation Report

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REACH AMERICORPS

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INTRODUCTION

Background

One of the major challenges to educators in the United States is to address the country's high school dropout crisis. As the America's Promise Alliance reports, "Nationwide, nearly one in three U.S. high school students fails to graduate. In total, approximately 1.3 million students drop out each year – averaging 7,200 every school day." In 2011, the JCPS Average Freshman Graduation Rate was 67.8%, which was well below the Kentucky rate of 77.8%.

Chronic absenteeism/truancy often adversely impacts the progress of many students in school. Students who do not attend school are in danger of failure because they are unable to keep up with class work which can lead to a downward spiral of disengagement from school and eventually dropping out. Truant students tend to fall behind academically and socially. They lose their place in terms of the subject matter being covered in the classroom and therefore do poorly on performance activities and testing. They start receiving failing grades and slowly develop a hopeless view of their ability to achieve in school. They often disengage academically and socially from the school environment. Many become disruptive which leads to conflicts between themselves and other students and staff. A cycle of absenteeism/truancy/interpersonal conflicts/school related disciplinary actions ensues, further exasperating an already difficult and complex set of circumstances.

JCPS, the largest school system in Kentucky, serves metropolitan Louisville with 152 schools for over 100,000 children enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12. Of the K-12 students, 64% receiving free or reduced lunch. Approximately 51% are white, 49% minority, and 3.6% have a non-English language background. 10.2% of JCPS students were homeless in 2011. Truancy is a major community concern because of its affect on academic performance. Truant students are defined as those who have experienced 6 or more unexcused absences. The year

before REACH began in JCPS (2008-09 school year), 9,143 JCPS students or 9.4% of the district's total enrollment fell into this category.

Truant students often lack the care and support of positive adult role models and are at high risk of educational failure. In Jefferson County, many of these children and their families live in neighborhoods where dropouts, youth gangs, crime, and drug and alcohol use is common. Barriers to these children's success include few adult role models, a lack of parental involvement in schools, generational poverty, and dysfunctional family situations. Without intervention, these children are at high risk of eventually dropping out of school and exhibiting other negative youth behaviors. Family Resource and Youth Service Centers (FRYSC) were established by the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990 to provide school-based assistance centers for children and their families. The centers' primary goal is to address the multiple barriers to student learning. Understanding that poverty can be a major barrier to student success, Family Resource Centers at the elementary school level and Youth Service Centers at the middle and high school level are placed in schools where a minimum of 20% of students qualified for free lunch. FRYSCs are in 122 of the district's 152 schools and all AmeriCorps school sites have a FRYSC.

The FRYSC program mission is to enhance students' abilities to succeed in school by developing and sustaining partnerships that promote early learning and successful transition into school, academic achievement and well-being, and graduation and transition into adult life. All centers have plans and activities to provide academic support to students needing assistance and enhance students' abilities to succeed in school by establishing linkages to the community, outside agencies, and faith-based organizations to provide positive youth development services. But limited funding has caused many FRYSCs to cut back in the services they are able to provide the growing numbers of students who are living in poverty and need additional help in order to be successful in school. These centers need additional help to address the specific needs of struggling students and their families.

One place that many Jefferson County Residents individuals turn to for assistance are Louisville's Neighborhood Places (NP), an innovative collaboration between the school district and local and state service agencies to provide regional one-stop locations for access to health,

education, employment, and human services. More than 500 staff from Louisville Metro Government, Kentuckiana Works (Workforce Development), Louisville Metro Department of Health and Wellness, Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Jefferson County Public Schools, and Seven Counties Mental Health Services work together at eight Neighborhood Places and three satellite sites. Every day, approximately 1,000 families seek services at Neighborhood Places. Last year, Neighborhood Places saw more citizens than ever before – coordinating services for more than 255,000 families. But during the current economic downturn, where more and more residents are seeking assistance, Neighborhood Place staffs are being stretched thin and could use additional support.

