



## **Experiencing Success**

A Review of Research on the Effectiveness of Experience Corps

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## ***Introduction***

Nearly two decades of research confirm the common sense propositions that one-on-one tutoring and mentoring improve academic and social outcomes for children, and that purposeful activity benefits older adults. Research also shows that the impact on both groups is greater when tutoring and service programs include adequate training and support, careful collaboration with the school or other host agency, multiple tutoring sessions each week, and a coherent program design.<sup>1</sup> (For specific examples of related research, please see endnote 1.)

Experience Corps was developed with explicit attention to research and to previous practice.<sup>2</sup> Based on a concept paper by the late John Gardner, Experience Corps is the award-winning program that engages Americans 55 and older in vital public and community service. The current model focuses on placing teams of older adults in urban public schools as tutors and mentors. Today, more than 1,000 Experience Corps members are serving in 100 elementary and middle schools in a dozen cities across the country.

The Experience Corps program model incorporates many research-based best practices, including intensive training for participants, a team-based structure that builds a “critical mass” of participants in each school, a variety of service roles, incentives (such as a monthly stipend), and high levels of commitment (10-15 hours per week) from most participants. Each local project receives assistance from the Experience Corps national office and implements the core elements of the program design.

Experience Corps’s careful design has yielded results. Now in its seventh year, the program is no longer merely a promising start-up. It has earned a strong reputation among participating older adults, educators, local and national officials, and experts. Local projects have collected numerous testimonials and citations; journalists and opinion leaders have featured the program in the media. Author and professor Robert Putnam devoted a chapter to the Philadelphia Experience Corps in his influential book, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2003).

The sections below describe highlights of research, evaluation, and internal assessment related to Experience Corps. Taken together, the results strongly suggest that implementing the elements of the Experience Corps program model produces powerful positive outcomes for children, older adults, schools, and communities.

## ***Scientific Research Studies***

Over the last several years, two research studies using rigorous statistical methods have confirmed the value of the Experience Corps model. One study, conducted by researchers from the University of Virginia, focused on benefits for children; the other, an ongoing clinical trial by researchers at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, focuses on benefits for older adults along with the children and schools they serve. Taken together, these two studies demonstrate the promise of Experience Corps, and provide a scientifically valid foundation on which future research can build.

University of Virginia Study.<sup>3</sup> Two researchers from the University of Virginia's Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) studied an Experience Corps site in the South Bronx during the school year 1998-1999. Fifty-six first graders identified by teachers as at-risk for reading difficulties were tested using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) assessment, and randomly assigned to two different cohorts. The first cohort ("Cohort A") received intensive tutoring (40+ sessions over three to four months) from trained Experience Corps participants from September-January. Children in the control group ("Cohort B") received no tutoring or special services during the first semester. From January-June, students in Cohort A received no tutoring and students in Cohort B received the same 40+ tutoring sessions. The study found that:

- When students from both cohorts were re-tested in January, "the children who received one-on-one tutoring (Cohort A) scored significantly higher than the children who did not receive tutoring (Cohort B)... Children in Cohort A had a mean total test score of **90.96** out of a possible score of 112, while children in Cohort B had a mean total test score of only **61.08**." The results of post-tests in June 1999 show that Cohort B had caught up with Cohort A; there were **no significant differences** between the two tutored groups at the end of the school year.<sup>4</sup>
- Tutored students "were significantly stronger in beginning reading skills than the closely matched comparison group."
- Tutored students read almost twice as many words accurately per minute, on average, than non-tutored students: 25.12 words per minute compared to 14.40 words per minute.

Johns Hopkins University Study.<sup>5</sup> A research team from Johns Hopkins University's Center on Aging and Health, led by Dr. Linda P. Fried, has completed the first year of a two-year clinical trial comparing 128 Experience Corps participants in Baltimore City (ages 60-86) to a comparable control group. Baltimore's Experience Corps participants all serve 15 hours or more each week, and faithfully return year after year; the local project has achieved an 80% retention rate.

The interim results were presented by Dr. Thomas Glass of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions to the AmeriCorps/national service community on September 2, 2003. Dr. Glass reported that:

- Sixty-three percent (63%) of Experience Corps members are more physically active as a result of their participation in the program.
- Participation in Experience Corps slows the decline in walking speed that is observed among non-participants.
- Researchers measured declines in participants' number of falls and need for canes.
- Participants themselves report that they are in better health and feel stronger.

Dr. Glass stated that these results "while preliminary... suggest that giving back to your community may slow the aging process in ways that lead to a higher quality of life in older adults."

In addition to improving health outcomes for the participating adults, Experience Corps in Baltimore shows promise for improving standardized test results, reducing the number of

students referred to the principal's office for disciplinary action, and increasing teachers' feelings of support and self-confidence.

### ***Expert Evaluations***

Since its founding, Experience Corps programs have been the subject of three detailed evaluations conducted by expert researchers. All three strongly suggest that the program increases student academic achievement, benefits teachers, and improves the well-being of Experience Corps members. All three evaluations also show that the program earns enthusiastic support from large majorities of participating teachers, administrators, and older adults.

