

OVERCOMING THE POVERTY CHALLENGE TO ENABLE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS FOR ALL

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF STUDENT SUPPORTS



EVERYONE CENTER
GRADUATES

JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

School of Education
Center for Social Organization
of Schools



ROBERT BALFANZ
FEBRUARY 2013

Acknowledgements

The author of this paper is grateful to the following people for their guidance and feedback: Jim Balfanz, John Bridgeland, AnnMaura Connolly, Katie Leonberger, Bethany Little, Michelle Nunn, and Shirley Sagawa. The author thanks Carolyn Trager Kliman for her assistance in the creation of this paper.

This paper was commissioned by City Year with the support of Bloomberg Philanthropies.

© 2012, The Johns Hopkins University, on behalf of the Center for Social Organization of Schools. All Rights Reserved.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....4

Introduction and Summary5

 The Challenge6

 Poverty Impedes School Success.....6

 Current Practices to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty Don’t Work7

 The Solution7

 Amass the People to Needed to Provide the Coordinated, Consistent, Direct Evidence-Based Student Supports7

 Strategically Deploy Community Volunteers and Full-Time National Service Members to Provide Evidence-Based Student Supports.....8

 The Need for Secure Funding for the Direct, Evidence-Based Student Supports9

The Challenge 10

 Poverty Impedes School Success 10

 Current Strategies to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty Don’t Work 12

 Grade Retention 12

 Class Size Reduction..... 13

 Test Prep..... 14

 Ad Hoc Accumulation of Externally Funded Student Supports 14

The Solution 17

 Amass the Additional People Needed to Provide Coordinated, Consistent, Direct, Evidence-Based Student Supports..... 17

 Use Data to Identify Students’ Needs..... 18

 Implement Early Warning Systems 19

 Teach Students Skills and Approaches to Increase their Personal Agency20

 Adopt Preventative, Real Time intervention, and Rapid Recovery Student Support Strategies20

 Employ a Disciplined Multi-tiered Approach with Built-in Continuous Improvement Tools20

 Successfully Deploying Community Volunteers and National Service Members to Provide Coordinated, Consistent, Direct Evidence-Based Student Supports21

 Employ Different Approaches Based on the Scale and Intensity of Student Need22

 The Need for Secure Funding.....27

 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility27

 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Reauthorization28

 State and Local Level29

 Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)30

Conclusion..... 31

Endnotes.....32

Abstract

This white paper focuses on an important and under-conceptualized thread in the weave of efforts needed to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and/or career training: enhanced student supports. It argues that in order to overcome the educational impacts of poverty – the poverty challenge, schools that serve high concentrations of low income students need to be able to provide direct, evidence-based supports that help students attend school regularly, act in a productive manner, believe they will succeed, overcome external obstacles, complete their coursework, and put forth the effort required to graduate college- and career-ready. Next, it highlights the unique role that nonprofits, community volunteers, and full-time national service members can play in the implementation of these direct student supports. It concludes by exploring how federal and state policy and funding can be designed to promote the implementation and spread of evidence-based, direct student supports. The paper draws on the emerging evidence base to examine these topics, and calls upon the insights gleaned through the author’s fifteen years of participant-observation in the effort to create schools strong enough to overcome the ramifications of poverty and prepare all students for adult success.

Introduction and Summary

We are in what promises to be a transformational decade in American education. Like the advent of public schooling in the 1840s, the Land Grant Colleges, the formation of the great city school systems at the turn of the 20th century, the GI Bill, and the response to Sputnik, our current era is shaping up to be a time when advances in public education can propel the nation forward.

The recent recession has made clear that there is little work in the 21st century for young adults without a high school diploma and limited work that is sufficient to support a family for those who lack at least some post-secondary schooling or training. Education is now the primary pathway to adult success and as a result, public education needs to be designed to prepare all students for post-secondary achievement. In short, a high school diploma is no longer an end point in the educational system. This may seem on the surface to be a prosaic statement, but it is in fact quite revolutionary.

The great American school system that helped drive the nation to prosperity in the 20th century was built on the implicit premise that for a quarter or more of students, a high school diploma was not necessary for adult success, and

for another substantial portion of students, a high school diploma was sufficient to secure a family-sustaining career. The nation’s current educational attainment outcomes – 75 percent high school graduation rate and a 41 percent college completion rate – are reflections of this¹. In the 1960s, such outcomes made the United States first in the world in educational attainment. Much of the world, however, is catching up and a growing number of nations have surpassed the United States in academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and post-secondary completion. As the United States’ educational achievement rates have remained stagnant, employers’ demands for a more educated, skilled workforce are increasing, creating a rapidly growing gap between the skills the economy requires and our citizens’ workforce preparedness².

Redesigning the elementary and secondary public education system to make its core mission preparing all students for post-secondary success will have a profound impact on the nation’s economic and social future. There is reason to be optimistic that we are heading in the right direction. The Common Core State Standards movement led by states to organize public

education around a set of common college and career readiness standards provides a framework for how to prepare all American students for post-secondary success. Advances in data collection and analysis have allowed us to better understand which classrooms schools and districts are in need of dramatic reform and what interventions and supports should be implemented to accelerate that reform. A deeper understanding of the dimensions of teacher quality and how more routinely achieve that quality will further propel the transformation of our education system to one that prepares all students for college and career success. For all of these reasons, our current era is shaping up to be a revolutionary time in American education.

The Challenge

Poverty Impedes School Success

Creating a public education system that routinely graduates all of its students from high school, prepared for post-secondary schooling or training will not be easy. One of the biggest barriers will be the impact poverty has on students’ ability to succeed in school. Emerging evidence is clear: poverty keeps students from attending school regularly, diminishes their ability to pay attention in class, and undermines a foundational driver of positive student behavior, the lived experience that effort leads to success. Over the last four decades, the achievement, high school graduation, and post-secondary completion gaps between students living in poverty and their more affluent peers have widened³. These gaps can be attributed, in part, to the inability of our current school design to successfully address the unique challenges students living in poverty face. As the public education system has come to enroll a higher proportion of low-income students, an

increasing numbers of students have been denied an educational system that effectively enables them to reach their full potential. In short, to achieve the educational outcomes America needs, it must solve the poverty challenge - by attacking head on the knowable and addressable effects of poverty on classroom and school behavior.

To effectively address the poverty challenge, we need a deep understanding of how poverty affects educational outcomes. The reforms currently being championed at the federal and state levels—a common core curriculum linked to college- and career-ready standards, improved teacher quality, and turning around or replacing with better options the lowest-performing schools—are essential to solving the poverty challenge. In short, low-income students, more than any others, suffer from limited access to strong curricula, good teachers, and effective schools. As crucial as they are though, better instruction, teachers, and schools alone will not solve the poverty challenge. In order for the effect of these reforms to be fully realized, students need to attend school, behave, and try⁴. The strongest curriculum and best teachers in the world will have limited impact

if students are not in class regularly paying attention, and able or willing to put forth the effort required to complete their school work. Overcoming the

poverty challenge will require not only a better supply of educational opportunities, but also additional supports to enable students who live in poverty to fully partake in and benefit from these high-quality educational options.

If each public school in the United States had only ten to fifteen percent of students who experienced these poverty distractors, then the current school structure and existing student supports—deans

of discipline, guidance counselors, school nurses, social workers, and others—could be mobilized to meet the poverty challenge. However, fewer and fewer schools in the US meet this condition. Increasing numbers of schools have many students who live in poverty, and there are as many or more schools where nearly all students are low-income as there are schools where only a few students are. So, a further piece of the poverty challenge is the fact that the nation’s highest-need students are concentrated in a sub-set of schools, where it is routine for hundreds of students to need more support than a skilled teacher giving a good lesson in every classroom can provide⁵.

Current Practices to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty Don’t Work

Since challenging student behaviors are often rooted in the challenges associated with growing up in poverty, the impact of poverty on school operations is keenly experienced in schools that educate large numbers and/or high percentages of low-income students. In response, these schools and their districts have typically put in place what amount to standard operating procedures to address the poverty challenge. These include grade retention, class size reduction, test prep, and an ad hoc accumulation of externally funded student supports. Unfortunately, few of these strategies have been successful. Analyses have continually shown that grade retention has a negative impact on student motivation, engagement, and academic performance. Class size reduction only improves student outcomes when classes are dramatically reduced to 15 or fewer students. Test prep is plagued by the same ramifications of poverty that affect school performance: poor attendance, inappropriate behavior, and inconsistent effort. Finally, the random collection of ad hoc student supports yield minimal results because they are often not aligned with the lessons being taught during the school day, providers do not have

access to the student data they need to best serve students, and programs can be present one day and gone the next depending on funding.

