



SCHOOL TURNAROUND AMERICORPS NATIONAL EVALUATION

Study Brief | July 22, 2016

Corporation for
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COMMUNITY
SERVICE** 



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To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit nationalservice.gov/research.

The School Turnaround AmeriCorps Grant Program

The School Turnaround AmeriCorps grant program, launched in school year 2013–14, is a joint initiative of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the U.S. Department of Education. It places AmeriCorps members in specific types of low-performing K-12 schools—those designated as School Turnaround or Priority campuses, or those among the lowest five percent of a state's persistently lowest-achieving schools. The School Turnaround AmeriCorps program is intended to increase such schools' capacity to meet ambitious school improvement goals, primarily through members' efforts to improve students' academic performance, academic engagement, attendance, high school graduation rates, and college readiness.

The first cohort of 13 School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantee programs received funding for three years. By the third year, 2015–16, these programs had partnered with approximately 70 SIG/Priority schools, and recruited about 450 School Turnaround AmeriCorps members annually to provide services in those schools. In the over 50 schools that participated in the evaluation, School Turnaround AmeriCorps members served from 11,000 to 13,000 students in 14 states each year. Most of the grantee programs served multiple schools (ranging from 1 to 11 schools) and, on average, programs reported 25 to 28 students received services for every AmeriCorps member serving in host schools. About half of School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantee programs were new to the AmeriCorps program, and the other half were experienced AmeriCorps grantee programs when the program began in 2013.

For more information on school eligibility, please see *Guidance on Fiscal Year 2010 School Improvement Grants under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sifguidance02232011.pdf>; for more information on current grantee programs and participating schools, please see Corporation for National and Community Service. e-Grants service location and member data for the 2014–15 and 2015-16 school years.

This brief summarizes highlights from a recently completed national evaluation of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps Program. Overall, the study was designed to address the following broad objectives:

- Describe School Turnaround AmeriCorps program implementation in schools, including how stakeholders perceive the program, and the contexts within which the program operates
- Identify promising practices for the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program in supporting schools' ability to implement their turnaround plans
- Describe how program-school partnerships affect program implementation
- Compare turnaround efforts in School Turnaround AmeriCorps schools to matched comparison schools' efforts on such dimensions as:
 - Overall success in school turnaround
 - Academic achievement
 - Students' socio-emotional health
 - School climate
 - School capacity to implement its turnaround effort
- Identify the strategies used by School Turnaround AmeriCorps programs in schools that have successfully exited SIG/Priority status that helped them engage students and school stakeholders to reach their turnaround goals, in order to inform other education-focused programs at CNCS.

The two-year national study collected information about the School Turnaround Program from grantee programs, school administrators and staff, parents, and from the AmeriCorps members to address the objectives summarized above. The study is designed to describe how AmeriCorps members contribute to grantee schools' capacity to implement turnaround models successfully and improve key turnaround outcomes.

Evaluation Overview

CNCS contracted with Abt Associates to conduct an implementation-focused national evaluation of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program that began in 2014–15 and continued into 2015–16. Year 1 represents the first year of the *evaluation*, which corresponds to the second year of *program operation* (2014–15 school year), and Year 2 references the evaluation's second and the program's third year (2015–16).

The goal of the evaluation was to deepen current understanding of the perceived effect of AmeriCorps members on the capacity of host schools to implement their respective turnaround model successfully and to improve key turnaround outcomes. The evaluation describes School Turnaround AmeriCorps members' contributions to low-performing schools' success in their turnaround efforts, and discusses the mechanisms underlying those contributions. The study focused on those School Turnaround AmeriCorps schools that met specific study requirements, or about three-quarters of the nearly 70 schools in the program. The study also collected some limited information on similar schools in SIG/Priority status that do not have School Turnaround AmeriCorps members to provide context on program features.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study used a combination of surveys (of grantee staff, school leaders, and school staff), individual and/or focus group interviews (of grantee staff, principals, teachers, parents, and AmeriCorps members), case studies of selected program and comparison schools, and administrative data (grantees' annual progress reports, grantee programs' member activity data, partnership agreements, and student level data collected by grantee programs). Data were collected in Spring 2015, Fall 2015, and Spring 2016, to allow the study to describe implementation as the program matured into its third year.

