

National Study: Improved Reading Scores in Harlem

The Experience Corps Literacy Program has changed the lives of thousands of New York City public school children, including children at PS 154, PS 129, PS 36, and PS 92 in Harlem. Yet it is in jeopardy of being shut down because of underfunding. Rigorous new research from Washington University in St. Louis shows significant gains from Experience Corps (EC), a national service program that trains experienced Americans to help low-income children in urban schools in New York and 23 other cities nationally.

The Community Service Society (CSS) operates the program in New York City. It is one of CSS's most successful and cost-effective programs, a model that could be the subject of wider-scale implementation with public support.

Experience Corps brings together a cadre of ethnically and racially diverse older adult retired volunteers, a network of public school sites, and a meticulous, research-based approach to help children at risk for academic failure. Working in teams of 10-15, Experience Corps volunteers have served in schools in four neighborhoods that are identified as low in income but rich in older adult resources.

Because Experience Corps volunteers come from the very neighborhoods in which they serve, their "buy-in" to, and engagement with, the program is extraordinary. They are committed to ensuring that "their" children receive the extra help they need to stay on track—for school and for life. And with thousands of baby boomers turning 55 in New York City each year, there is a constant and growing pool of prospective volunteers willing and able to make significant contributions to children, schools, and communities throughout the city.

Two Evaluations

The program has been evaluated twice – both evaluations demonstrating the efficacy of the literacy intervention.

The first evaluation was done in 1999 by the University of Virginia whose reading/tutoring program CSS utilizes. The results were both educationally and statistically significant. "The children who received one-on-one tutoring from EC scored significantly higher than the control group."

In the 2006-07 school years, the Experience Corps program underwent another rigorous evaluation to test its effectiveness in improving reading abilities. The evaluation was conducted by independent researchers at Washington University and Mathematica Policy Research. A two-group random assignment was used to evaluate the effects of the Experience Corps program. Standardized reading tests, school records of reading skills, were used to capture reading ability.

Preliminary research findings show that Experience Corps has statistically significant and substantively important positive effects on the reading abilities of first and second graders, including their reading comprehension. Students tutored by Experience Corps members made significantly greater gains on the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System, the New York City school system's standardized reading assessment, than students in the control group. The effect was strongest for first graders and for those

students who were the poorest readers. More than 95 percent of participating first and second grade teachers say Experience Corps benefited the participating students.

Experience Corps has matured to the point where an investment by the city could give the program the citywide presence it needs to maximize its impact on school children. The program started with an anonymous donation of \$1 million. It has proven to be both unique and successful, which is why approximately \$8 million has been invested in it. It is the only program of its type in the city, providing educational help to the school district with the state's highest percentage of Black and Latino children, including children for whom English is not always a first language.

Funding Barriers

This year, we requested additional funds for Experience Corps, which would allow for the expansion of the program to Staten Island, making it a five-borough program. Funding shortfalls have resulted in the program closing operations in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx for the last half of the current school year. The program is now active only in the four schools in Harlem.

We are hoping that funding will become available with the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act which encourages volunteerism from school children to senior citizens. The legislation passed Congress last month and is expected to be signed by President Obama.

Although government budgets are being cut, Experience Corps is a program that should be expanded, especially in tough times. Class sizes are large; budgets are tight. Music and art classes - even science laboratories and libraries - are now considered expendable in some schools. Moving into this situation, Experience Corps volunteers provide an inviting environment for children to learn, helping schools to become more caring and personal places. In the schools where they provide help, they have established a substantial and visible presence, gaining the respect of teachers and staff and the affection of the children.

If you are 55 years or older, and would like to be an Experience Corps volunteer, contact us at www.experiencecorps.org/cities/nyc, or call 212-614-5499. You, too, can make a difference in the life of your community. To view a copy of the Washington University study results, go online at <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RP09-01.pdf>.

Join the discussion on how we can improve the lives of low-wage workers by making your voice heard on our Turnstile blog at <http://turnstile.cssny.org/turnstile/>.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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