THE ROLE OF NATIONAL SERVICE IN CLOSING THE GRADUATION GAP
Authors’ Note

The authors of this paper reviewed numerous evaluation reports, policy papers, academic journal articles and program summaries related to the contributions that AmeriCorps, and national service more generally, have made and can make to close the nation’s graduation gap. In addition, more than two dozen program leaders, educators, advocates and scholars generously made themselves available for interviews. (The quotes reflect language from the interviews unless otherwise noted.) While we name each of the people we interviewed in the Acknowledgments, the list of people who contributed to our thinking is much longer. We thank everyone whose research, writing and good practice inspired us along the way.

This paper contains multiple links to evaluation reports. These are best viewed in the online version of this document available at www.gradnation.org
Preparing America’s young people to thrive, contribute and compete in a 21st century global economy is an urgent, national imperative. By the time today’s middle school students enter the job market, two-thirds of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education. Postsecondary access and attainment, in turn, depend on success in and graduation from high school.

In pursuit of a broader effort to prepare young people for adult success, America’s Promise Alliance has zeroed in on high school graduation as a key milestone. If birth is life’s first starting line, in today’s world a high school diploma can be considered a second starting line on the pathway to success. Without this critical credential, young people are essentially disqualified from the race — left without a chance for additional education or a job that can support a family. Further, the costs to our economy and our democracy are high when young people aren’t able to enter the workforce as educated, skilled, engaged citizens.

America’s Promise and its partners launched the GradNation campaign to bring national attention to the fact that so many students leave high school without a diploma and to galvanize individuals, organizations and communities to take action to reverse this trend. This broad-based, multi-sector campaign aims to achieve 90 percent on-time high school graduation nationwide by 2020.

The good news is that the nation has made great progress in increasing graduation rates over the past decade, rising from just over 70 percent in 2002 to an unprecedented 80 percent in 2012. That 10 percent increase represents 1.7 million additional high school graduates over the past decade.

These gains put the nation on track to reach the 2020 goal — if we continue to commit energy and apply strategies that are appropriate to the scale and significance of the challenge.

Even with a decade of good progress, one in five students is still not graduating on time. Most states still have not reached the 80 percent milestone for their low-income students, with rates hovering around 60 percent in a few states for this population. According to the latest Building a Grad Nation report, the graduation gap between low-income and other students is 20 points or more in 10 states. Moreover, recent estimates tell us that nearly 6 million young people age 16–24 are not in school and not working. How will we close the graduation and opportunity gap for these students?

Many efforts are converging to increase the graduation rate and to keep the nation on track to reach the 90 percent goal — including education reform at the national, state and district levels; stronger systems for collecting and sharing data; supportive public policies; investments from public and private funders; and determined leadership at all levels and across several sectors.

One contributor that has not received as much attention is national service — substantial volunteer commitments by ordinary Americans that benefit both the people serving and those being served. It includes programs like AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps VISTA, Senior Corps and the Social Innovation Fund that are supported by the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, which leverages significant public and private matching funds, and operates through vibrant public-private partnerships.

As AmeriCorps turns 20 this year, this paper examines the contributions national service is making to help young people stay in and succeed in school. After 20 years, what are we learning about what works? What can we say about the impact of two decades of investment in this national service program? And what does the experience and evidence suggest about future actions?
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NATIONAL SERVICE: Changing the Game, Closing the Gaps

As AmeriCorps enters its third decade, a growing number of national service programs and practices are illustrating high-impact, cost-effective ways to help young people succeed in school and stay on track toward graduation and lifelong success. The evidence-based interventions reviewed in this paper, and others like them, are showing that national service can be a game-changing resource for closing the graduation and opportunity gap for America’s young people.

Over the years, research has documented that students leave high school without graduating because of what happens both inside and outside school. The risk indicators, like poor attendance or failing at algebra, may look simple, but what lies underneath may range from caregiving responsibilities, to struggles with reading, to homelessness. John Bridgeland, a thought leader and author on the nation’s dropout crisis, illustrates these challenges: “For decades, more than 1 million students failed to graduate with their class every year. Many left school because they did not see a connection between classroom learning and their career dreams. Some students were absent so much they could never catch up, and others had real life events — needing to get a job, having a child or caring for a family member — that made graduating from high school a distant dream.”