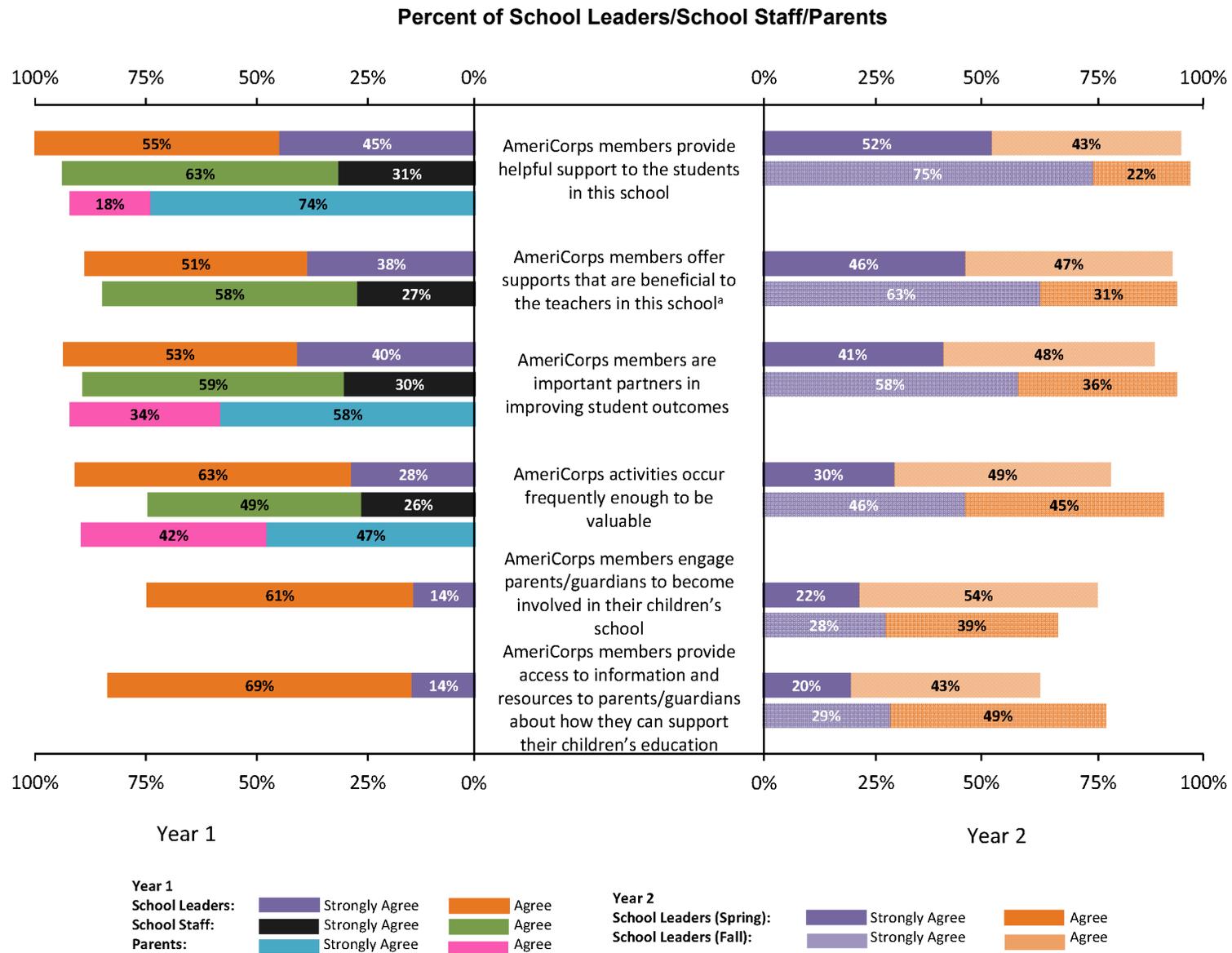
Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize patterns in responses across different respondent groups (e.g., school leaders and school staff), and interview and case study data were analyzed using qualitative data analytic methods to identify recurring themes and patterns. Administrative data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, as appropriate. For more information on the data collection and approach to analysis see the comprehensive final report and technical appendixes on CNCS's Evidence Exchange, <http://www.nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange>.

