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Independent Research Shows National Service Program in Portland Schools Produces Big Gains in Student Learning

Rigorous Study Finds Students with Experience Corps Tutors Make 60% More Progress in Critical Reading Skills than Students without Tutors

Tutoring children in and after school isn't new, but how much does it really help in critical areas like reading? Rigorous new research from Washington University in St. Louis shows significant gains from a national service program that trains experienced adults to help low-income children in urban public schools in 23 cities, including Portland.

The central finding: Over a single school year, students with Experience Corps tutors made over 60 percent more progress in learning two critical reading skills — sounding out new words and reading comprehension — than similar students not served by the program.

Researchers at Washington University in St. Louis conducted a randomized, control-group study of Experience Corps, a national program that engages people over 55 in helping struggling students learn to read, to assess its effectiveness. The two-year, \$2 million study, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, is one of the largest of its kind, involving more than 800 first, second and third graders (half with Experience Corps tutors, half without) at 23 elementary schools in three cities.

"The difference in reading ability between kids who worked with Experience Corps tutors and those who did not is substantial and statistically significant," said Nancy Morrow-Howell, the lead researcher and a professor at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University.

"This research shows that Experience Corps tutors can increase student reading skills," said Jean Grossman, an expert in youth mentoring programs and evaluation design at Princeton University and Public / Private Ventures. "That's great news for parents, children, educators and the many people of all ages who want to respond to President Obama's call to service and want to know that their efforts will make a significant difference."

Other key findings from the Washington University research:

- **Experience Corps tutors were able to improve young students' reading comprehension, one of the toughest skills to affect for struggling readers.** Few other studies of tutoring interventions for beginning readers have demonstrated improvement in reading comprehension, a critical building block for literacy development.

- **As an intervention, Experience Corps compares to smaller class size.** Students with Experience Corps tutors get a boost in reading skills equivalent to the boost they would get from being assigned to a classroom with 40 percent fewer children.
- **Experience Corps works for all students, including those farthest behind.** Experience Corps tutors delivered similarly significant results for students regardless of gender, ethnicity, grade, classroom behavior or English proficiency (25% of tutored children use English as a second language). Half of all students referred to Experience Corps tutors struggle so much with reading that they are at or below the 16th percentile nationwide.
- **Teachers welcome Experience Corps.** Teachers overwhelmingly rate Experience Corps as beneficial to students, while reporting that it represents little or no burden to them.
- **Experience Corps is beneficial for the older adults themselves.** Experience Corps members perceive that the program has a positive impact on students and on their relationship with students, an important ingredient as research shows that better student-tutor relationships are associated with better reading outcomes. In addition, studies by researchers at Washington University and Johns Hopkins have shown that working with young students improves the health and well-being of the adults themselves.

“Davis Elementary was honored as one of 16 schools in Oregon for our work on closing the achievement gap,” said Susan Dunn, principal of Davis Elementary School. “Experience Corps is a key piece behind this success.”

In partnership with Metropolitan Family Services, Experience Corps has served more than 1,350 students in Portland since 1995. Nationally, the program has 2,000 tutors helping 20,000 students in 23 U.S. cities. For a list of local schools served, go to www.ExperienceCorps.org.

“Experience Corps works because Experience Corps members are carefully screened and trained to support local literacy instruction,” said Lester Strong, the program’s CEO. “Plus most Experience Corps members come from the neighborhoods where they serve. They know these kids, they believe in these kids, and they see a future in them.”

“Experience Corps puts a growing national resource, *experienced Americans*, to work on a pressing national need — giving *all* students the reading skills they need to succeed,” Strong continued. “There’s no shortage of older adults — nearly 10,000 Americans turn 60 every day — and no shortage of kids who need help — half of our urban students never graduate from high school. We could be doing so much more to put these two generations together.”

To download a copy of the research findings, please go to http://gwbweb.wustl.edu/CSD/service/older_adults_and_civic_service/Experience_Corp.htm.

About the Research

In 2006, researchers at the Center for Social Development at Washington University’s Brown School of Social Work were awarded a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to evaluate the effects of the Experience Corps program on student reading outcomes. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) provided data collection services.

Three school systems agreed to be part of the study, and 23 schools in Boston, New York City and Port Arthur, Texas, participated. At the beginning of the school year, teachers referred all students who needed assistance with reading. More than 1,000 students were referred, and parental consent to participate in the study was obtained for 81 percent of those referred. Those students were then randomly assigned to work with an Experience Corps tutor for one academic year or to a control group. All students were tested at the beginning and end of that academic year.

The Experience Corps program tutored 430 of these students, and 451 were in the control group. There were 332 first, 304 second, and 186 third graders, and 420 males and 402 females in the final data set. Analysis of pretest data collected by MPR showed that the Experience Corps students and control groups were equivalent on all measured characteristics.

The program succeeded in delivering the intervention to a large number of the students. About half of students received 30 to 49 sessions, and the mean number of sessions was 45. Three-quarters of the students received over 35 sessions, which represents about one session a week throughout the program period. When including only the students who received at least 35 sessions, a criterion that was chosen to indicate that the students received the intervention as intended, the effects appear to be stronger.

Data for the study came from three sources: interviews with the students, assessments completed by teachers, and school records. MPR interviewers assessed reading ability at the beginning and end of the school year in face-to-face interviews with the students. Standardized reading tests were used: the Woodcock Johnson word attack subscale (WJ-WA), which tests students' ability to sound out new words; the Woodcock Johnson passage comprehension subscale (WJ-PC), which tests reading comprehension; and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test (PPVT-III), which tests vocabulary acquisition for young children.

At the beginning and end of the academic year, teachers completed assessments of grade-specific reading skills and classroom behavior. At the end of the year, school records were abstracted to ascertain demographics and other student characteristics, and tutors rated the quality of their relationships with students.

About Experience Corps

Experience Corps, an award-winning national program founded in 1995, engages people over 55 in meeting their communities' greatest challenges. Today, in 23 cities across the country, 2,000 Experience Corps members tutor and mentor elementary school students struggling to learn to read. Independent research shows that Experience Corps boosts student academic performance, helps schools and youth-serving organizations become more successful, and enhances the well-being of the older adults in the process.

Experience Corps is supported by public and private funders, including The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps), and the Deerbrook Charitable Foundation.

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