How, therefore, will we help more young people achieve that dream? Ample evidence, including young people’s own voices, tells us that the single most effective student support is the persistent presence of caring adults who can help young people envision and work toward a brighter future. As David Shapiro, CEO of MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, said in a recent interview: “You can see the effects that mentoring has on academic achievement, attendance, employability. But the fact that every time we talk to young people they say, ‘This is the thing I need,’ and it’s always some form of a consistent relationship between them and an adult that helps them succeed, that’s the thing that keeps us coming back. And those voices are worthy of a growing movement.” Yet, research also tells us that many young people still lack this essential support. Earlier this year, MENTOR reported a startling statistic: one in three young people report that they did not have a mentor growing up. And, the report projects that as many as 16 million young people ages 8–18, including 9 million “at-risk” young people, may grow up without a mentor. Given all that we know about the power of human capital to make a difference in young people’s lives, this is a grave situation.
Low-income children often lack the advantages that other young people may take for granted — advantages that result from time with caring adults. As Eric Schwarz, the founder of Citizen Schools, observes: “The class-based education gap is [widening] because upper-middle-class children are accelerating faster, pulling away from their less privileged peers thanks to increasingly engaged parents and a cottage industry of coaches, counselors, tutors and trainers.”

The differences manifest themselves in hours of learning time; in the availability of after-school and summertime enrichment; and in opportunities to learn a particular kind of “savvy” (defined as “practical knowledge of how to make institutions work for them,” according to Robert Putnam at Harvard University) and the kinds of relationships that help develop social and emotional skills. These advantages are transmitted through consistent time, attention, challenge and support.

Alongside the increasingly definitive understanding of the importance of caring adults — the “first promise” that America’s Promise makes to young people — there is also a growing consensus that a strong and scalable set of evidence-based practices are needed to help high-poverty students and schools succeed. These can include extending the learning day; one-on-one tutoring and mentoring; early warning systems and interventions that target attendance, behavior and course performance; and social and emotional supports — just to name a few.

The fact is that schools, working alone, lack the human capital or people power to take these practices to scale.

That’s why a growing chorus of voices says that more people power is needed to close the gap between students who are graduating and those who are not.

From the 2006 reports *The Silent Epidemic* and *Every Child/Every Promise*, to Robert Balfanz’s 2012 paper *Overcoming the Poverty Challenge to Enable College and Career Readiness for All*, to this year’s *The Mentoring Effect* and *Don’t Call Them Dropouts*, leaders from multiple sectors and young people themselves are calling for more human capital to meet the needs of children and youth growing up in challenging circumstances. City Year’s leaders have described the situation that exists as an “implementation gap — that results when school staff members’ time and school resources are not sufficient to meet the intensity of students’ needs at the required scale.”

Imagine just one classroom that reflects national statistics from the latest *KIDS COUNT Data Book*: nearly a quarter of children are living in poverty, more than a third live with only one parent, and two-thirds reach the fourth grade not reading at grade level. Then consider that there are 9.5 million children who attend a “high-poverty” school — one where 75 percent or more of the students are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches; and 1.5 million children attend high schools where 60 percent or less of the first-year class will graduate on time.

In each of these schools, there can be hundreds of students who need extra academic and social support beyond the classroom. Without targeted and sustained interventions, the gaps in support that lower-income children face during their early years can persist and accumulate, showing up in difficulties with coursework, disciplinary actions and excessive absences from school that all make it harder to graduate on time.

“We need more human capital to help these kids out, all along the way, even after they drop out. National service is one of the few ways we can afford to provide enough people, including volunteers, to meet the scale of the current challenge.”

Shirley Sagawa, Center for American Progress

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* The collective work of America’s Promise Alliance involves keeping Five Promises to children and youth that form the conditions they need to achieve adult success. America’s Promise pledges to young people that they will grow up with the help and guidance of caring adult relationships, healthy childhoods, safe surroundings, effective education and opportunities to serve others. When at least four of these promises are at work in young people’s lives, they are more likely to succeed academically, socially and civically. See [http://www.americaspromise.org/promises](http://www.americaspromise.org/promises).
Faced with limited time, money and human capital in many urban and rural communities, high-quality schools and hard-working teachers alone simply cannot deliver everything that millions of low-income children and youth need to stay on track toward graduation, nor to return to school if they have stepped off the path.\textsuperscript{21}