How Stakeholders Perceived the Impact of AmeriCorps Services

Stakeholders in the majority of School Turnaround AmeriCorps program schools perceived that AmeriCorps services support turnaround efforts in multiple ways:

- By helping to achieve key outcomes, including improving students' academic achievement and socio-emotional health.
- Through developing positive relationships between members and students, which in turn have a positive impact on students' academic engagement and behavior and/or are effective at meeting school turnaround goals.
- By helping schools improve student achievement, consistently described as the most important student outcome for school turnaround efforts, as well as increased motivation and attendance.
- By helping schools address turnaround goals more broadly, whether one or as many as 22 members worked in a school, and by exerting positive influences on students' socio-emotional well-being and academic engagement.
- Through offering helpful supports, serving as partners in improving student outcomes, and providing activities frequently enough to be valuable (see Exhibit 1 on the next page).
- By contributing to improvement in the outcomes stakeholders deemed most important.

Exhibit 1: Perceived Value of School Turnaround AmeriCorps, by Stakeholder and Year



The study used a comparative case study design of matched pairs of SIG- and Priority- funded schools with and without School Turnaround AmeriCorps members to examine both program implementation and the perceived impacts of AmeriCorps services in supporting school turnaround efforts. The program was perceived as providing valuable support in this set of case study schools studied more intensively. Stakeholders in these schools reported how AmeriCorps members contributed to achieving turnaround goals:

- By helping to build school capacity to implement turnaround efforts, leveraging resources to increase services for students, using AmeriCorps members to manage/analyze student data; and supporting classroom teachers' efforts.
- By helping schools achieve turnaround goals, improving students' socio-emotional well-being and academic engagement—enough for some schools to exit Turnaround status.

The study team also conducted four “SIG Exiter” case studies of schools that exited SIG status with the help of School Turnaround AmeriCorps programs. The purpose of these case studies was to identify the major strategies school leaders and teachers perceived as supporting their school's success in exiting SIG status, including the role of AmeriCorps members in implementing each strategy. Findings suggest that Exiters perceived their partnership with School Turnaround AmeriCorps as one of multiple important factors that helped them to successfully exit SIG status, although once schools exited, they lost some of the same resources that had helped them exit SIG status, including School Turnaround AmeriCorps services. Notably, in all four SIG Exiter schools:

- Principals were open to robust partnership engagement, including fully integrating members into school operations, which they viewed as important in successfully achieving student- and school-level outcomes, and
- Stakeholders described how attending to students' socio-emotional needs enabled them to learn and was a crucial precipitating factor to increase their academic performance, combined with other interventions.

Improved Academic Achievement

“In English, we saw our [end-of-course] scores rise significantly; a large part is because there is another dedicated person that is constantly reinforcing what we're teaching. The data is there, we're seeing increas[es] in the number of kids who are passing. It only happens because all oars are rowing in the same direction.”

—*Teacher Interview (2016)*

Improved Academic Engagement

“I've had a student come up to me and he assists me in some of my duties here at the school. And he told me once ... ‘If I wasn't helping you, like helping me, I'd probably be in detention right now.’ So basically he's saying, ‘You keep me on track.’”

—*Member Interview (2016)*

Members' Positive Effects on Students

“Even when she feels bad she wants to go to school, so that lets me know that they are doing something to make her want to come back.”

—*Parent Interview (2015)*

Interestingly, administrative data suggest a different, and somewhat less optimistic, picture than the stakeholders' perceptions of implementation summarized from the case study research. Grantee progress reports and student data suggest more limited success. The full evaluation report also describes the potential uses and challenges of administrative data for measuring grantee performance.