Current Initiative

The JCPS Ready to Extend A Caring Hand (REACH) Corps program plan was aligned with the Corporation for National and Community Service’s mission to expand the ability of communities to provide services to meet local community needs by recruiting 17 full-time members who served both in schools and in the community. The project addressed a priority issue area under the Serve America Act. Members addressed “Education: Helping children and youth achieve success in school and prevent them from dropping out of school before high school graduation” by providing mentoring and interventions for targeted students who have exhibited a pattern of truancy at a young age at eight elementary and nine middle school sites. Members also addressed the forces outside of school that contribute to dropping out through service at Neighborhood Places where they helped support individuals, families and children in the Louisville community who needed additional support and services.

REACH placed members in 17 school sites four days per week to mentor and support elementary and middle school students showing early signs of chronic truancy making them at-risk for academic failure and eventually dropping out of school. The project placed full-time members in the FRYSC of eight elementary and nine middle schools to assist at-risk students and their families. The initiative helped identify and address the needs of students who were having high numbers of unexcused absences from school and were at risk of eventually dropping

out of school. Members collaborated with school and district personnel to identify a minimum of 20 students per site who had 7 to 15 unexcused absences in the previous year.

The project provided early intervention and support to these identified students through a caring adult who provided assistance and encouragement. Each REACH Corps Member provided mentoring, encouragement, and support in a non-threatening environment to these 20 students through daily interactions four days a week. Members also contacted the student's home every time they were absent from school.

Members served as a liaison to students' parents by identifying family needs and connecting students and their families with available school and community resources. These resources included referrals to extended learning and job training opportunities, social services, health services, and emergency assistance.

Below is the typical school day for an AmeriCorps REACH member:

- Members begin each day in a centralized location greeting their children upon their arrival to school.
- The first 30 minutes of the school day, Members rotate among the classrooms of their assigned students and participate in Classroom Morning Meetings, the cornerstone of the district's Care for Kids Character Education social development program
- After the Morning Meeting, Members check daily attendance and mark each child on their list who is absent.
- Members contact each child's family via phone call or letter and constantly update changes of phone numbers and/or addresses.
- During lunch, Members are in the cafeteria checking in with each of their students.
- The remainder of the day is used to meet with school attendance committees, assist FRYSC Coordinator, and assisting families who come into the FRYSC Center and gathering data for reports and updates on the REACH Corps.
- After the school day ends, Members continue their outreach through a variety of services including joining their assigned students in after-school activities or extended learning

opportunities, meeting with teachers concerning student progress, and attending faculty meetings.

- Members have a daily recording tool to track services provided to students that they complete each afternoon.

In addition, REACH Corps Members served one day a week at one of eight Jefferson County Neighborhood Places (NP). The AmeriCorps Members were assigned to a NP location which served the families from their assigned school where they are a liaison between the school and Neighborhood Place. The AmeriCorps Member assisted in a variety of services including NP Baby-Stores, Food Pantries, and Clothes Closets. Members also greeted and assisted families as they came into the lobby of NP and helped them get connected with the right service provider.

At the end of the school year in May, REACH Corps Members continued to provide service in their assigned school but also served in other capacities in the Louisville community including assisting programs located in NPs. They also assisted the 15th district PTA Clothing Assistance Program (CAP) which hosts a district-wide Back to School Clothing Blitz each summer.

EVALUATION DESIGN

The REACH Corps project plan addressed the Corporation for National and Community Service's national service priority of Education. Members addressed the unmet needs of children and youth, helped them achieve success in school, and prevented them from dropping out before high school graduation. The project's outputs and outcomes were aligned with the following National Standardized Performance measures for the Education Priority Area: *#3, Number of disadvantaged youth/mentor matches that are commenced by the AmeriCorps program, #4 Number of disadvantaged youth/mentor matches that are sustained for at least the required time period, and #6, Number of youth who have improved their school attendance over the course of the AmeriCorps program's involvement with the student.*

Seventeen AmeriCorps Members split between eight high needs elementary and nine middle schools mentored at least 20 students with between 7-15 absences from the prior year. Members actively engaged each student on a daily basis, monitored attendance, and contacted student's homes and provided outreach services when a student was absent. Members were in their schools 4 days per week and it is estimated that they engaged in activities related to improving the attendance of their assigned students 32 hours per week.