“\textit{When it comes to our efforts to recruit volunteers as mentors, it’s all about driving the necessary human capital for effective relationships. This is not happening for one in three young people. We have one of the rare theories of change where, if a billion dollars showed up tomorrow, it wouldn’t be everything we need. With mentoring, there’s a volunteer part of the equation, a human part, that even with a billion dollars would still need to be activated.}”

\textit{David Shapiro, MENTOR}\textsuperscript{22}

Thanks to the series of annual Building a Grad Nation reports from 2010–2014, as well as previous dropout prevention research, we know more and more about where these students go to school and what extra support they may need to stay on track with data-driven benchmarks like attendance, behavior and course performance.\textsuperscript{22}

Several scholars and advocates have written about the power and potential of national service to help produce the people needed to meet this challenge. Johns Hopkins University’s Robert Balfanz, for example, has said that well-trained community volunteers and full-time national service members “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.”\textsuperscript{23}

Shirley Sagawa, a visiting Fellow at the Center for American Progress and a senior policy advisor for America Forward, recently wrote: “National service is a form of human capital that could rapidly accelerate our ability to solve the nation’s biggest problems, while providing opportunities to a million young adults each year. To get there, all parts of society must contribute to building and supporting a system that enables nonprofit and public agencies to create positions, have them approved, find funding and build quality online.”\textsuperscript{24}

National service, aligned with the work of schools, school-based or school-linked supports, and youth-serving organizations that meet a wide variety of needs, has shown that it can deliver the human capital necessary to power the evidence-based interventions that keep children and youth on the path to graduation — beginning with kindergarten readiness and following through even beyond high school.

This paper highlights emerging evidence about effective national service programs and practices, recommends ways that the current powerful partnership among national service, education and youth development could be even stronger and suggests ways to rally the human capital needed to help the nearly one million young people who are failing to graduate from high school on time each year, and the millions more who are already stranded in today’s economy without a diploma.
WHAT’S WORKING: Emerging Evidence from Established AmeriCorps Efforts

Twenty years ago, when AmeriCorps began, there were no large-scale programs and no definitive evidence of impact. Now, a growing body of evidence is showing powerful results. Over the last five years alone, at least a dozen AmeriCorps-supported programs focused on educational outcomes have completed or are in the midst of rigorous external evaluations whose designs include (but are not limited to) randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies.

The list includes City Year, Citizen Schools, College Possible, Communities In Schools, Diplomas Now (a collaborative effort among City Year, Communities In Schools and Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development Secondary), AARP Experience Corps, Jumpstart, Minnesota Reading Corps, Playworks, Reading Partners, Teach for America and YouthBuild. Together, these high-impact, multi-state programs span a continuum from pre-K through postsecondary support, engaging AmeriCorps members and community volunteers alongside professional staff to meet benchmarks that dropout prevention research tells us are essential for high school graduation.25

(See Appendix II, National Service Investments in Education, to see the scope and scale of the work that national service does on behalf of children and youth.)

The following few pages focus thematically on a set of AmeriCorps-supported programs that have completed or are in the midst of rigorous external evaluations. The evaluation designs for each of these include randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies, and the results to date demonstrate strong beneficial effects on the milestones that research affirms are essential for staying on track to graduate high school.

It is essential to note that none of these programs launched this type of rigorous external evaluation without being relentlessly data-driven. All are dedicated to studying implementation and impact from multiple perspectives, and use various kinds of evidence for continuous improvement.

The decision about how to focus this paper, as well as demands of space and time, meant that many strong programs and a greater array of compelling research are not included here. A more comprehensive review would surely surface greater diversity, particularly in terms of programs serving rural areas and programs serving a single state.

Taking a broader view of strategies, rather than programs, would also draw in other bodies of evidence, such as the studies that Furco, Billig and others have done over several decades about service-learning.26 Hopefully, what follows provides a strong snapshot of current programmatic evidence and provides a frame on which others can build.

“We’re not running a sprint any more, we’re running a marathon. Getting to the next 10 percent — a 90 percent graduation rate — is going to be a lot harder than the last 10. We’ve never had a 90 percent graduation rate, so we’re charting new territory together. We need to combine everyone’s best thinking and creativity with the last 20 years of learning and success. The adaptive leadership challenge — that’s what’s before us.”