The Contexts within which School Turnaround AmeriCorps Operates

The School Turnaround AmeriCorps program is designed to serve some of our nation's most disadvantaged schools, schools that can and do face daunting challenges. Even after nearly three years of working with largely the same schools, grantee programs continued to experience unpredictable changes; the participating schools experienced dynamic conditions beyond the control of grantee programs and members. This includes students whose families suffer substantial economic disadvantage and the multiple challenges associated with poverty and being able to meet basic needs, high turnover of school leaders and staff, insufficient resources, and other factors that contributed to pervasive instability.¹ Whether changes in school leadership and teaching staff were part of the turnaround plan or a consequence of morale and retention issues, schools that experienced such turnover had to re-introduce their AmeriCorps programs to the new school leadership, start building crucial relationships and earning buy-in anew, and train new faculty in the curriculum and in school-specific AmeriCorps interventions.

Among the pervasive challenges schools faced were student academic performance, disruptive student behavior and discipline, poor student attendance, low student engagement, and student depression. School Turnaround AmeriCorps members supported school staff efforts to meet the needs of English learners, students with disabilities, and students with low levels of math and reading proficiency (as measured by state standardized assessments), many of whom required additional instructional support. The School Turnaround AmeriCorps program was often one of multiple external partners and programs working in turnaround schools.

How is the Program Implemented?

School Turnaround AmeriCorps programs varied across multiple dimensions: the number of schools, number of members serving in partner schools, number of service hours provided by members, and the number of students served, as well as the amount of time to reach the minimum dosages of AmeriCorps services for students to be counted as having completed the program. Other features of program implementation include the following:

- Generally, schools relied on teacher referrals as the most common mechanism for identifying students for services. However, more schools in Year 2 compared to Year 1 increased their reliance on using standardized test data over counselor recommendations to target students who needed additional academic or behavioral support.
- Members generally provided similar services and supports to schools from Year 1 to Year 2, focusing their efforts on the specific strategies that schools had identified.
- Many programs used on-site coordinators to support members in their roles and help programs run more smoothly in host schools.

School Turnaround AmeriCorps members support 6 SIG strategies

- Engaging families and communities.
- Addressing non-academic factors that affect student achievement (school climate and students' socio-emotional and health needs).
- Supporting skill acquisition in reading and math.
- Increasing graduation rates.
- Providing college preparation and increasing college enrollment.
- Increasing learning time.

¹ The study schools experienced considerable principal turnover rates; a substantial minority (over a quarter in Year 1 and over 40 percent in Year 2) had fewer than four years of experience as school leaders at their current school.

- Grantee programs experienced persistent challenges with member recruitment, retention, and role definition. Programs responded to such challenges by strengthening the member preparation and training offered in Year 2, including more tailored pre-training to members about their school's community and demographics, training on how members should carry out their roles in the school, and training for school staff on how to use AmeriCorps members appropriately in their school.
- AmeriCorps members also used student progress data to inform interventions, providing socio-emotional supports and targeted academic interventions to struggling students.
- Programs operated more effectively when members immersed themselves in the school culture and operations and regularly collaborated with teachers, for example, in discussing their interventions or reviewing student data.
- Administrative challenges typically associated with launching a new program became less prevalent, according to grantee progress reports from 2014-15, while other challenges as well as strengths inherent in the AmeriCorps program model persisted, as summarized in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: Tensions between the School Turnaround AmeriCorps Program Model and Serving in Educational Settings

Program Model Feature	Strength	Shortcoming
Member Demographics	Ability to build relationships with students as “near peers” and role models	Immaturity; lack of content knowledge and experience working in low-performing schools
Term of Service	Dedicated, often full-time, AmeriCorps members embedded in the school throughout the year	Relationships with students built over the year ended, interrupting student progress
Living Stipend	Not reported	Stipend was too low in areas with high cost of living and/or high opportunity cost of obtaining other full-time work
Service Dosage Requirements	Requires that students receive the targeted amount of intervention hours per student to improve in reading/ or math	Prohibits flexibility in meeting schools’ needs or the needs of high transient student populations
Building School Capacity	Members augment school capacity during their term of service	Because school capacity improvement reflects member presence, such improvement is not sustained when members leave the school

Grantee Programs Work with Program Schools as Partners

CNCS requires School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantees to use written partnership agreements between grantees and host schools to describe how grantees and schools will collaboratively manage, share data and resources, and define roles and responsibilities. Generally, grantee staff and principals reported that partnership agreements are useful tools for defining roles and responsibilities in the partnership planning stage, yet are seldom revisited if and when implementation challenges arise later in the partnership. Instead, most grantee programs used on-site coordinators to supervise members and manage relationships with school stakeholders throughout the year, a practice used somewhat more widely in Year 2 than Year 1.