In addition to the required performance measures, AmeriCorps Members served in a variety of roles in community-based NPs one day each week for 8 hours. For instance, Members actively addressed community needs by providing assistance in the clothing assistance program. Members engaged in volunteer recruitment for their assigned school. They were expected to recruit 10 volunteers each (total = 170) to serve the school.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the impact of AmeriCorps Member mentoring focuses on improvements in student attendance data. It was expected that students who were identified for the mentoring program would improve their attendance when compared to their attendance for the prior year.

Table 1

AmeriCorps REACH Year 3 Program Performance Measures and Results

PERFORMANCE MEASURE	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION	OUTCOME
<i>Number of disadvantaged youth/mentor matches that are commenced by the AmeriCorps program</i>	<p>ELEMENTARY: Eight AmeriCorps Members are placed at eight elementary school sites and assigned a minimum of 20 students each. Members were initially matched with a total of 184 students to be mentored.</p> <p>MIDDLE: Nine AmeriCorps Members are placed at nine middle school sites and assigned a minimum of 20 students each. Members were initially matched with students at each school with a total of 203 students to be mentored.</p>	<p>ELEMENTARY GOAL: 184 students were assigned a mentor at the eight schools. 162 students finished the year. GOAL MET.</p> <p>MIDDLE GOAL: 203 students were assigned a mentor at the nine schools. 180 students finished the year. GOAL MET.</p>
<i>Number of disadvantaged youth/mentor matches that are sustained for at least the required time period</i>	<p>ELEMENTARY: 120 of the 160 elementary students matched with AmeriCorps Members will remain matched throughout the school year. Also, student responses on the JCPS Comprehensive survey will show improved satisfaction.</p> <p>MIDDLE: 135 of the 180 middle school students matched with AmeriCorps Members will remain matched throughout the school year. Also, student responses on the JCPS Comprehensive survey will show improved satisfaction.</p>	<p>ELEMENTARY GOAL: 162 of 184 elementary students maintained their match for the year. The Comprehensive Survey is a district survey given each year. A comparison of 2011 and 2012 scores showed that only 45 REACH elementary students had data for both years. Thirteen of these students showed small improvements in school satisfaction. GOAL MET.</p> <p>MIDDLE GOAL: 180 of 203 middle school students maintained their match for the year. A comparison of 2010 and 2011 data showed that 47 of 165 students showed an improvement in school satisfaction by 1 point on a 4 point scale. GOAL MET.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

AmeriCorps REACH Year 3 Program Performance Measures and Results

<p><i>Number of youth who have improved their school attendance over the course of the AmeriCorps program's involvement with the student.</i></p>	<p>ELEMENTARY: A minimum of 96 elementary school students who are matched and mentored by AmeriCorps Members will show improved school attendance when compared to the student's previous year's attendance.</p> <p>MIDDLE: A minimum of 85 middle school students who are matched and mentored by AmeriCorps Members will show improved school attendance when compared to the student's previous year's attendance.</p>	<p>ELEMENTARY GOAL: 107 elementary students improved year-to-date attendance. These students missed on average 4.54 fewer days than the year before. An analysis of the entire group using a paired comparisons t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the pre-test absences (M=7.2, SD = 2.3) and post-test absences (M=5.9, SD=4.0), $t(162) = 3.91, p \leq .0001$ (two-tailed). GOAL MET.</p> <p>MIDDLE GOAL: 98 middle school students improved year-to-date attendance. These students missed on average 3.94 fewer days than the year before. An analysis of the entire group using a paired comparisons t-test failed to show a statistically significant difference between the pre-test absences (M= 7.2, SD =2.3) and post-test absences (M=7.2, SD=4.4). GOAL MET.</p>
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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation report addresses the outcomes associated with the JCPS REACH AmeriCorps program; currently in its third year of implementation. All program goals were met. The reduction in absences was significantly reduced for elementary school students. The majority of students initially matched with an AmeriCorps Member maintained their match for the entire school year.

The contribution of AmeriCorps Members is highly valued and needed at the schools in which they are assigned. The main recommendation for next year is to keep AmeriCorps Members at their assigned schools for the entire week. Members could still participate in community work, and involve their school community in new ways. Program management should continue to explore ways to differentiate between the mentoring needs of elementary and middle school students (and mentors).