The Solution

Amass the People to Needed to Provide the Coordinated, Consistent, Direct Evidence-Based Student Supports

There is hope. Emerging evidence indicates that the poverty challenge can be overcome. Poverty complicates, and, if ignored, undercuts our quest to put all students on secure pathways to post-secondary success, but it does not have to prevent it. The range and extent of “beat-the-odds” counter-examples cannot be ignored. Their existence not only undermines arguments that educational and social interventions strong enough to overcome the effects of poverty cannot be built, but also creates an obligation and accountability to provide them to all students who need them to reach their fullest potential.

A small subset of high-poverty schools has successfully addressed the poverty challenge. They have done so combining strong teaching, thoughtful school design, and effective school management with enhanced evidence-based student supports. These include: using data to identify student need, implementing early warning systems that accurately identify off-track and on-track students, and integrating data-driven, direct student supports into the school structure. This small collection of schools proves that we can overcome the poverty challenge and enable all students to reach their full potential. It will not be easy. It will require schools, districts, and states to reimagine student supports, making them an integral part of the design of all high poverty schools. And it will demand that all high poverty schools in need of additional person power to effectively implement student supports at the scale and intensity required are able to access it.

Strategically Deploy Community Volunteers and Full-Time National Service Members to Provide Evidence-Based Student Supports

In order for schools to fully integrate direct student supports at the scale and intensity their students require, especially in a tight fiscal environment, schools, districts, and cities will have to harness the power of the nonprofit sector, well-trained community volunteers, such as those supported by the Volunteer Generation Fund, and full-time national service members (citizens serving their country through Corporation for National and Community Service programs AmeriCorps and Senior Corps). These groups are uniquely positioned to cost-effectively deliver direct student supports that are aligned with classroom learning, rooted in student data, and integrated into each school’s design.

Critical to the success of this deployment is employing different combinations of nonprofit organizations, community volunteers and full-time national service members depending on the scale and intensity of student needs. Examples include the following:

A high poverty school with 50 struggling students at the cusp of reading proficiency:

Such a school may benefit from programs that deploy community volunteers (citizens able to serve once a week for a set period of time) trained to tutor individual students. Examples of such programs include the Minnesota Reading Corps, the Nashville K – 2 Reading Program, Experience Corps, and GenerationOn.

A high-poverty middle or high school that has 250 students performing multiple grade levels behind:

This school requires a highly coordinated collection of nonprofit organizations that collaborate to improve student and school performance. For example, Diplomas Now combines Talent Development Secondary’s instructional support with City Year’s full-time

AmeriCorps members trained to deliver data-driven student supports and Communities In Schools’ case managers equipped to provide students with the needed community supports.

A school district facing multiple low-performing schools, high rates of chronic absenteeism, and soaring dropout rates:

This requires a third, unique combination of nonprofit organizations that leverages all community assets by deploying community volunteers and full-time national service members in a strategic fashion that makes full use of the assets each can bring. This army of well-trained citizens, serving through part-time AmeriCorps programs like Jumpstart, should be organized to infuse early learning centers with the additional people to ensure all students receive the support they need to be ready for school. Full-time AmeriCorps members should be empowered to attack the factors that contribute to poor school performance among elementary and secondary students through programs like City Year, Citizen Schools, and Playworks. These organizations give AmeriCorps members the skills needed to be fully integrated into the school to deliver critical student supports. Community volunteers should be leveraged to address city-wide issues such as chronic absenteeism and dropout. New York City’s “School Every Day NYC” and the Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign engage community members in school attendance efforts. The Philadelphia Graduation Coaches and the Los Angeles Student Recovery Days, which both received support from Cities of Service, enable volunteers to help keep students on track or get students back on track to high school graduation. Finally, HandsOn Inland Empire’s program, Promise Scholars, prevents dropout by training skilled volunteers to engage at-risk students in experiential learning opportunities. These volunteer efforts are often coupled with other city-wide initiatives, which are supported by national service organizations.

The Need for Secure Funding for the Direct, Evidence-Based Student Supports

In order for evidence-based student supports to mitigate the effects of poverty and, in so doing, help enable all students to graduate from high school prepared for college and career, it is necessary to establish a secure, long term funding source for effective strategies and programs.

The current delay in completing re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides time for bolder thinking to occur. If one examines how current Title I funding is used at the school level, it becomes clear that in many ways it supports the standard operating procedures for student supports that have evolved into high-cost, low-impact strategies via class size reduction and test prep activities. Moreover, it is not uncommon when funds are tight, for schools to cut effective student supports so that smaller classes and test prep-focused extra help programs can be maintained. The result is ineffective, ad hoc, temporary student support structures. Finally, grade retention is implicitly supported by the per-pupil funding mechanism of Title I, where every student in the school, whether they are repeating a grade or not, brings in the same additional dollars, making ineffective grade retention cheaper for the school than higher impact student support interventions. As a result, it is time to re-think how Title I funds are allocated at the school level in the highest-need schools.

Second, at the state and local level, ways to incentivize more effective alternatives to grade retention, and a means to redirect cost savings towards evidence-based, higher-impact, lower-cost student supports should be explored. One strategy to consider is using social impact bonds, in which, schools and districts are incentivized to adopt cost effective, evidence-based strategies, through start-up funding, and then a share of the cost-savings could be expanded to student supports in high

poverty schools. Third, in the lowest performing schools the use of evidence based student supports integrated into the school day could be incentivized at the federal level by the regulations which govern school improvement grant funding and if and when they are renewed state flexibility waivers from certain provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. States, districts, and schools should be encouraged and supported to adopt high impact, low-cost strategies, including using national service members and community volunteers to deliver these direct student supports.

Finally, federal appropriators must invest in the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). CNCS is the largest provider of federal grants to support national service programs such as AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. AmeriCorps provides opportunities for more than 82,000 Americans each year to give intensive service to their communities and country through three programs: AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps). Each year, Senior Corps taps the skills, talents, and experience of more than 330,000 Americans age 55 and older to meet a wide range of community challenges through three programs: RSVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program. CNCS also oversees the Volunteer Generation Fund, which supports the deployment of community volunteers.



The Challenge

Poverty Impedes School Success

Poverty is a bear. Its impact on students is both obvious and subtle. The effects of food scarcity, housing instability, and insufficient access to medical and dental care are clear. If a student is hungry, without a home, suffering from untreated ailments, or in need of glasses, it is difficult for him or her to focus on schoolwork. Poverty also brings an increased exposure to violence, which further shapes student behavior directly and indirectly in complicated and often counter-productive ways. Another characteristic of poverty is living under constant stress, which research is beginning to show has a wide range of negative cognitive, physical, emotional, and mental health effects. Finally, since in the US a large percentage of students who live in poverty come from single-parent households, there can be a range of sibling, family, and elder-care responsibilities thrust upon them that their more affluent peers do not, in general, experience. These additional familial responsibilities influence students' success at school. Students' academic preparation, attendance rates, behavior, and the amount of effort they are able to put into their schoolwork are particularly susceptible to the deleterious effects of poverty.

The effect poverty has on students' preparation to achieve academically is well documented in Paul Barton's 2003 "Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress."⁶ Students living in poverty, on average, start their educational experience significantly behind their peers in terms of the precursor reading and mathematics skills and the knowledge they bring to school. Differential experiences during the summers between grades widen these gaps. As they grow older, students in poverty tend to have less academic background knowledge and more limited vocabularies, which further challenge the pace with which they read and absorb new academic material.

Because students who live in poverty often experience less stimulating learning environments outside of school, steady school attendance and participation is even more critical for these students than it is for their more affluent peers. Poverty, however, greatly increases the likelihood that a student will be chronically absent (miss 10 percent or more of school, in essence, a month or more of schooling in a year) and not attend regularly (miss 5 or fewer days of schooling). Neither the magnitude of chronic absenteeism

nor its negative effects are commonly understood, because chronic absenteeism is typically not measured. A recent report: "The Importance of Being in School" estimates that between 5 and 7.5 million students a year are chronically absent. In the most affected high poverty elementary schools, more than 15 percent of students can be chronically absent, in middle schools, this increases to 25 percent or more of students, and in high poverty high schools, over half of the students can be chronically absent. Poverty also affects students' behavior in school.