Program-school partnerships appeared to function more effectively when partnership relationships were stable over time; such stability improved communication and program implementation. Partnerships suffered when school leader turnover or other external conditions or implementation factors hindered relationship building. Overall, all stakeholders reported high levels of satisfaction with their partnerships, in terms of program operations and elements of program implementation; few grantee staff reported challenges with partnerships.

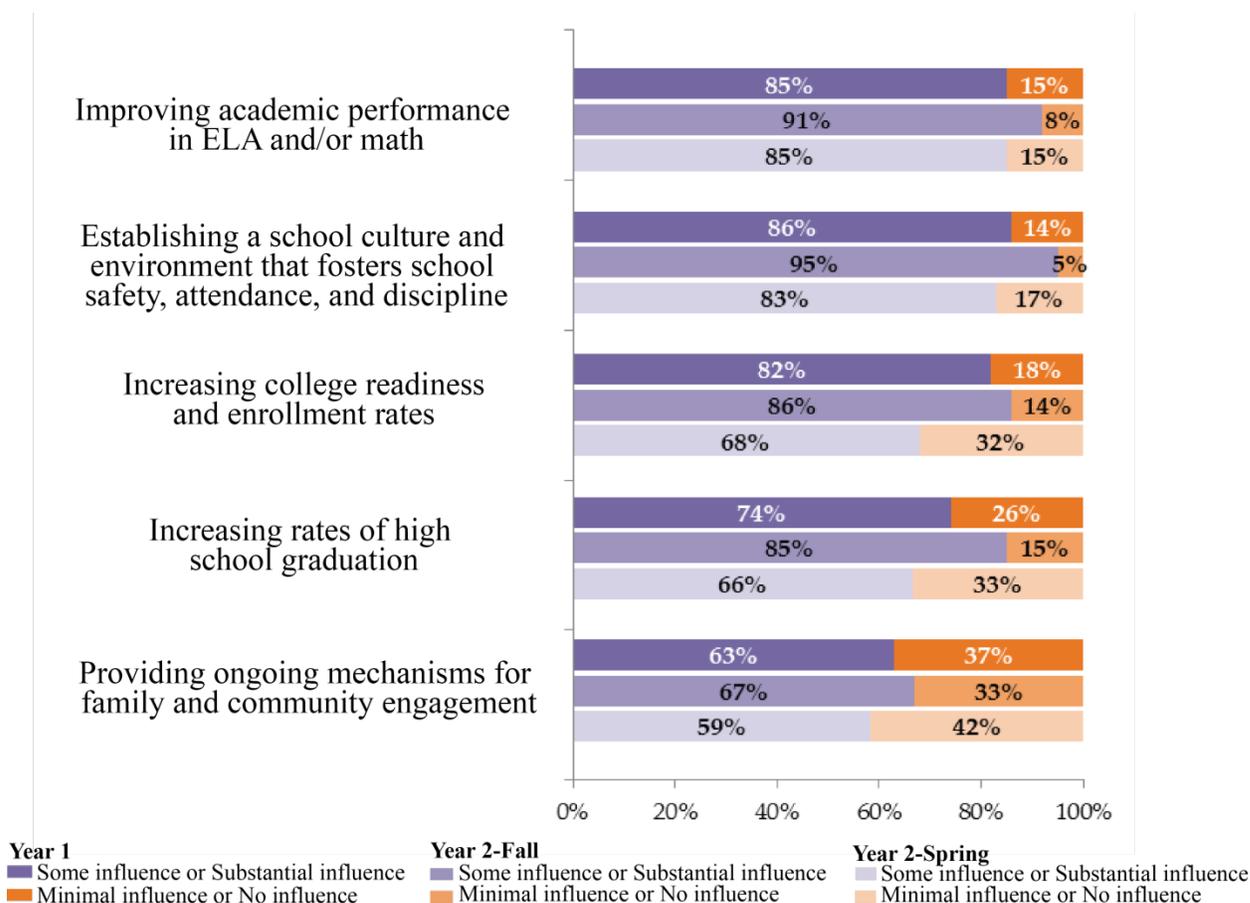
Key Mechanisms of Program and Member Effectiveness and the Value-Added of AmeriCorps