Dan Cardinali, Communities In Schools
The role of national service in closing the graduation gap

This paper highlights selected program evidence in eight areas:

• Ensuring young children are ready for kindergarten;

• Boosting early reading success;

• Supporting regular attendance, good behavior and strong course performance (the ABCs);

• Providing social and emotional support;

• Extending learning beyond the school walls and the school day;

• Fostering college and career aspirations;

• Creating a new pipeline of effective, diverse educators and advocates for high-need schools; and

• Reconnecting young people to education and employment pathways.

These programs target specific educational outcomes by engaging full-time AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA members, part-time AmeriCorps members (including programs that engage adults, ages 55+), and community volunteers of all ages in high-need public schools, Head Start centers and youth-serving nonprofit organizations.

Ensuring young children are ready for kindergarten. Without early-learning support, low-income children are likely to start kindergarten as much as 60 percent behind their more affluent peers — a gap that can persist through adulthood.

• Jumpstart trains college students and older community volunteers to build early literacy skills for preschool-age children in low-income neighborhoods. A 2011 randomized controlled trial showed that young children served by Jumpstart’s AmeriCorps members significantly outperformed a comparison group on standardized measures of reading, school readiness and socio-emotional skills. The study also found that Jumpstart-served children concluded their preschool year at, or slightly above, the average performance of rising kindergartners in general. More recently, the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania featured Jumpstart in a toolkit for donors interested in investing in early childhood education. See links to several studies of Jumpstart’s impact on this page of their website.

• HIPPYCorps (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) blends an evidence-based family involvement and kindergarten readiness model with AmeriCorps’ structure. AmeriCorps members, all of whom are parents recruited from the lower-income communities HIPPY serves, use a peer-to-peer curriculum to work with individual families every week for up to three years to build parents’ capacity to provide early learning support for children ages three to five. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness program, conducted in collaboration with Mathematica Policy Research, has identified HIPPY as one of a handful of models that meet specific evidence-based criteria. Research has shown statistically significant effects on school readiness and school achievement, including results that persist beyond kindergarten. Read more about the research on HIPPY’s impact on the HIPPY USA website and on the Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness site.
Both Jumpstart and HIPPY USA are included on the S&I 100 list, a new social impact exchange that highlights 100 high-performing nonprofit organizations who have strong evidence of their success as well as the capacity to grow in size and impact. A dozen other national service programs also appear on the “Education” section of this list. (See more information about the Social Impact Exchange, also known as the S&I 100 here.)

**Boosting early reading success.** Research shows that students who don’t read on grade level by the end of the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.\(^{28}\) One-on-one literacy tutoring, including by trained volunteers, is a well-established strategy for improving children’s early reading proficiency. Recent studies, therefore, are able to build on a long-standing evidence base, including a 2001 Abt Associates study of AmeriCorps tutoring outcomes that showed positive effects on students’ reading skills based on pre- and post-tests of first through third grade students across a nationally representative sample of 68 AmeriCorps literacy programs.\(^ {29}\)

AARP Experience Corps, Minnesota Reading Corps and Reading Partners are all multi-state, evidence-based AmeriCorps tutoring programs whose recent randomized controlled trial evaluations (published between 2009 and 2014) show statistically significant, substantive impacts on standardized measures of reading proficiency such as reading comprehension.

As the Research Brief about the Minnesota Reading Corps studies states: “A growing body of research validates what works in teaching children to read: Well-trained tutors delivering early, targeted, evidence-based interventions to students in need.”\(^ {30}\)

**For example:**

- **AARP Experience Corps**, which places older adult AmeriCorps members and volunteers as literacy tutors in high-need elementary schools, released a study in 2009 by Washington University in St. Louis and Mathematica Policy Research showing that tutored students made 60 percent more progress in learning two critical reading skills — sounding out new words and reading comprehension — than did similar students not served by the program. Read the results of the study here. A U.S. Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse review of the study described it as “a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.”