As is recently detailed in Paul Tough's book *How Children Succeed*, students arrive at school weighed down by the tensions of living in poverty: the after-effects of family and neighborhood disputes, the fatigue of juggling school, home, and work responsibilities, and the need to toggle between a street persona and a school persona⁷. In high-poverty schools, the impact of this can be seen in high suspension rates involving hundreds of students. Data recently released by the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights shows that over time, in some school districts the majority of poor and minority male students will be suspended at least once. Some, perhaps many, of these suspensions result from an overreaction to student behavior and overuse of suspensions for behavioral infractions that could be handled through less drastic sanctions. Even so, the suspension data indicates the prevalence in high poverty schools of a significant gap between expected and realized student behavior. As a result, large amounts of class time and adult energy are expended managing student behavior, and students perceive that they are constantly being sent signals that they are not conforming to the norms of the school. This perception can propel students to push back, skip school, or simply withdraw from active participation.⁸

Student effort is also affected by poverty. Many of the circumstances of poverty cited above that

lead to behavioral issues can also undermine the amount of effort students can or will put into their schoolwork. This dearth of effort can be seen in the low GPA's found in urban school systems, where in non-selective secondary schools average GPA's are often in the D range (i.e. below 2.0). Retention rates are also high because students fail core courses. This data challenges the urban myth that students are given good grades for just showing up and not misbehaving. A major reason why students receive low or failing grades is because they do not turn in assignments or complete their schoolwork. This sets up a number of counter-productive dynamics.

First, there are students who pass key exams but receive low or failing grades because they have accumulated multiple zeros for not completing assignments. The student assumes that because they passed the test, they should pass the course. When they fail the course, they attribute the failure to the teacher not liking them, rather than recognizing that the course failure stems from not turning in their assignments. Students' misunderstanding of the source of their poor course performance prevents them from reflecting on what they might need to do to improve their academic performance.

Second, because many students who live in poverty have experienced the sting of course failure in earlier grades they seek to shield themselves from again experiencing the negative feelings associated with this failure by denying effort. In this way, the anticipated course failure can be attributed to the fact that they did not care or try, which can be self-corrected in the future, rather than putting themselves in a situation in which they believe they tried their hardest and still failed. Alternatively, some students act out in this situation because they would rather be viewed by their classmates as bad than dumb.

Finally, there is the case of the highly engaged C or D student with very heavy family responsibilities. This student is desperately trying to manage schoolwork and family responsibilities, but the time he or she has to complete homework outside of school hours is very limited. When a teacher, unaware of the student’s home situation, benignly states that the student has not put in enough effort lately, it can trigger a negative response from the student. The impact of poverty on student effort is hugely consequential because the evidence is clear: course failure propels students on the path towards dropping out, and course success (earning a B or better) launches students towards post-secondary educational attainment.⁹

Current Strategies to Mitigate the Effects of Poverty Don’t Work

Currently there are standard operating procedures schools use to deal with the effects of poverty on students’ ability to attend, behave and try. These strategies include grade retention; class size reduction; test prep and the ad hoc, temporary, non-strategic accumulation of externally funded student supports. Since these practices are not specifically designed to improve students’ attendance, behavior, and effort their impact is limited. The ineffectiveness of these strategies also makes them costly, resulting in wasted federal and local dollars that, if invested in initiatives specially designed to address the effects of poverty, could yield positive outcomes for students and maximize the taxpayer investment. The paragraphs that follow explain why grade retention, class size reduction, test prep, and an ad hoc accumulation of externally funded student supports are not effective.

Grade Retention

Grade retention is used when students fail to demonstrate sufficient mastery of key academic skills or are unable to pass courses required for

grade promotion. Chronic absenteeism is a key driver of grade retention. Students who do not attend school regularly have trouble mastering critical academic skills and/or passing courses, and are compelled to repeat the grade. The theory behind grade retention is twofold: first, it is thought that providing extra time will enable students to acquire core academic competencies and, second, it is believed that the fear of grade retention will propel students to try harder to master the key academic material required to pass the course. In practice, there is little evidence that grade retention works and compelling evidence that students who are retained, especially if it occurs more than once, have considerably lower odds of graduating from high school.¹⁰

The growth of grade retention policies and multiple grade promotion gates, such as third, fifth, and eighth grade, has led in some states to growing numbers of middle-grade students who are two or more years over age¹¹. No one is angrier than a 16-year-old eighth-grader, and there are few effective strategies to get these students back on track. In a 2009 analysis, Andrew Martin found that grade retention had a consistently negative impact on student motivation, engagement, and academic performance, undercutting the very goals of grade retention practices¹². Moreover, in a perverse way, some high school students, in schools where grade retention has become a norm, and therefore lost much of its stigma, use grade retention to shop for better or different teachers. If they don’t like a teacher, they skip class, confident that they can take the class again with another teacher the following year.

It should be noted that a distinction can be drawn between grade retention and grade promotion policies. It is possible to have strong grade promotion policies, which establish key points in time when students need to demonstrate mastery of key academic skills to move on to the next

grade, without using grade retention as the default remediation strategy. Students failing to meet the promotion gate can be designated to receive individualized tutoring tailored to their unique learning needs or can be asked to attend intensive summer, Saturday, or after-school extra-help programs that employ evidence-based strategies and are aligned with classroom lessons to close critical skill and knowledge gaps.

One reason why grade retention may remain popular despite the evidence against its effectiveness is that it is perceived not to cost much, if anything. This perception is an artifact of how public education is often funded. In school districts that receive per pupil funding from local, state, and federal revenue sources, funding is based on the number of pupils in a school or district, and not their grade progression. In short, whether a student is promoted from third to fourth grade or retained in third grade, the school and district receives the same funding. However, in terms of total dollars needed to educate a student, or the true cost of educating a student successfully to a given outcome, grade retention is incredibly costly. Given that grade retention often has negative rather than positive effects, the actual cost is much higher. If the grade retention ends up contributing to the factors that propel a student to drop out, then it is in part responsible for the lost tax revenue and increased social service costs that research has shown are incurred when a student drops out of secondary school.

Grade retention is incredibly costly:
Take the simple case of a school district that spends \$10,000 in local, state, and federal funds to educate each student. If a student repeats third grade, the cost of educating that student to a third-grade standard has doubled from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Moreover, the cost of providing that student with a kindergarten through third grade education has increased 25 percent - from \$40,000 to \$50,000.

By contrast, if an intensive summer intervention, at a cost of \$2,000 per student, or even a targeted prevention intervention, such a one-on-one tutoring or mentoring at the cost of \$500 per student with solid evidence of success were proposed as the best intervention for students at risk of not meeting grade promotion criteria, these strategies would erroneously be viewed as additional costs, and cut when funds are tight. Yet, from a return-on-investment and total cost-to-educate-to-standards perspective, effective summer intervention programs and high quality mentoring and tutoring for struggling students are far more cost effective than grade retention.

Class Size Reduction

The economist Edward Lazear has elegantly shown how the contradictions of class size reduction can be reconciled¹³. The evidence shows that class size reduction yields significant positive results in only a few narrow situations, primarily when very significant class size reductions - to 15 students or fewer - are applied to classes of low-income students, particularly in the early grades. Yet, most practicing teachers and administrators advocate for class size reduction. In fact, small increases in class size—adding one or two more students per classroom—are often seen as major setbacks only to be taken in times of extreme economic duress. Lazear argues that, through class size reduction, teachers are trying to minimize the odds that they will be overwhelmed by disruptive, distracting student behavior. In short, the larger the class, the greater the likelihood that teachers will have numerous distractions, rather than just one or two students

whose behavior disrupts classroom learning. Administrators explicitly or implicitly see the value of attempting to reduce the behavioral load in classrooms because the bane of their existence is office referrals: students sent to the office for acting out or behaving inappropriately in class. Administrators recognize that if teachers cannot manage their classrooms, not only does instruction suffer, but also administrators will be distracted from their tasks by the sheer number of students sitting in the office. Seen in this light, class size reduction is in essence the go-to intervention teachers and administrators use to offset the effect students in need of additional behavior support have on classroom learning. Since it is a broad-stroked and non-directed strategy—it does not directly seek to improve student behavior, just limit its effect – class size reduction is a low impact, and hence high-cost strategy¹⁴. In contrast, behavior coaching that is designed to address each student’s unique behavioral needs can be delivered at a low cost by nonprofit partners that deploy national service members or community volunteers and is more likely to deliver strong results.

Test Prep

If grade retention is viewed as a no-cost solution to the effects of poverty on students’ ability to attend and try, and class size reduction is viewed as an implicit strategy to address student behavior, then test prep is simply seen as a necessity. Given the realities of high-stakes testing, schools view test prep as a means to narrow and focus student effort on the most essential skills needed to reach mandated levels of performance on state or local assessments. Schools calculate that students on their own will not do the necessary work to get ready for the exam and that regular classroom instruction is not sufficient. The effectiveness of test prep, however, is weakened by the same ramifications of poverty that plague classroom instruction: poor attendance, inappropriate

behavior, and inconsistent effort. Test prep may be even further affected by these factors as students view test prep as repeating prior instruction often in a very rigid and non-engaging manner. As a result, students determine that not much will be missed if they skip the class, act out, or tune out.

