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A Narrower Focus Helps City Year Win Grants and Increase Its Impact

Jennifer Cogswell/City Year

City Year focuses its efforts to help reduce student dropout rates on students in high school, middle school, and even in the upper elementary grades.

Enlarge Image

By Nicole Wallace

Washington

This fall Jason Kim started a before-school tutoring program here at Browne Education Campus, where he serves as a City Year volunteer. The first two weeks, he didn't assist a single student.

But the 18-year-old kept showing up at 7 a.m. —and slowly, some kids at the combined elementary and middle school started to ask for help. One of the first, a seventh grader, is now helping two fifth graders whom Mr. Kim tutors during the school day. The City Year corps member hopes that by becoming a tutor himself, the seventh grader will get a boost of confidence. "It's as much for him as it is for my students," says Mr. Kim.

Those fifth and seventh graders are part of City Year's new approach. The charity, whose volunteers once built hiking trails, worked in libraries, and did myriad other tasks, has overhauled its service program to focus on a single mission: improving graduation rates in struggling public schools.

The transformation has worked, say City Year officials and the group's partners, because it is based on solid research and is designed to draw on the Boston charity's strengths. Using research that has identified which schools have the biggest drop-out problem and the warning signs that a student is at risk, City Year officials realized by applying its resources judiciously, it can make significant headway toward solving a seemingly intractable problem.

The narrowed focus has also helped the charity attract new support from grant makers. A charity that is very clear about its mission is attractive to donors, says Michelle D. Gilliard, a senior director at the Wal-Mart Foundation, which made two grants totaling $4.5-million to City Year after the organization committed to putting all its energy into increasing graduation rates.

City Year can now say, this is what we do, this is what we measure, and here are our results, says Ms. Gilliard. "That's a more powerful statement than saying to a funder, 'We can do this or we can do that. What do you want?'"

'Permission' to Innovate

While City Year has always believed that young people and national service are powerful forces for social change, it used to be a very different organization.

For the first few years after City Year was founded in 1988, each of the charity's locations issued an annual call for projects to local nonprofits—which could include not only schools but also

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"The metaphor we had then was that we would be the yeast in the bread of other nonprofits," says Michael Brown, a City Year co-founder. But, he says, with so many kinds of projects, it was impossible for the organization to measure its impact or craft ways to improve its work.

One of the keys in the charity's transformation was a $450,000 grant from Cisco over several years that allowed Stephanie Wu, one of City Year's top executives, to focus full time on leading an in-depth study of the organization's service work. She then talked to outside experts and used what she and her colleagues learned to design a new approach.

In a way, says Mr. Brown, the grant did more than just pay for expenses. It also gave the organization "permission," he says, to pursue innovation. "Anything that has a true, dedicated grant gets a firewall around it and says, 'That's what we're doing and that's what's important,'" he says.

City Year, Ms. Wu says, had realized for some time that the service model was the "missing link."

"We'd been trying to work on it, but we weren't able to make any breakthroughs," she says. "I don't think it could have been done if the organization hadn't decided we're going to devote some real resources to this."

Making a Difference

Education seemed an obvious place for City Year to build its streamlined mission. At the time, roughly 65 percent of corps members were working in the schools, which indicated a great need in those institutions, says Jim Balfanz, the organization's president.

A researcher at the University of Pennsylvania helped the charity identify the reasons City Year was already making a difference in the schools. Chief among them: The students see the youthful corps members as role models rather than authority figures.

The organization's basic structure was also an advantage. The nonprofit deploys teams of eight to 12 corps members, and they work full time. "We could go into a school en masse and dramatically change the ratio of caring adults to students in a building," says Mr. Brown.

At the same time, what City Year learned about the dropout crisis made its leaders think it was a problem small enough to fix.

The organization had long been frustrated by the limits its size and resources placed on its ability to make a difference, says Mr. Balfanz. To make a real dent in a problem like, for example, violence, would require 5,000 corps members working in a single city.

But the high-school dropout crisis is concentrated. Roughly 12 percent of the country's high schools account for 50 percent of the students who don't graduate, according to researchers at the Johns Hopkins University, whose groundbreaking study laid the foundation for City Year's new direction.

The Hopkins scholars also found that students in high-poverty neighborhoods most at risk of dropping out can be identified as early as middle school by three warning signs: poor attendance, behavior problems, or failing an English or math course. A sixth grader with any one of those conditions has only a 20-percent chance of graduating from high school.

The charity's leaders quickly saw they could reach the majority of students who were at risk with only 300 to 500 corps members per city, says Mr. Balfanz.

Winning Grants

Today, across the country, 2,000 City Year corps members ages 17 to 24 serve full time in 187 struggling public schools in poor neighborhoods. They tutor students, call their homes to check on them when they're absent from school, help teachers with classroom activities, and lead projects to improve school buildings and grounds. In return, the volunteers get living stipends and an educational award of $5,550 when they complete their year of service.

So far, their efforts appear to be paying off: Last year, schools with City Year volunteers saw a 55-percent decrease in the number of students with a high number of absences. Ninety percent of students tutored by corps members improved their literacy scores.

The charity's new focus has spurred the creation of a school-turnaround program, Diplomas Now, to aid the lowest-performing schools. In August, Diplomas Now won a $30-million award from the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation Funds, known as an i3 grant. And

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the PepsiCo Foundation, a City Year supporter since 2003, has committed an additional $11-million for Diplomas Now.

In the program, City Year volunteers work with Talent Development Schools, a charity at Johns Hopkins that helps school-district leaders reorganize schools to jump-start learning, and Communities in Schools, in Arlington, Va., which provides social workers to connect students facing significant problems, such as homelessness or abuse, with assistance.

Diplomas Now brings a combination of skills and personnel to the schools that have the largest number of dropouts, says Gary Chapman, an executive vice president at Communities in Schools. "When you're working in very high-poverty schools, the number of students who need support is tremendous," he says. "By having the people power in place, we're able to serve all the kids at that school who need service."

'Nagging and Nurturing'

The Johns Hopkins studies and the partnership with the university on Diplomas Now hit close to home for City Year's president. His brother, Robert Balfanz, led the research.

The Johns Hopkins scholar is clearly amused when asked about the family connection. "People have created these great origin stories that involve Thanksgiving dinner," he says about the conception of Diplomas Now. "But it didn't happen that way. It was more organization-to-organization than brother-to-brother."

Robert Balfanz says that as he was talking to people at City Year about his research, Talent Development was struggling to help Philadelphia school officials figure out where the district could find the additional people it needed to assist students who were at risk of dropping out.

"It all sort of clicked in my mind," he says. "They can give us a team of 10 to 15 corps members who are trained and focused and are in the building 7 to 7." If each volunteer works with 15 students who show warning signs that they might drop out, he says, "we can now reach 150 to 200 kids a day with that constant nagging and nurturing."

The math and English tutoring and the volunteers' work to encourage good attendance are important, says Rashida Tyler, principal of Browne Education Campus. But their ability to do that is based on the relationships they build with students.

Ms. Tyler says that when she thinks about the impact City Year has made in her school, she thinks of the improved confidence of a student who has developed a good relationship with her tutor. The two have worked out a system: When the student meets one of her goals, she gets to wear the corps member's City Year pin or jacket for the day.

"It reaffirms her self-esteem," says Ms. Tyler. "Little things like that really go a long way."

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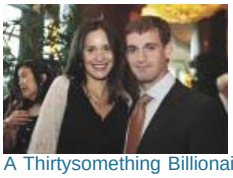

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