- **Minnesota Reading Corps** trains AmeriCorps members and community volunteers as literacy tutors in a research-based intervention to help struggling readers between age three through grade three. An impact and a process study were released in 2014, commissioned by the Corporation for National and Community Service and conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. Among other findings, the study concluded “Kindergarten, first and third grade students who received MRC [Minnesota Reading Corps] tutoring achieved significantly higher literacy assessment scores than students who did not.” The effects on students’ achievement were statistically significant, even among students at higher risk of academic failure. See more information on the NORC website and on the Corporation for National and Community Service research page.

- **Reading Partners** recruits, trains and supports community volunteers to provide one-on-one literacy tutoring for students K–5. The multi-state program is supported by both AmeriCorps and the Social Innovation Fund (a Corporation for National and Community Service initiative designed to identify, evaluate and grow evidence-based innovations in low-income communities).
In 2014, MDRC released results from the first part of a two-part study of the program. Among the results: “Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on all three measures of student reading proficiency examined — reading comprehension, reading fluency and sight-word reading.” See the full research brief here. Part Two of the study, which will be released next year, will examine the program's costs and cost-effectiveness.

Using the “ABCs” of early warning systems to help keep students in school and on track. Over the last 10 years, dropout prevention research and investments in stronger data collection have led to the development of early warning systems that school systems and their partners can use to track three especially strong predictors of whether students are likely to stay in school through graduation: attendance, behavior and course performance in key subjects like English and math. Without intervention, sixth-graders who struggle in these areas account for 60 percent of those who won’t graduate from high school with their class. Early attention to these students is critical, because if students are still off track in the ninth grade, they are much less likely to graduate on time.

Acting in close coordination with teachers and other school-based personnel, AmeriCorps members in organizations like City Year and Communities In Schools provide individualized support to students who are off-track in one or more of the ABCs.

- As a result of national service members’ efforts inside and outside the classroom, students in schools that City Year serves with its Whole School Whole Child model for grades three through nine are improving daily attendance, showing higher scores on standardized literacy assessments, earning higher letter grades in English/Language Arts and more. Read more about City Year’s impact along with several related research reports.

- A multi-year study of Communities In Schools found that its Integrated Student Supports model — which includes a wide range of coordinated interventions from ensuring students’ basic needs are met to helping them prepare for college — is raising graduation rates in the schools it serves, among other significant outcomes for students in grades K–12. Read more about Communities In Schools’ results, including the findings from a five-year study; and their 2014 National Impact Report, which includes an externally-conducted economic impact analysis.

Providing social and emotional support that keeps students engaged, reduces negative behavior and improves school climate.

When researchers and advocates ask young people what they need, or would have needed, in order to stay in school, the answer overwhelmingly comes down to an adult who delivers two things: consistent caring and skilled guidance. This is a clear finding from 2014 reports like The Mentoring Effect and Don’t Call Them Dropouts, as well as earlier surveys and studies (also heard over and over in the interviews for this paper) Several studies of specific AmeriCorps programs highlight outcomes in this area. Three examples come from Playworks, AARP Experience Corps-Baltimore and City Year.

- Playworks engages full-time AmeriCorps members as coaches in low-income schools. These coaches lead cooperative activities and games during recess, alongside teachers in the classroom and before and after school. A randomized controlled study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University found that Playworks’ presence in schools results in less bullying and exclusionary behavior; easier transitions from recess to learning activities; and better student behavior and attention in class. See publications related to the studies of this program on the Gardner Center website and the Mathematica website.
• **Experience Corps-Baltimore**, a site of the national AARP Experience Corps program that has been studied extensively by scholars at Johns Hopkins University, places a team of older adult AmeriCorps or Senior Corps members for 15 hours or more per week in urban public schools to improve the educational outcomes of children and the health and well-being of the volunteers. A randomized controlled trial found that office referrals for classroom misbehavior decreased by about half in the Experience Corps schools, but remained the same in the control schools.

The same study found significant positive effects on third-grade reading achievement. See a [summary of the research](#), published in the *Journal of Urban Health.*

• **City Year**, whose impact on indicators like attendance and course performance are noted above, embeds social and emotional support into its Whole School Whole Child approach. [This paper](#), prepared by American Institutes for Research, examines the social-emotional learning component of City Year’s model, with a focus on the middle grades.