The premise of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program is that its members can help deliver effective turnaround interventions and help schools achieve their desired student outcomes. Three themes emerged as necessary (yet each is not sufficient on its own) conditions for member and intervention effectiveness:

- School leader receptivity toward using external resources, openness to robust partnership engagement, and buy-in to the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program.
- Having an on-site coordinator manage members and facilitate communication with the school staff.
- Close collaboration between teachers and members about classroom support and how to review student data.

Across applicable school turnaround goals (e.g., improving academic performance and increasing graduation rates and college readiness), a majority of school leaders reported that School Turnaround AmeriCorps members had either substantial or some influence (see Exhibit 3). Leaders were more likely to characterize the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program as exerting some rather than substantial influence on all goals.

Exhibit 3: School Leader Perceptions of Level of Influence of School Turnaround AmeriCorps on School Turnaround Goals (Year 1 and Year 2)

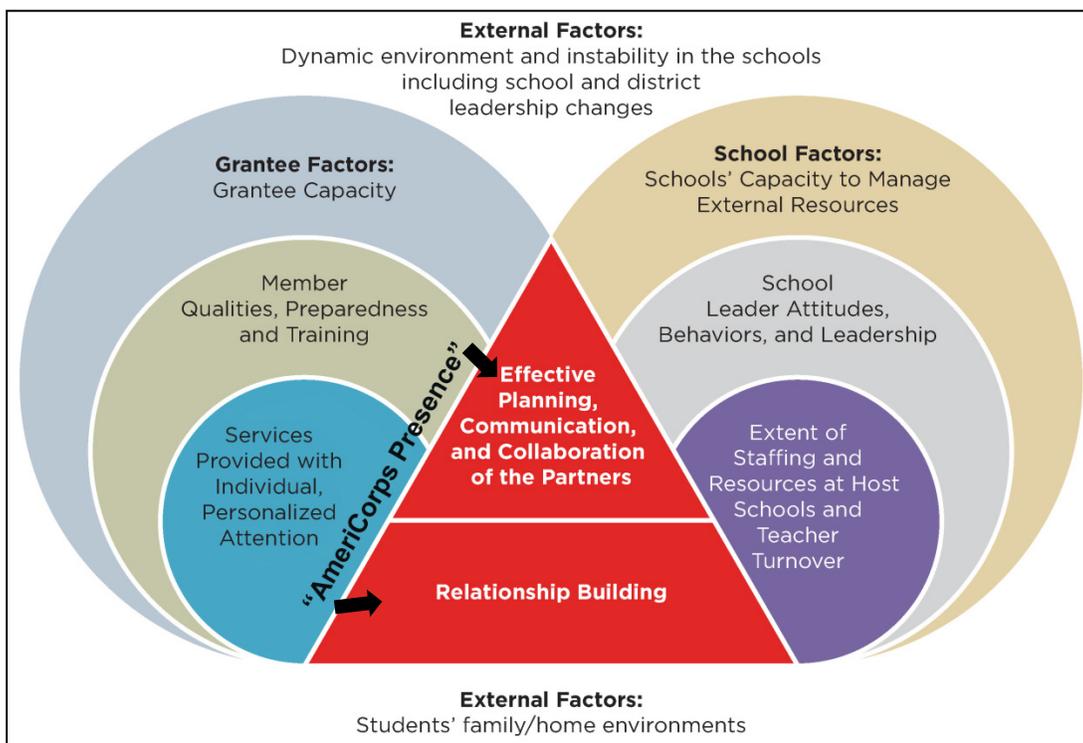


Other mechanisms for integrating members into school operations and culture were established through members' consistent daily presence in schools and through participation in other school functions beyond service provision alone—the “AmeriCorps presence.” Multiple school and program stakeholders described several other key means by which that presence contributes to perceived effectiveness, including:

- Building trusting relationships with students, an important mechanism for supporting students' socio-emotional learning and improving student academic engagement and behavior.
- Contributing to creating a positive school climate.
- Boosting classroom and overall school capacity.