By the time they are early adolescents, students who live in poverty are often managing complex lives with a fair degree of autonomy. They are balancing home responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings and providing elder or even parent care, and the need or desire to make money. In their cost-benefit analysis, if they believe not much is going on in the classroom because it is only test prep, then they make the calculation that it is a good time to attend to other aspects of their lives. This decision to be elsewhere or not put forth much effort in test prep is also propelled by the fact that many “high stakes” assessments actually have limited or no stakes for students, as they are used to evaluate the success of the school and, increasingly, teachers and administrators. However, the very fact that administrators and teachers view students as not trying on something which does matter to the school, or teacher’s and administrator’s ability to retain their jobs or earn a promotion, can lead to a further loss of hope and decreased investment in students. Perceived lack of effort among the highest-need students can also provide implicit justification for focusing attention on students who are close to proficiency rather than those with the largest skill gaps.¹⁵

Ad Hoc Accumulation of Externally Funded Student Supports

The final de facto student support strategy which predominates in schools that serve high poverty populations is a hodgepodge of externally funded student support programs. Schools, by and large, are aware that many of their students do need extra supports. As a result, they accept any help that comes their way, as long as it is fully or

partly paid for by someone else. This leads to a “random acts of kindness” approach to supporting struggling students. In any given year, as external funding ebbs and flows, there is a different collection of programs in the school serving a different subset of student needs. The effectiveness of this approach is undermined at four levels.

First, there is usually a lack of strategic matching of the service provided to student need. Many schools do not conduct need assessments. As a result, the students in need of additional support are not always accurately identified, the type of support struggling students need is often not understood, and the scale and intensity of student need is often overlooked. Thus, there can be too much of one type of support and too little or none at all of other essential supports.

Second, there is typically little coordination between external support providers and classroom teachers, resulting in a lack of alignment between the services provided and classroom lessons. The classic example here is the after-school tutoring program that gives students a pre-test, identifies student weaknesses, remediates them successfully, but focused on fractions when the student’s test at the end of the week is on probability. This lack of alignment results in many students participating in the afterschool programming failing the test. Numerous evaluations of after-school tutoring programs have revealed that these programs have limited effectiveness if the content is not directly linked to classroom learning¹⁶. Most recently, researchers from the University of Maryland and Rowan University conducted a randomized comparison of students in after-school programs to a control group of students without any educational services beyond the traditional school hours. The researchers found “no differences between the performance of the students in the treatment group and those in the control group on measures of conduct problems, academic

performance, school attendance or any of the intermediate behaviors targeted.”¹⁷ Yet, in the few cases when effort was expended to explicitly link after-school activities with classroom needs and student behaviors in school, much stronger impacts were found.¹⁸

Third, there is no stability. Student support programs come and go as their funding waxes and wanes. This prevents improvement over time, and the creation of an integrated set of providers, organized against identified student need. It also wreaks havoc on the relationships students have formed with the external providers. Students who live in poverty are, in many respects, starved for adult attention and support. When this support is available one year and then simply gone the next year, it further exacerbates students’ perception that adult support is inherently unreliable. This has the negative effect of making students less willing to seek adult support in the future.

Finally, there is limited accountability for supporting overall student success. If external student support providers essentially have to pay for themselves, they are often driven to focus on the outcomes that can be directly attributed to their efforts. As a result, adult effort is directed to smaller and more fragmented outcomes often involving tallies of services provided rather than towards a collective effort to enable students to attend, behave, believe they can succeed, feel connected to school, and put forth the effort needed to learn and complete their schoolwork.

Supplemental Educational Services (SES), federal policymakers’ laudable effort to provide additional support for low-income students attending low-performing schools through the No Child Left Behind Act, is an excellent example of an effort to support struggling students that has yielded inconsistent advancement among participating students while incurring significant costs. SES has faced all four challenges outlined above: mismatch



between student need and the services provided, lack of alignment with classroom learning, inconsistency, and misdirected focus on preset goals as opposed to adjusting curriculum to ensure students receive the right support at the right time. As a result, research indicates that supplemental educational services participation has a minimal effect on students' academic achievement.¹⁹ In fact, an analysis of Minnesota students revealed that the academic performance of students who received tutoring services from SES providers did not differ from the performance of their non-participating peers.²⁰

In sum, providing student supports in high-poverty schools is under-conceptualized. Yet, on the ground, in classrooms and schools the need exists. Teachers and administrators experience firsthand the grinding effects of poverty as expressed through students' sporadic attendance, inappropriate behavior, and constrained effort. Seeking to mitigate poverty's effects with the avenues open to them and the tools at their disposal, front-line educators have adopted a series of responses that have become routinized into standard operating procedures. As such, they are often not subject to much reflection or analysis. When examined more closely, it becomes clear that grade retention, class size reduction, test prep, and an ad hoc collection of externally funded student supports are neither effective nor cost-efficient means of providing students with the supports they need to overcome the unique challenges presented by living in poverty. In some circumstances, these strategies exacerbate rather than mitigate student need and in so doing, further drive up their cost. In this time of limited resources, it is critical that we invest in student support strategies that are specifically tailored to address the unique needs of students living in poverty, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of direct student supports.

The Solution

Amass the Additional People Needed to Provide Coordinated, Consistent, Direct, Evidence-Based Student Supports

The first step in creating more effective and cost-efficient student supports is to openly acknowledge student need. Poverty can neither be willed away nor ignored, nor should it be used as an excuse for poor teaching or failing schools. If we are serious about providing all students with real pathways to post-secondary success, and as a nation we need to be, we must recognize that these pathways will not become available until we combine efforts to improve teacher quality and school turnaround with an evidence-based and strategic approach to providing student supports.

Existing evidence and experience highlights the critical, core components of an evidence-based and strategic approach to providing student supports. In order to provide students with these supports, it is necessary both to develop a problem solving capacity and to be able to change student behavior. Neither of these approaches is possible without first forming a positive relationship

with the student. This is why student support is ultimately a person-to-person retail business. In the lowest performing schools, with high percentages of students living in poverty, strategies need to be developed to amass sufficient person power to form supportive relationships with the hundreds of struggling students in need of individualized support. A second shift of well-trained adults, who are able to help teachers provide these supports at the scale and intensity required, needs to be mobilized, from both inside and outside of the school. Key sources of this person power include national service members serving through AmeriCorps and Senior Corps programs made possible by the Corporation for National and Community Service and community volunteers organized by intermediaries like the United Way, volunteer centers, and through city-wide efforts supported by mayors' offices working in partnership with Cities of Service. This second shift of caring adults can be strategically integrated into the school design to help identify students' needs, implement early warning systems, and deliver the right supports to the right students at the right time.

Use Data to Identify Students’ Needs

To start, there is a need to understand the scope, scale, and intensity of student needs, and how these needs are distributed and concentrated across schools. At the most basic level, this means measuring and making available information on the extent of chronic absenteeism, behavioral challenges, course performance, and academic achievement at the school level. This information is currently available in some states and districts, but often is not.

Academic achievement data, thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act, is the most readily available. However, academic readiness data (how close students are to expected grade level skills) for incoming elementary, middle, and high school students is often not available, making it difficult for educators to discern what critical skills students lack, and will need focused attention to acquire. Behavioral data of the most basic level –the number and type of students suspended and for which offense—is often not accessible outside of the school that generates it. The recent US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights survey shows that more detailed behavioral data can be collected and disseminated.

Perhaps the most essential piece of information is currently among the least accessible: the number of students who are chronically absent—those who miss 10 percent or more of school or are on a path

About National Service Members and Community Volunteers

The Corporation for National and Community Service is the largest provider of federal grants to support national service programs such as AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. AmeriCorps provides opportunities for more than 82,000 Americans each year to give intensive service to their communities and country through three programs: AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps). Senior Corps taps the skills, talents, and experience of more than 330,000 Americans age 55 and older each year to meet a wide range of community challenges through three programs: RSVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program. CNCS also oversees the Volunteer Generation Fund, which supports the deployment of community volunteers.

to missing a month or more of school—and, the number who attend regularly – students with five or fewer absences in the course of the school year. Currently, as cited in the recent report, “The Importance of Being In School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools,” only four states - Georgia, Florida, Maryland, and Rhode Island—make this important attendance data publicly available. A handful of school districts also report the data but are not sharing it in a timely manner which would allow educators to react to it, though New York City is heading in this direction.

This information on student need must be leveraged to target the right kinds of supports at the scale and intensity required. For example, if a high school learns that it will have 75 students entering ninth grade reading at the fifth grade level, then it needs to have a literacy intervention with evidence of effectiveness specifically designed for this population. This high school will also need to provide these supports to all 75 students. Having a single literacy lab that can serve 25 students would not be sufficient. Similarly, if data reveals that a school will have 50 new students with a history of chronic absenteeism, it needs to design a proactive campaign to make sure these students attend regularly and not wait until these students have missed a week or more of the first month of school.