**Extending learning beyond the school walls and the traditional school day.** According to Citizen Schools’ website, “students in upper-income families spend 300 more hours each year with adults than do the three million students in lower-income families. Upper-income students also benefit from almost $8,000 worth of enrichment activities yearly — robotics camp, piano lessons, academic tutoring, and more.” Data like this, along with research about utilizing Extended Learning Time (ELT) to work in partnership with schools to re-design and lengthen the learning day, animate programs like Citizen Schools. Recognizing that these resource differences are the root cause of the opportunity gap, and working in partnership with schools, they match the wealth of community-based human capital to the urgent needs of lower-income middle school students.

Like City Year and Communities In Schools, Citizen Schools tracks the “ABC” indicators (attendance, behavior and course performance) for the students they serve. Through hands-on apprenticeships supported by community volunteers — lawyers, scientists, cooks and other professionals — and intensive academic support provided by full-time AmeriCorps Teaching Fellows, Citizen Schools gives students the skills, access and aspirations they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Evaluations of the program, including a seven-year longitudinal study, show higher attendance, learning gains in math and English, stronger performance on standardized tests and substantially greater likelihood of on-time graduation than a group of matched comparison students who did not participate in Citizen Schools activities.

Read more about the results of the [longitudinal study](#), completed by Policy Studies Associates in 2010.

• Look forward to the results of two other studies that are underway now with Abt Associates, one measuring impact on student engagement and achievement, and one measuring impact on student achievement and STEM interest.

• See a slide-show [summarizing the findings](#) of the Policy Studies Associates study, and a report on interim findings from the first Abt Associates study.

> “Service shouldn’t be limited to just those who think they’ve been fortunate and therefore have something to give. Everyone’s got something to give.... People of every color, experience and background [belong] in the service agenda.”

Simran Sidhu, YouthBuild Philadelphia
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Fostering college and career aspirations. The unfamiliar landscape of navigating the college application process, securing financial aid and choosing the right school can discourage even well-qualified students from continuing their education. With guidance counselors’ caseloads often numbering in the hundreds, finding ways to give young people more one-on-one support and guidance about their postsecondary options is an urgent mission. The need is even greater for young people who leave high school before earning a diploma, and return later to complete their education.

The Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation, which sets clear goals and benchmarks along the way to a 90 percent graduation rate, focuses on using evidenced-based strategies to address the dropout crisis. Recognizing that high school graduation is a second starting line for success, one Civic Marshall Plan benchmark for the high school years is to “provide all youth (including those who have dropped out) clear pathways from high school to college and career.”

A 2007 report from Brandeis University states, “The economic returns from investments in education are so great that the subject of college access receives considerable attention in many fields, from education reform to second chance programs for some of society’s most vulnerable populations.”

College Possible, the National College Advising Corps and YouthBuild USA are three examples of organizations whose AmeriCorps programs are helping low-income students navigate what’s next.

• **College Possible** engages AmeriCorps members to coach juniors and seniors in high school through key aspects of preparing for college, such as ACT/SAT exams and college and financial aid applications. The structured two-year curriculum, completed with a group of supportive peers, also introduces students to college life through campus tours and guides them through the transition from high school to college. To support continued success, AmeriCorps members coach college-going students all the way through college graduation.

A three-year randomized controlled trial of the model found a significant increase in four-year college enrollment for students served, and a significant increase in college applications submitted by students served. A separate study of College Possible’s impact on postsecondary outcomes found that “College Possible coaching exerts a significant and positive influence on college success.” Read more about the findings.

• **The National College Advising Corps** places recent college graduates as full-time advisers in underserved high schools in order to increase the number of low-income, underrepresented and first-generation college-goers who enter and complete higher education.

“**It’s almost impossible to exaggerate how little poor kids know about the opportunities that are available to them. What they need are adult mentors who are regularly, reliably in their lives and can hand-tailor the information and support they need. There’s no question in my mind that national service and AmeriCorps, working with parents and schools, could do that.**”

Robert Putnam, Harvard University
A team at Stanford University conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods study, including a randomized controlled trial in Texas that experienced rapid growth in size during the 2010–2011 year. Results are very promising: “Preliminary evidence from our randomized controlled trial in Texas shows that graduating seniors from College Advising Corps schools are more likely to go to college and complete an application to a four-year college. Hispanic students and students receiving free/reduced price lunch are most strongly impacted by College Advising Corps advisers.” Read more on the “Results” page on the Corps’ website, or see a link to the study report on the Social Impact Exchange site.