AmeriCorps members delivered a wide range of activities to their school turnaround partners. Underlying the variation in how these services were structured or delivered is a common thread: All School Turnaround AmeriCorps programs provided additional human capital resources to their under-resourced and under-staffed school partners. Among the central findings of this two-year evaluation is that the value of AmeriCorps is based on the consistent presence of additional helpful, caring adults who support students by developing strong relationships with them. This defining feature of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps model is a unifying element in what program schools most appreciated about the program.

Exhibit 4: Conditions that Moderate Program Effectiveness



As the first grant period for School Turnaround AmeriCorps comes to an end, the insights that may guide future programming include understanding the key mechanisms of program and member effectiveness, understanding how School Turnaround AmeriCorps adds value to school improvement efforts in low-performing schools, and recognizing that some implementation challenges may reflect tensions between school contexts and the program model. Other insights reflect learning from the grantee programs and partner schools about practices stakeholders have reported to be particularly useful in their local efforts to deliver effective interventions (see textbox below).

Promising Practices for Delivering Effective Interventions and Serving in Schools

- **Communication and Relationship Building:** Communicate proactively at program level (grantee programs to districts, school leaders; members to teachers, students, on-site coordinator, and school leaders); build sustained relationships to increase program understanding and ease challenges.
- **Recruitment and Retention:** Recruit early, advertise through multiple channels, communicate expectations about the service commitment and school conditions clearly, recruit and match members with schools' needs, place members in full-time positions.
- **Preparation and Training:** Provide pre-service orientation and training, specialized training in behavior management and school-specific strategies; include members in faculty and professional learning community meetings, school-level training, and teacher professional development during the school year.
- **Supervision and Support:** Rely on on-site coordinators to manage, organize, and support members and facilitate communication with school staff; cultivate school leader buy-in, integrate members into school culture and operations.
- **Service Delivery:** Establish effective and trusting relationships with both teachers and students, maintain a consistent presence in schools and classrooms to aid with classroom management, collaborate with teachers to review student data and target supports appropriate to students' needs, and be flexible in meeting schools' needs.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Based on the study team's observations over the two-year evaluation period, the report also offers recommendations about aspects of program implementation and structure for CNCS to consider:

1. **Provide grantee programs technical assistance for communications and more opportunities for peer learning.** By providing additional technical assistance to improve how grantee programs communicate with members and schools, some common and persistent implementation challenges may be minimized, tensions in the program model may be mitigated, and program delivery may be enhanced. Communications assistance could include messaging and materials development, one-on-one support, and disseminating promising practices more broadly, for example, by posting communications toolkits on the AmeriCorps program website and facilitating peer group learning on common program challenges and the successful strategies for both grantee staff and host school staff, a strategy CNCS employed with the first cohort of School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantees.
2. **Clarify the expectations and standardize the requirements for how programs collect and report administrative data.** Despite considerable variability in grantee progress reports, member activity data, and student-level data, the study identified potential ways to enhance these data for the future, both for the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program and other education-related CNCS programming. The Year 1 and Year 2 final evaluation reports offered recommendations for improving the collection, reporting, and analysis of administrative data, focused on providing more explicit guidance, articulating common reporting procedures, and developing common templates, as well as an alternative approach to the collection and analysis of grantee program administrative data to improve measurement of program performance.
3. **Consider encouraging greater continuity of members' service within participating schools to alleviate some of the implementation challenges associated with member onboarding and relationship building that now occur anew each year.** The grant program statute requires terms of service to be no longer than one year, yet some grantee programs enroll members into two consecutive one-year terms to provide greater stability and continuity. Perhaps CNCS could acknowledge explicitly that two consecutive years of service for members might be a viable option for programs (assuming continuity of funding and satisfactory member performance). This recommendation is based on the finding that starting over each year with a new cohort of members requires substantial time and energy from programs and schools.