While easily accessible school and student level information on the extent of chronic absenteeism, behavioral challenges, course performance, and academic achievement is essential, it is not sufficient. In order to maximize the effectiveness of student supports, it is critical to conduct building-level needs assessments and student surveys and/or focus groups. The data collected through these strategies will provide guidance as to the root causes behind the attendance, behavior, and academic data which will facilitate getting the right intervention to the right student at the right time. A growing set of tools is available to collect this survey data. Examples include: the Gallup Student Poll and teacher, parent, and student surveys such as the Chicago 5 Essentials, which many districts and states are collecting as part of their accountability systems.

Implement Early Warning Systems

It is essential to collect data on the educational challenges that stem from living in poverty and hamper student learning in order to organize a strategic and sufficient response²¹. However, a second key component of an effective student support system is the use of early warning indicators, the signals that a student is falling off track or is on track to a desired goal like high school graduation and college attainment. Evidence shows that, in high poverty environments, close to 50 percent of the students who will drop out of school start to show signs of distress as early as sixth grade. The key early warning

Role for National Service Members in Using Data to Identify Student Needs

AmeriCorps*VISTA members serve as data fellows to ensure that schools have the student data they need to identify struggling students and provide those students with the appropriate supports.

indicators are the ABCs—attendance, behavior and course performance, the very same variables identified as the mechanisms through which poverty exerts a negative influence on educational outcomes.

Emerging second generation early warning systems go beyond these core measures in two ways. First, they capture early indicators such as attendance patterns, office referrals, and failing a test or not turning in major assignments, enabling educators to intervene at the first sign of trouble. Second, they extend from their initial focus on grades six through nine and dropout prevention, to data sets that include kindergarten through grade 12 data to capture critical post-secondary success indicators.

In order for early warning indicators to be of use, real time or near real time data needs to be easily available at the teacher and classroom levels. Time has to be built into the school schedule for teams of adults, including teachers, school counselors, and trained national service members among others, who work with common sets of students to regularly analyze early warning indicator data, share insights into the root causes of off-track behaviors, devise interventions, assign champions, and monitor each intervention’s effectiveness. If

the intervention is not working, then the adult team supporting the student must increase the intensity and vary the modality until success is achieved. Many schools, however, are unable to dedicate

Role for national service members in helping to implement early warning systems

City Year AmeriCorps members deliver evidence-based literacy and math interventions, attendance coaching and behavior coaching, each of which is tailored to meet each student’s unique needs.

sufficient person power to carry through the interventions identified to meet student’s needs. As a full-time presence in schools, national service members, for example, represent a cost-effective human capital strategy for providing schools with the people needed to implement and deliver the needed support.

Teach Students Skills and Approaches to Increase their Personal Agency

As essential as a helping hand from an adult is to students in need of additional supports, it is also critical that we more formally teach students the skills and approaches they need to strengthen and expand their personal agency. Evidence-based programs that teach resiliency, self-management and regulation, study skills, conflict resolution, leadership, communication, and programs to create a college-going and career-focused student culture are important tools that need to be widely adopted.²²

Adopt Preventative, Real Time intervention, and Rapid Recovery Student Support Strategies

Redefining the goal of elementary and secondary education as having all students graduate from high school prepared for college and a career necessitates a substantial change in the mindset with which student supports are approached. Keeping all students on track to post-secondary success will require more thoughtful attempts to mitigate the negative effects of poverty before they impact student achievement. This will require more extensive prevention work. For example, enrolling students who had behavior issues in prior years in a conflict resolution course at the start of the year, or assigning students

who exhibited an off-track indicator the prior year to a success mentor—a role that can cost-effectively be filled by a national service member or community volunteer – will enable students to receive the support they need before they have exhibited any new signs of duress. In addition, through close monitoring of student progress, much more rapid intervention is possible. For example, if a student has miserably failed a mid-term, there is no need to wait for him or her to fail the final before action is taken. Instead, intense supports should immediately be provided to enable the student to catch up within the term and ultimately pass the course.²³ Finally, when prevention and real-time intervention are not sufficient, recovery opportunities should be rapid. If a student fails a first term course, they should be given opportunities to pass it during the second term rather than having to wait until the summer or the following year. If students see that they have no hope of earning on time promotion, then they are more likely to miss more school or act out in frustration.

Employ a Disciplined Multi-tiered Approach with Built-in Continuous Improvement Tools

In order for student supports to be both impactful and cost-effective it is necessary to reserve the most labor intensive and expensive interventions for those students for whom nothing else will work. In other words, it is important to practice intervention discipline by first making sure that strong prevention practices are in place, and then, when they are not sufficient, employing targeted, small group interventions before resorting to one-on-one, case-managed efforts. It is also important to closely track what interventions are

attempted for which students and continually evaluate if the intervention is working or if another approach is required. The core concept is to increase intensity and vary the modality of the intervention until it works. By keeping close track of which interventions work for which students and under what circumstances, it is possible to develop a strong local knowledge base and, through it, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of student support efforts. Fortunately, recent advances in early warning systems make what once would have been time consuming and complicated quite simple. Adults monitoring the early warning data, can enter the intervention selected, often from a drop down menu, and then on a quarterly basis, analyze which interventions led to improvements for which groups of students.

Successfully Deploying Community Volunteers and National Service Members to Provide Coordinated, Consistent, Direct Evidence-Based Student Supports

Schools serving large numbers of students facing the unique challenges associated with poverty must acquire additional people to deliver the individualized supports students need to reach their full potential. Currently, few schools are designed or staffed to provide customized supports to anywhere from 30 percent to 80 percent of the students, as is often the need in high poverty schools. This means that these high-poverty schools need to be infused with external people who are trained to implement evidence-based student supports. Fortunately, the supply of high-quality student supports and the organizational capacity to train and deploy this additional human capital into high-need schools has increased considerably within the nonprofit sector over the

past decade. Strong organizations with national reach, such as Boys and Girls Club, Communities In Schools, Big Brothers Big Sisters, a growing number of local United Way affiliates, and City Year have all enhanced their capacity to infuse struggling schools with well-trained people who are able to provide evidence-based student supports in struggling schools.

While there is a wealth of nonprofit providers focused on improving student achievement, the limited coordination and alignment that typically exists among these different groups minimizes their overall impact. In order to avoid replicating the pitfalls of the ad hoc, temporary assortment of student support providers, it is important to think through how to strategically select, combine, and deploy the growing number of high quality nonprofit partners so that they can be strategically integrated into the school design to advance student success. Cities of Service, which aims to create a network of municipal governments effectively leveraging citizen service to achieve measurable impact on pressing local challenges, can be very helpful in coordinating efforts across communities. To ensure the success of the school-nonprofit partner relationship, schools must provide partners with access to the data they need both to identify the students in need of support and to monitor their improvement. Schools must also understand the specific conditions the partner needs in order to implement their program with high fidelity, yielding the maximum impact for students and the school. If, for example, a certain school schedule is needed to ensure effective programming, then the school either has to be prepared to provide it, or inform the partner before they start working at the school that it will not be possible.

Role for community volunteers in preventative student support strategies

Philadelphia Graduation Coaches, an initiative led by the Mayor’s Office and supported by Cities of Service, provides struggling students with the support of a caring adult who can share critical educational information and guide students towards high school graduation. and postsecondary success.

Employ Different Approaches Based on the Scale and Intensity of Student Need

To determine which student support organizations should be deployed at the school level, it is critical to accurately diagnose the number of students in a given school who require additional support and the intensity of their needs. The temptation to create a standard student support package made broadly available regardless of the scale and intensity of need should be avoided. Instead, nonprofit partners should be selected based on their record of meeting the challenges which students, schools, or districts are facing. Similarly, full-time national service members who serve in schools throughout the school day may be better suited to address certain student needs, while community volunteers who devote a few hours a week to service may be ideal to address other issues. Some circumstances might require a combination of national service members and community volunteers. A high-poverty school with 50 struggling students on the cusp of reading proficiency will require a different type of support and nonprofit partner(s) than will a school with 250 struggling students performing far below grade level or a district that struggles with a mix of low-performing and the lowest performing schools, high rates of chronic absenteeism, and soaring dropout rates.