• YouthBuild USA (also described on page 13 in the “Reconnecting” section) enables low-income young people ages 16–24, more than 90 percent of whom have left high school before graduating, to work toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people in their neighborhoods and participating in leadership development activities in their communities. A 2007 report from Brandeis University examined the impact of AmeriCorps Education Awards, a post-service benefit given to all AmeriCorps members who complete their commitment to serve a specific number of hours. The report shows numerous positive effects on outcomes related to postsecondary success, including young people’s expectations that they would attend and complete an Associate’s degree.

Among African-American males who completed YouthBuild in 2005, the college attendance rate for YouthBuild AmeriCorps members who earned an Education Award was twice as high (24 percent) as for completers from the same programs who did not earn an Education Award (12 percent) and almost five times higher than the rate for similar completers who were not AmeriCorps members (5 percent).37

“Providing service in communities, making a difference, producing something of value has a profound influence on self-respect, identity and the career choices young people make — especially when they are in a group that has been considered worthless. For young men of color, it has a huge impact to be visible on the street doing something positive and tangible for their community — building affordable housing for their own neighborhoods.”

Dorothy Stoneman, Founder and CEO, YouthBuild USA

Creating a new pipeline of effective, diverse educators and advocates for high-need schools and the children they serve.

Children and young people need more than good schools to graduate — and they certainly need good schools and good teachers. One of the Five Promises that America’s Promise makes to young people is “an effective education that prepares them for work and life.” A significant body of research tells us that high-quality teachers are essential to student achievement, particularly for lower-income students.

• Teach for America (TFA) is one of the largest and longest-serving AmeriCorps partners in the country. It is also one of the most-evaluated, with a 15-page summary of research to date on its website. The research summary is essential not only for the findings it describes, but also because it includes a clear explanation of the types of evidence that might be represented in studies of youth-serving interventions.
To name just one recent highlight, a random assignment experimental design study released in 2013 by the Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences found that students learning secondary-school math from a Teach for America teacher scored higher on end-of-year math assessments than students assigned to comparison teachers. The study findings state that the statistically significant difference between the Teach for America-assigned students’ scores and the comparison group’s is equivalent to an additional 2.6 months of school for the average student nationwide.

- **Alumni Impact.** Teach for America has studied extensively not only their members’ impact in the classroom, but the ways their 32,000 alumni continue to contribute to education beyond their initial two-year service commitment. As reported on the External Research page of TFA’s website, “[a] 2011 study by researchers from Harvard Graduate School of Education and the American Enterprise Institute concluded that more founders and top leaders of entrepreneurial education organizations started their careers with Teach For America than anywhere else.” According to Teach for America’s own data, two-thirds of their alumni pursue a career in the education sector.

And they’re not alone among alumni of AmeriCorps programs. The commitments people of all ages make to serve their communities last well beyond the one or two years enrolled in a national service program. National service alumni often choose education as a career, making a long-term commitment in professions like teaching or social work in the same kinds of communities where they’ve served. Mary Bruce, co-director of AmeriCorps Alums, stated: “AmeriCorps Alums want to change the world, and they have the skills to do it. The impact of their service goes beyond the direct results achieved in schools and communities each year.

We’ve found that AmeriCorps shapes career choices of those who serve, and fosters capabilities that make alums more effective at and committed to their work, for life.” A recent survey of more than 5,000 AmeriCorps Alums in all 50 states showed that many alumni continue careers in the field where they served. Nearly half (46 percent) work in the nonprofit sector and one-fifth (18 percent) in the government. Survey respondents consistently shared that their career path was shaped by service, including many who chose careers as teachers and principals because of their service with AmeriCorps. What’s more, national service alumni are diversifying and strengthening the teacher pipeline.

Several people interviewed for this paper emphasized this point, including leaders from both Communities In Schools and City Year. As City Year’s Michael Brown and Jim Balfanz stated in a recent blog, “City Year AmeriCorps [members] have the potential to serve as a robust teacher pipeline for high-need schools based on their strong diversity, comprehensive leadership training and commitment to addressing the needs of the whole child. Approximately 35 percent of City Year AmeriCorps members are interested in securing teaching jobs after their service year. Of these City Year AmeriCorps members, 31 percent are male; 31 percent are bilingual; 19 percent are African American; and 17 percent are Hispanic. Such a diverse group of young teachers can help to address the dramatic under-representation of teachers from these demographic groups.”
Reconnecting young people who have left high school without graduating to education and employment pathways.