*2001-2002 Temple University Evaluation of Philadelphia Experience Corps.*<sup>6</sup> This year-long evaluation was conducted by researchers from Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning.<sup>7</sup> The evaluation compared scores for 510 tutored students on a standardized reading test (Fountas/Pinnel) administered after the first and third marking periods. It also analyzed detailed surveys completed by 88 tutors and 58 teachers.

Highlights include:

- Sixty-nine percent (69.2%) of tutored students improved their reading scores relative to their grade level.
- The mean improvement in test scores was 2.81 Fountas/Pinnel standards, a significant increase.
- Nearly all (96.6%) of the surveyed tutors reported positive views of their responsibilities, and 94.8% of tutors felt they were providing a valuable service.
- Seventy-nine (79%) of surveyed teachers reported that Experience Corps participants provided significant support in the classroom; the same percentage reported that the presence of Experience Corps members enabled them to devote more attention to non-tutored students.

*Civic Ventures/Johns Hopkins University Evaluation of Pilot Project (1996-1998).*<sup>8</sup> In January 1999, Civic Ventures published *Launching Experience Corps: Findings from a Two-Year Pilot Project*, by Marc Freedman, President of Civic Ventures, and Dr. Linda Fried, Professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. This report did not gather outcome data for students in the program. However, it did present a wealth of descriptive information and analysis, along with extended first-person accounts from Experience Corps volunteers and multiple quotations from stakeholders. (One principal, for example, said that Experience Corps volunteers "have gained the respect of everyone. I can't praise them enough.") The qualitative evidence supports the conclusion that the program benefited students in areas that are difficult to quantify, including: improved self-confidence, improved behavior, increased basic socialization skills, and an expanded range of skills and interests. The report did gather outcome data from surveys of Experience Corps participants, and found that:

- One hundred percent (100%) of participants reported that they benefited from the program.
- Nearly all (98%) of the Experience Corps members recommended that the program should be continued and expanded.

- Three-quarters of participants (77%) rated their time in Experience Corps as “very satisfying.”

*1997-1999 Project STAR Evaluation of Experience Corps / Seniors for Schools.*<sup>9</sup> Project STAR specializes in evaluation and assessment for the Corporation for National and Community Service. Staff from Project STAR worked with all existing Experience Corps sites over two successive years to survey stakeholders and to analyze, where possible, student gains on standardized tests. The evaluation report for 1998-1999 showed remarkable student achievement gains and stakeholder satisfaction, including:

- Sixty-nine percent (69%) of students who were tutored by Experience Corps members improved by at least one grade level, despite being referred to the program because they were having difficulty reading.
- Forty percent (40%) of tutored students who took relevant tests reached or exceeded their grade level, despite being referred to the program because they were having difficulty reading.
- Eighty-two percent (82%) of 224 teachers said that the program improved student attitudes towards reading.
- Ninety percent (90%) of 224 teachers said that the program increased their ability to target instruction to specific student needs.
- Nearly all (98%) of 285 principals and teachers wanted the Experience Corps program to continue in their schools.
- Nearly all (98%) of 285 principals and teachers said that the program provided students with positive adult role models.

In addition to quantitative measures, the Project STAR evaluation includes anecdotal reports from surveys and site visits that provide evidence of the positive effects of the program on the lives of students and Experience Corps members.

### ***Internal Project Assessments***

Every local Experience Corps project collects data for assessment and accountability purposes.<sup>10</sup> Data from the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 school years are consistent with expert evaluations that show high levels of stakeholder satisfaction, significant student achievement gains, and often dramatic evidence of program impact. For example, a 2001-2002 survey of teachers at all Experience Corps projects yielded the following results:

- Seventy percent (70%) of surveyed teachers reported that they are “very satisfied” with the progress of Experience Corps tutoring.
- Eighty-five percent (85.3%) of surveyed teachers reported that Experience Corps students have improved self-confidence as readers.
- More than half (58%) of teachers reported a “significant increase” in Experience Corps students’ respect for older adults.

Experience Corps members are most often assigned to work with students who are struggling to learn, and who may have particular difficulty with reading. Nonetheless, information collected by the Experience Corps projects suggests that tutoring and literacy support have a significant impact on students’ achievements. Highlights from the 2002-2003 school year include:

- In Boston, tutored students increased by an average of 2.8 reading levels on the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) assessment.
- In Minneapolis, 64% of tutored students gained one or more grade levels on a standardized test.
- In New York City, students tutored through the Book Buddies program showed increases in alphabet/sound recognition, sight words, and fluency as measured by the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) assessment. Additionally, according to teacher surveys, 61% of tutored students increased their grade level in reading as a result of Experience Corps's intervention.
- In Philadelphia, teacher assessments reported that more than 60% of participating students increased by at least 1.5 grade levels in reading.

Experience Corps members provided more than 250,000 hours of tutoring and mentoring services to nearly 20,000 students during 2002-2003. As a result of the resources provided by these older adults, three out of four teachers surveyed said that the presence of Experience Corps members improves student behavior, readiness to learn, and respect for older adults.