A High Poverty School with 50 Struggling Students at the Cusp of Reading Proficiency

A school that produces acceptable outcomes for students overall, but has 50 struggling students might benefit from a tutoring program and service-learning activities shown to improve students’ academic performance and engagement. Many nonprofit organizations

Nashville K-2 Reading Program: improving reading scores among students in elementary school
With the support of community volunteers organized through the Nashville K – 2 Reading Program, participating students increased their reading scores by an average of 7.65 reading levels, surpassing the goal of a 2-level increase, in the 2010-2011 school year.

bring well-trained community volunteers and AmeriCorps members into schools part time to deliver these critical programs. Examples of such programs include: the Nashville K -2 Reading Program, the Minnesota Reading Corps, Experience Corps and generationOn.

Through the Nashville K-2 Reading Program, spearheaded by Mayor Karl Dean, well-trained community volunteers go to schools once a week to tutor students in grades K-2 during the school day. The Minnesota Reading Corps also addresses students’ reading challenges by deploying AmeriCorps members to serve part time in schools to provide tutoring and literacy interventions to children as young as three years old. The AmeriCorps members work with the students through third grade to ensure that these students are able to read at grade level. This continual support from AmeriCorps members has yielded positive outcomes for participating children: *80 percent of program participants make more than a year’s worth of progress, outperforming similarly at-risk peers.* ²⁴

Recognizing that the Minnesota Reading Corps is an effective intervention in schools where a small number of students are in need of intensive reading support, Points of Light has built on the exceptional work done by the Minnesota Reading Corps by engaging community volunteers to provide expressive language development interventions to neighborhood youth between

three and five years old. Thus far, Points of Light has provided funding to five sites in North Carolina, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Florida, and Pennsylvania to implement this critical early literacy

model. To encourage students to be actively engaged in literacy activities, generationOn, the youth service enterprise of Points of Light, helps schools to implement service-learning and youth philanthropy programs shown to improve student engagement in critical academic areas. Specifically, generationOn leverages AmeriCorps members and community volunteers to provide academic standards-based lesson plans that teach young people to take positive action in their communities and develop skills of life-long civic engagement. Eighty-six percent of teachers surveyed believe that participation in the generationOn projects helped to improve student attitudes towards school, helping to improve their academic achievement.

One of these programs alone or a combination of these initiatives could be sufficient to help the 50 struggling students improve their academic achievement and engagement in classroom lessons, leading students to achieve proficiency. Since a school of this type faces a different scale of difficulty than do our nation’s lowest performing schools, the partnership between the school and just one of these partner organizations could sufficiently address the students’ reading struggles.

A Secondary School with 250 Students Multiple Grade Levels Behind

In contrast, a high-poverty school that educates hundreds of students, 250 of whom are multiple grade levels behind, demands a highly integrated collection of nonprofit organizations that successfully collaborate to improve school and student performance. Each nonprofit organization’s assets should be strategically leveraged so that the right nonprofit is delivering the right services to the right students.

Diplomas Now: Effectively addressing the early warning indicators
More than halfway through the 2011-2012 school year, there was a 63 percent reduction in the number of students failing English, a 44 percent reduction in the number of students off-track in attendance and a 61 percent decrease in the number of students off track in behavior.

For example, Diplomas Now – a proven approach to transforming the lowest performing secondary schools - combines the assets of Talent Development Secondary’s comprehensive, data-driven instructional support with City Year’s full-time AmeriCorps members and Communities In Schools’ case managers. Each of these organizations has a specific focus and tailors their approach based on student and school need. Talent Development Secondary focuses on analyzing student data, enhancing curriculum, developing educators, and establishing a “can do” school culture. Teams of full-time City Year AmeriCorps members deliver research-based direct student supports based on student data in the early warning indicators of attendance, behavior and course performance, the factors shown to most effectively predict the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. City Year’s 17- to 24- year-old AmeriCorps members are also able to leverage their near-peer (close in age) relationships with students to learn about serious out-of-school or health issues before they are discovered by other adults in the building. City Year AmeriCorps members are then able to share that information with the Communities In Schools staff member inside of the school who is able to identify, access, and facilitate critical wraparound supports. These supports may include leveraging AmeriCorps

members and community volunteers to surround these students with a community of support, encouraging them to stay in school and achieve in life. Having the organizations working in the school in this highly coordinated way enables the Communities In Schools case manager to get faster referrals of students in need of case-managed

supports, and in so doing increases their chance of being effective. Through this highly coordinated, comprehensive approach that leverages each organization’s unique assets, Diplomas Now is having a dramatic impact on student performance in the lowest performing schools.

A School District with Multiple Low-Performing Schools, High Rates of Chronic Absenteeism and Soaring Dropout Rates

Large urban school districts with a mix of low-performing and the lowest performing schools, high rates of chronic absenteeism, and large numbers of students dropping out require a unique, highly coordinated district-wide approach to addressing these large challenges. Districts in this situation benefit from forming strategic partnerships with an army of well-organized nonprofit partners that leverage community volunteers and part-time and/or full-time national service members to infuse early learning centers, elementary schools and secondary schools with the additional people needed to deliver the direct support large numbers of students in these districts require. Each nonprofit organization or initiative should address a specific grade band or area of difficulty based on the nonprofit’s assets and expertise. Working in close partnership with the school district, the nonprofits can form the continuum of care students in these districts require to reach their full potential.

This continuum of support could begin in Head Start Centers, which by partnering with Jumpstart could acquire the additional person power needed to serve more young children. Jumpstart ensures all children have equitable access to high quality

early learning programs by deploying part-time AmeriCorps members to Head Start Centers. These AmeriCorps members collaborate with Head Start staff to help young children develop the language and literacy skills needed to be successful in kindergarten and beyond. A randomized, controlled trial of Jumpstart’s model revealed that *young children working with Jumpstart outperformed same-classroom comparison students in literacy, school readiness, and socio-emotional skills.*²⁵

For elementary schools, the district could bring in additional literacy support for struggling students by partnering with Experience Corps. Leveraging support from AmeriCorps, Experience Corps engages older adults as tutors and mentors to children in urban elementary schools across the country.²⁶ These elementary schools may also consider partnering with Playworks, which leverages AmeriCorps members to facilitate play at recess, providing students at inner-city schools with an opportunity to exercise. *Seventy percent of*

*principals who partner with Playworks have seen a reduction in the number of fights and 75 percent of teachers report increased cooperation among students in the classroom*²⁷. The combination of literacy support from Experience Corps and behavioral support from Playworks would address the academic and behavioral challenges that interfere with many elementary students’ academic success.

To transform low-performing middle schools, districts may want to leverage AmeriCorps VISTA members to serve as data fellows to ensure that schools have the student data they need to

identify struggling students and provide those students with the appropriate supports. Once the data has been analyzed and the course of action determined, the school must have the well-trained people in place to deliver the requisite data-driven interventions.

City Year’s full-time AmeriCorps members are perfectly suited to this task. The City Year corps is trained on research-based interventions in literacy and math. By travelling with struggling students throughout the school day, City Year corps members are able to track students’ struggles and adjust interventions to meet those challenges. *During the 2010-11 school year, 85 percent of the students tutored by City Year improved their reading scores.*

In addition, middle and high school students at risk of disengaging from school need the connection to be made between their coursework and the working world to understand the relevance of classroom lessons. This is

where, at the middle school level, AmeriCorps members and community volunteers serving with Citizen Schools can be helpful. Citizen Schools partners with low-performing middle schools to provide students with the customized supports and additional learning time they need to be successful. Full-time AmeriCorps members supervise and coordinate community volunteers who teach unique, inspiring courses in their fields,

Experience Corps: improving students’ vocabulary and reading skills

A 2009 evaluation of Experience Corps showed that students benefiting from the Experience Corps program made 60 percent more progress in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, and 40 percent more progress in grade-specific reading skill development than did the control group.

*matched nonparticipants. An analysis of Citizen Schools’ youth outcomes in Boston revealed that participation in Citizen Schools’ programming was associated with higher math performance on classroom and standardized tests.*²⁸

At the high school level, skilled and corporate volunteers can be leveraged to keep at-risk students engaged in school. One program that has experienced tremendous success in doing this is HandsOn Inland Empire’s Promise Scholars

program. HandsOn Inland Empire, the volunteer program of Inland Empire United Way, provides meaningful volunteer opportunities for individuals, families, teams and corporate groups. The Promise Scholars program

leverages skilled and corporate volunteers to engage with students in the classroom and to provide at-risk students with experiential learning opportunities with local colleges, community colleges and trade schools. Early analysis has revealed that the program could increase high school completion rates for entire class cohorts by 10 percent and college-going rates by 30 percent.

Citizen Schools: improving attendance and performance on math tests

Two external evaluations revealed that, on average, students who participated in the Citizen Schools’ program had significantly higher attendance rates and higher math performance than did nonparticipants.

The lowest performing secondary schools - like the one described earlier in this section - require a unique approach. To effectively serve these schools, districts require a turnaround partner, such as Diplomas Now. This turnaround approach can be further strengthened by pairing it with a partner organization focused on creating a college- going culture. That is why Diplomas Now is collaborating with College Summit in a number of high-need high schools. College Summit helps to create a sustainable college- going culture in schools and communities

by identifying a group of influential, mid-tier students from the rising senior class who are trained at residential summer workshops to become Peer Leaders in their classrooms and to partner with their teachers, principals, and City Year’s AmeriCorps members to drive college- going culture in their schools. College Summit also couples its powerful peer work with educator training, postsecondary planning curricula for grades 9-12, and actionable data which are coupled with the early warning indicator data collected by Diplomas Now to provide a comprehensive approach to keeping students on track to graduate from high school prepared for college and a career.

The final piece of this continuum of care is to address the poverty distractors that occur outside of the schoolhouse. This is where organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and a growing legion of evidence-based mentoring, extended day, and summer programs come into play. Here, the key is still to connect their work to students’ progress in school. This will require continued work on developing means, protocols and tools to share student

attendance, behavior and course performance data with nonprofits working in the out-of-school time space, consistent with privacy laws and regulations.

This coordinated continuum of direct student support services from Head Start Centers to secondary schools can be aligned with city-wide strategies to address chronic absenteeism and dropout rates. Cities of Service is empowering cities to leverage community volunteers to work

in partnership with national service members to implement critically needed student support services. Examples of how community volunteers are working with schools to address chronic absenteeism include New York City’s “School Every Day NYC,” and the Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign. Through “School Every Day NYC,” the New York City Mayor’s Office is harnessing the power of community volunteers to serve as mentors for at-risk students to encourage greater attendance. So far, students with mentors have attended 11,820 more days than similar students without help. The Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign mobilizes Experience Corps members and church group volunteers to contact chronically absent students and their families to learn about and help to address barriers to student attendance. These city-wide efforts have resulted in the halving of chronic absenteeism levels among Baltimore’s middle school students.

Just as New York and Baltimore are harnessing the power of citizen service to address chronic absenteeism, Philadelphia and Los Angeles are mobilizing citizens to address the dropout crisis.

In spring 2011, Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola launched “Love Your School” as part of his high-impact service plan, Little Rock Serves. After one year of implementation, of the 242 students in the program, 79 percent scored “Proficient” or higher in literacy (compared to 60 percent of students who were not in the program) and 72 percent scored “Proficient” or higher in math (compared to 62 percent who were not in the program).

The Philadelphia Graduation Coaches Campaign, which is led by the mayor’s office with support from Cities of Service, is designed to provide struggling students with the support of a caring adult who can share critical educational information and guide students towards high school graduation and postsecondary success. More than 3,700 Graduation Coaches have received training and are working to accomplish the Mayor’s goal of a city-wide graduation rate of 80 percent by 2015. Los Angeles Student Recovery Days, a joint initiative between the mayor’s office and the Los Angeles Unified School District, strives to provide students, who are at risk of dropping out or have already made the decision to leave school, with the extra support they need to re-engage. Over 1,800 volunteers have worked with school officials to identify and contact over 13,000 students who are at-risk or have already dropped out. More than 2,300 of the students contacted have returned to school.

In sum, to effectively solve the student support puzzle, nonprofit partners and the community volunteers and part-time and/or full-time national service members they deploy should be leveraged based on their ability to meet the specific student, school, or district need.

The Need for Secure Funding

In order for evidence-based student supports to mitigate the effects of poverty and, in so doing, help enable all students to graduate from high school prepared for college and career, it is necessary to establish a secure, long-term funding source for effective strategies and programs. Poverty is a stubborn foe. For students to get the supports they need to overcome its distractors so they can attend school regularly, stay out of trouble

School Every Day NYC: improving school attendance rates
Students with mentors have attended 11,820 more days than similar students without help.

and try hard to succeed, the necessary funding needs to be consistently and continually present as students progress from early childhood education programs through secondary school graduation. The challenges of poverty, moreover, change as students grow older. Although a strong Pre-K program prepares a student to start school well, the student is not inoculated against the ramifications of neighborhood violence or increased sibling or eldercare responsibilities as they reach early adolescence. In short, evidence-based student supports need to be seen as a core function of schools that educate large numbers of students who live in poverty. As a core function, these supports should receive sustained funding. Effective student supports cannot be there one year and gone the next.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility

By offering states flexibility pertaining to certain elements of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Department of Education provided local and state leaders with a unique opportunity to more effectively leverage federal funds intended for direct student supports. Specifically, states are now empowered to use dollars previously set aside for Supplemental Education Services (SES), the primary funding stream for direct student supports under No Child Left Behind, for more effective, comprehensive student support programs. Recognizing that SES has not effectively provided the right students with the right support at the right time and intensity, many states have asked and received approval to waive the requirement that districts with low-performing schools set aside 20 percent of their Title I Part A dollars for SES.

Some states plan to empower district leaders to use these funds to support school improvement efforts, including developing partnerships with organizations shown to deliver research-based, targeted student supports. For example, Louisiana has received freedom from the SES requirement and plans to encourage districts and schools to use these freed funds to improve the state's lowest-performing schools. One of the ways the state is encouraging districts to leverage these freed funds is through the development of school-based partnerships with external organizations shown to provide the support needed to improve student achievement. Similarly, under ESEA flexibility, Massachusetts will be requiring districts to set aside up to 25 percent of their Title I Part A funds to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions and direct student supports in the state's lowest performing schools and those with large achievement gaps. Finally, Rhode Island plans to use the freed federal dollars to support interventions in the lowest-performing and large achievement gap schools. Rhode Island districts are encouraged to focus these funds on providing direct supports and services to struggling students by implementing early warning systems and response to intervention. The impact of these efforts should be closely monitored and those with the greatest impact used to inform continuing guidance to states who seek flexibility waivers or their renewal.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Reauthorization

Like state and local leaders, some federal legislators acknowledge the need for a designated funding stream for evidence-based student supports. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization proposals from Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate recognize the need to provide funding for these evidence-based student supports, but have approached funding for these critical supports differently.

The Senate's bipartisan Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act of 2011 requires or encourages districts to partner with nonprofit or community-based partners to implement specific, evidence-based reforms shown to meet struggling students' needs thereby improving academic achievement. Examples include the following: Section 1116 – School Improvement, in which districts are required to partner with organizations that have a demonstrated record of helping schools to implement research-based instructional programs that provide students with needed interventions and appropriate instructional supports; and Section 1201 – Secondary School Reform, which requires districts to partner with organizations that have a demonstrated record of helping struggling secondary schools and their feeder middle schools to implement reform strategies shown to increase the likelihood that students will graduate from secondary school prepared for college and a career. Required reform strategies include the implementation of early warning indicator and intervention systems, the provision of credit and dropout recovery, implementing grade and school transition programs and supports, and delivering data-driven interventions.

The Encouraging Innovation and Effective Teachers Act, which was passed by the House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee, takes a different approach. It designates a separate funding stream for non-governmental entities to provide direct student supports. This structure demonstrates that the bill's authors recognize the need to devote federal resources to the delivery of critical student support services. Greater clarity on the type of services that can be provided, the evidence base required for these services, and the quality of eligible providers, however, would likely strengthen this approach.

Finally, the Senate's Fiscal Year 2013 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill draws particular attention to the fact that Title I funds are allowed to be used to implement evidence-based, integrated academic and non-academic student supports provided through partnerships between schools and nonprofit providers.

While the various policy ideas on funding student supports at the state level, in the Senate, in the House, and the recent action by the Senate Appropriations Committee are a positive step forward in recognizing the need for funding and provide different mechanisms through which it could occur, there is a need to go further.

The current delay in completing re-authorization of ESEA provides time for bolder thinking to occur. If one examines how current Title I funding is used at the school level, it becomes clear that in many ways it supports the standard operating procedures for student supports that have evolved into high-cost, low-impact strategies via class size reduction and test prep activities. Moreover, it is not uncommon when funds are tight, for schools to cut effective student supports, to maintain smaller classes and test prep-focused extra help programs, and in so doing, create ad hoc, temporary student support structures. Finally, grade retention is implicitly supported by the per-pupil funding mechanism of Title I, where every student in the school, whether they are repeating a grade or not, brings in the same additional dollars, making ineffective grade retention cheaper for the school than higher impact student support interventions. As a result, it is time to rethink how Title I funds are allocated at the school level in the highest need schools.