The older adults themselves also report high levels of satisfaction. Nine out of ten Experience Corps members surveyed reported an increased sense of usefulness and social connection as a result of their participation.

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As an enterprise with ambitious goals for impact and growth, Experience Corps remains committed to research and evaluation, both to ensure accountability and to guide future practice. The evidence accumulated thus far strongly suggests that the Experience Corps program model consistently achieves measurable benefits.

Experience Corps attempts to create change that goes beyond the tools currently used to measure success. The program's leaders expect to make a significant difference in the ways communities educate their children and value their older citizens. Within schools and communities, Experience Corps aims to impact not just test scores, but also student behavior and attitudes, family and community involvement, teacher satisfaction, and the overall culture of the school and community, as well as the overall health and well being of older volunteers.

This year, Experience Corps has commissioned an external survey of principals in participating schools, currently being conducted by Policy Studies Associates. The results of this survey will be available in December 2003. The national office for the program is also convening a Research Advisory Group of scholars and expert practitioners to help design the next generation of research on the program: a comprehensive evaluation that will better measure Experience Corps' progress towards all of its transformative goals. While we can never hope to measure the full impact of the richly textured, multi-dimensional program model operating in multiple communities, we believe that this next generation of research will confirm the real results Experience Corps produces for children, older adults, schools, and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a major study of tutoring programs (including Experience Corps) commissioned by the Corporation for National Service found that “tutored students at all grade levels improved their reading performance from pretest to post-test more than the gain expected for the typical child at their grade level.” See Abt Associates, Inc. (2001). *AmeriCorps Tutoring Outcomes Study*. Cambridge: Abt Associates. For a comprehensive review of recent research on tutoring programs, see Elbaum, B., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M.T., and Moody, S.W. (2000). *How effective are one-to-one tutoring programs in reading for elementary students at risk for reading failure? A meta-analysis of the intervention research*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 605-619. See also a report by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of the Deputy Secretary for Planning and Evaluation Services (2001), *Evidence That Tutoring Works*. Many studies have demonstrated the efficacy of mentoring for students at risk of academic failure, including Tierney, J.P. and J.B. Grossman (1995). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. See also Freedman, Marc (1992). *The Kindness of Strangers: Reflections on the Mentoring Movement*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures. For evidence that volunteerism improves the health of older Americans, see, for example, Varughese, Joe M.D., Lipton, Richard B. M.D., et al. (2003). *Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly*. *New England Journal of Medicine* 348:2508-2506 and Bennett, David A. M.D., et al. (2003). *Education modifies the relation of AD pathology to level of cognitive function in older persons*. *Neurology* 60:1909-1915.

<sup>2</sup> Among the studies that contributed to the Experience Corps design, one of the most important was *Seniors in National and Community Service: A Report Prepared for The Commonwealth Fund’s Americans Over 55 At Work Program* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1994). In a journal article, Dr. Linda Fried, Marc Freedman, and colleagues Thomas Endres and Barbara Wasik describe Experience Corps as a program designed to promote successful aging. See Fried, L.P., Freedman, M., et al. (1997) *Building Communities that Promote Successful Aging*. *West Journal of Medicine* 167: 216-219.

<sup>3</sup> Meier, Joanne D. and Invernizzi, Marcia (2001). *Book Buddies in the Bronx: Testing a Model for America Reads*. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 6(4), 319-333. These results are also described in *The Experience Corps: An Intergenerational Program Flourishes in the South Bronx*. Community Service Society of New York, Urban Agenda Issue Brief No. 18 (June 2000).

<sup>4</sup> As described in Community Service Society’s Urban Agenda Issue Brief No. 18, pages 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see the web site for the Center on Aging and Health, [www.jhsph.edu/AgingandHealth/](http://www.jhsph.edu/AgingandHealth/). The work of the Baltimore project has been highlighted in public presentations to professional associations such as the Gerontological Society of America. Selected study results will be published in forthcoming journal articles.

<sup>6</sup> Tietze, Robert and Bundens, Jennifer (2002). *Philadelphia Experience Corps Evaluation Report, school year 2001-2002*. Philadelphia: Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University.

<sup>7</sup> Like the Johns Hopkins Center on Aging and Health, the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning administers the local Experience Corps project.

<sup>8</sup> Freedman, M. and Fried, L.P. (1999). *Launching Experience Corps: Findings from a Two-year Pilot Project Mobilizing Older Americans to Help Inner-City Elementary Schools*. (Oakland, CA: Civic Ventures)

<sup>9</sup> Project STAR (2001). *Seniors for Schools Evaluation Results 1999-2000 School Year*. San Mateo: Project STAR.

<sup>10</sup> All Experience Corps programs participating in AmeriCorps administer annual surveys to principals, teachers, and volunteers and maintain data on program services, participation, retention, demographics, and attendance. Not all programs are able to obtain pre- and post-test student achievement information from partner schools. Because standardized tests in different cities vary greatly, it can be difficult to meaningfully aggregate the data that is obtained by local programs.