ESEA reauthorization should require that districts with schools that have large numbers of students facing the unique challenges associated with poverty use Title I funds to provide these students

with evidence-based direct student supports. These direct student supports should be data-driven – designed to meet each student's unique needs, tightly integrated into the school structure so that students receive the right supports at the right time, and feature a multi-tiered approach to ensure that students are receiving the right services at the needed intensity. Senate and House policy makers ought to require these schools to invest in increasing their capacity to provide student supports. One way to increase this capacity would be to partner with nonprofit organizations, which leverage national service members or community volunteers, with proven records of successfully providing evidence-based student supports. Districts with these schools should also be held accountable by being required to show how these student support providers will be integrated into a broader set of comprehensive whole school reforms, guided by a district-wide early warning system, and in the lowest performing schools, led by an organizing whole school reform partner.

State and Local Level

At the state and local level, innovative funding practices that reward districts that develop effective alternatives to grade retention and invest cost savings in evidence-based, higher impact, lower cost student supports should be explored. State and local decision makers should, in particular, explore social impact bonds (SIB). Under the SIB framework, government agencies define an outcome they want to accomplish and agree to pay an external organization a sum of money if the external organization achieves that outcome. In the context of overcoming the poverty challenge, districts could agree to pay external providers if they successfully achieve a previously agreed upon set of student support outcomes. This would incentivize schools and districts to adopt cost-effective, high-impact evidence-based strategies that lead to drastically improved student outcomes, through start-up funding. A share of



the cost-savings - generated by the higher-impact, lower- cost student supports - could then be expanded to student supports in high-poverty schools.

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

Decision makers at the local, state, and federal levels are starting to recognize the need to provide sustainable funding for evidence-based student supports. Leaders at all levels of government recognize that most of the organizations providing effective direct student supports rely upon AmeriCorps and Senior Corps members. Both programs are supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service. City-wide initiatives, like those pioneered by Cities of Service, rely upon funding from another CNCS program – the Volunteer Generation Fund. Our students’ increasing needs, schools’ desperation for extra people power, and America’s economic and social imperative to meet these needs requires consistent, increased funding in CNCS.

Conclusion

In order for college and career readiness to become a reality for all of the nation’s students, it is necessary to have a strategic and evidence-based approach to mitigating the effects of poverty on school success. Poverty can propel students to attend school less often, struggle behaviorally, and to put forth diminished effort. In short, it interferes with students’ ability to attend, behave and try. This in turn greatly complicates school reform efforts because our best strategies won’t work if students are not in school on a regular basis, staying out of trouble, and getting their schoolwork done. In order to successfully confront the poverty challenge, we need to rethink our approach to student supports. Current efforts, which revolve around grade retention, class size reduction, test prep, and an ad hoc collection of temporary externally funded student supports, are not working and will not effectively provide the student supports required.

To move towards high impact, cost-effective student support strategies, we need to adopt an evidence-based framework for providing student supports and wisely deploying the increased capacity of nonprofit organizations that leverage community volunteers and national

service members to provide the human capital and expertise needed to implement and scale evidence-based student supports in schools that serve high-poverty populations. Decision makers at all levels of government must recognize that student supports are necessary to achieving the educational outcomes the nation needs to succeed, and must ensure that secure and continuous federal and state funding streams be developed to enable the implementation of high impact, cost-effective student supports at the scale and intensity required. Only with this continuous funding will America achieve the national imperative of providing all students with the support they need to graduate from high school prepared for college and career, and get back on track to having the most educated citizenry in the world.

Endnotes

1. OECD (2011), Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2011-en>.

2. Claudia Goldin & Lawrence F. Katz, 2007. “Long-Run Changes in the Wage Structure: Narrowing, Widening, Polarizing,” Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Economic Studies Program, The Brookings Institution, vol. 38(2007-2), pages 135-168.

3. Duncan, Greg & Murnane, Richard, Ed. (2011). Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances. Russell Sage and Spencer Foundations: New York, NY. Retrieved from https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/Whither%20Opportunity_Executive%20Summary.pdf.

4. Farrington, C.A. et al (2012) “Teaching Adolescents to become learners: The role of non-cognitive factors in shaping school performance: a critical literature review.” Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

5. Balfanz, Robert & Nield, Ruth (2006) “An Extreme Degree of Difficulty: The Educational Demographics of Urban Neighborhood High Schools.” Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, Vol. 11(2). Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=gse_pubs

6. Paul E. Barton (2003). “Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress.” Policy Information Report, October 2003. ETS. pages 1-42. Retrieved from: <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICPARSING.pdf>.

7. Tough, P. (2012) *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

8. T. Fabelo et al. (2012) “Breaking School’s Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Student’s Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement.” New York, NY: Justice Center/PPRI Institute.

9. Allensworth, E. & Easton, J. (2007) “What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools” Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

10. Jimerson, S; Anderson, G. & Whipple, A. (2002) “Winning the Battle and Losing the Way: Examining the Relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school.” Psychology in the Schools, Vol. 39(4), Retrieved from http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/PITS_DropoutRetention2002.pdf.

11. “States to Take Aim at Third Grade Retention.” Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/11/15brief-3.h31.html?qs=grade+retention>.

12. Martin, A. J. (2009). “Age appropriateness and motivation, engagement, and performance in high school: Effects of age within cohort, grade retention, and delayed school entry.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 101(1), Feb 2009, 101-114.doi: 10.1037/a0013100.

13. Edward P. Lazear (2000). “Smaller Class Size No Magic Bullet.” Hoover Digest, January 2000, No.1. Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Retrieved from: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/6948>.

14. Hoxby, C. (2000). “The Effects of Class Size on Student Achievement: New Evidence from Population Variation.”*The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2000) 115 (4): 1239-1285. doi: 10.1162/003355300555060.

15. Source: Supovitz, J. (2009). “Can high stakes testing leverage educational improvement? Prospects from the last decade of testing and accountability reform.” *Journal of Educational Change*, Volume 10, Numbers 2-3 (2009), 211-227, DOI: 10.1007/s10833-009-9105-2. Retrieved from <http://www.springerlink.com/content/86mj551n23l72047/export-citation/>.

16. Dynarski, M., James-Burdumy, S., Moore, M., Rosenberg, L., Deke, J., Mansfield, W., et al. (2004). “When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program: New findings.” Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, U.S. Department of Education.

Dynarski, M., Moore, M., Mullens, J., Gleason, P., James-Burdumy, S., Rosenberg, L., et al. (2003). “When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program: Year 1 report.” Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

James-Burdumy, S., Dynarski, M., Moore, M., Deke, J., Mansfield, W., Pistorino, C., et al. (2005). “When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community

Learning Centers program.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

17. D. Gottfredson et al. (2010). “Effects of Participation in After-School Programs for Middle School Students: A Randomized Trial.” Philadelphia, PA: Journal of Educational Effectiveness, July – September (3), p. 305.

18. Kauh, T. (2011) “AfterZone: Outcomes for Youth Participating in Providence’s After-School System.” Providence, RI: Public/Private Ventures.

19. Heinrich, C.J., R.H. Meyer, and G. Whitten. (2010) “Supplemental Education Services under No Child Left Behind: Who Signs Up, and What Do They Gain?” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 32 (June): 273-298.

Rickles, J.H. and M.K. Barnhart. (2007) “The Impact of Supplemental Educational Services Participation on Student Achievement: 2005-06. Report of the Los Angeles Unified School District Program.” *Evaluation and Research Branch, Planning, Assessment and Research Division* Publication No. 352.

20. Burch, P. 2007. “Supplemental Educational Services under NCLB: Emerging Evidence and Policy Issues.” Boulder: Educational Policy Research Unit, University of Colorado.

21. Balfanz, R; Bridgeland, J; Bruce, M & Hornig Fox, J. (2011). “The Use of Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems to Build a Grad Nation.” Web. http://www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/on_track_for_success.pdf.

22. Tough, P. (2012) *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

23. Fuchs, D & Fuchs, L. (2006). “Introduction to Response to Intervention: What, Why, and How Valid is it?” Nashville, TN: Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. Retrieved from <http://www.scred.k12.mn.us/School/documents/FuchsFuchsWhatisRTIArticle.pdf>.

24. Gozali-Lee, E.; Mohr, C & Mueller, D. (2011) "Minnesota Reading Corps Evaluation." Wilder Research: St. Paul, Minnesota.

25. Harris, Sarah & Beck, Laura. (2011). "Impact of Individualized, Supplementary Preschool Intervention on Literacy, School Readiness, and Socioemotional Skills."

26. Morrow-Howell, Nancy; Jonson-Reid, Melissa; McCrary, Stacey; Lee, YungSoo Lee & Spitznagel, Ed. (2009). "Evaluation of Experience Corps: Student Reading Outcomes." Washington University: St. Louis, Missouri.

27. Sagawa, Shirley. (2010). *The American Way to Change: How National Service & Volunteers Are Transforming America*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

28. Diehl Vile, Juliet & Arcaira, Erikson. (2010). "Evaluation of Citizen Schools." Policy Studies Associates, Inc.