YouthBuild is a long-standing, successfully-replicated, public-private partnership model that reaches approximately 10,000 low-income young people each year through a network of programs in both urban and rural communities that stretch across the country. The majority of YouthBuild participants are low-income young men of color who enter the program without a high school diploma. YouthBuild gives them an opportunity to complete their education, develop marketable skills through both vocational certification programs and time spent building affordable housing in their communities and discover their capacity for leadership and community engagement.

This comprehensive approach, which combines AmeriCorps service with education, job training and leadership development, has long-term positive effects.

As Founder and CEO Dorothy Stoneman said in a recent interview, “Pathways out of poverty are good, but that’s only half of what’s needed. We provide leadership training to young people so that they are changing the conditions that have been so painful for themselves and their families — not just escaping from them.” YouthBuild’s results have been studied from a variety of different perspectives, including youth development, leadership development, welfare-to-work, juvenile justice, and cost-benefit analysis. Currently, the national research firm MDRC is conducting a multi-year study of the program that includes an impact analysis, a process analysis, and a cost-effectiveness analysis. Read more about the study here, including the goals and the design.

A note about the state of the evidence. Evidence about the impact AmeriCorps is having on multiple aspects of educational success and youth development is growing, maturing, and rapidly emerging. Several of the studies mentioned above were only released in the last six months.

Many of the programs highlighted in this section, or their sponsoring organizations as a whole, have also invested in studies that examine how the program is implemented, which can provide useful guidance for smaller and newer programs. Several programs have undertaken or are launching studies of cost-effectiveness.

Many more service-supported interventions than those described here are aligned with rigorous research, though the specific program or approach may not yet have been the subject of an external study. This is often the case for smaller or newer programs, as well as for larger programs that are preparing for rigorous external evaluation.

Because research designs like a randomized controlled trial involve significant investments of time and money for program operators and research teams, high-quality programs often begin by investing in process evaluation, allowing leaders to examine challenges to faithful implementation as well as factors that may affect replication and growth.

Policymakers and potential investors should consider the full range of evidence that may be available to inform decisions about the value of a particular intervention.

As Wendy Spencer, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, notes: “We’ve got to make [high-quality evaluation] a reality for every single program that’s part of national service, no matter their size. We can do that through training and best practices, we can learn from one another, and we also need to continue to find money to make this happen at the local level. A good evaluation can be 20 or 30 percent of a program’s budget — that’s a lot. So we need to encourage the private sector to invest in this, to make it possible for everyone — not just large organizations — to join in.”
THE ROLE OF NATIONAL SERVICE IN CLOSING THE GRADUATION GAP

KEEPING THE FIFTH PROMISE: Opportunities to Serve

Service not only meets unmet human needs and solves serious social problems; it also makes a difference for those who serve, and for the communities they call home.

For the nation’s youth, the opportunity to serve is one of the Five Promises that America’s Promise believes are the foundations that create the conditions for all young people to succeed. The first four promises focus on what young people should receive: caring adults, safe places to grow up, a healthy start, an effective education. The fifth promise, though, focuses on what young people can and should give: Everyone should have the opportunity to serve others. Only those who get that chance learn “the value of service to others, the meaning of community and the self-respect that comes from knowing that one has a contribution to make in the world.”

YouthBuild Philadelphia provides a case-in-point. Most of their 200 students left high school before graduating. Many have had run-ins with the justice system. Few have stable two-parent families. Yet over the course of a year in YouthBuild, with its five-week rotations between classroom learning and building homes in the community, all of them experience this Fifth Promise — many for the first time. As its Executive Director Simran Sidhu explains: “[T]his kind of tangible service changes [our students’] relationship with the community so that they go from being the problem to being the problem-solvers. Our students wear their hard hats and tool belts around because they want to be seen in them. They’re so proud.” And those benefits aren’t only intangible. As the Corporation for National and Community Service and Opportunity Nation have documented, youth who volunteer are more likely to find employment and less likely to fall into disconnection.

In turn, adults who serve play a vital democratic role. Not only do they make a difference in building lives as members of the ‘second shift,’ but they gain the pride, commitment, networks and social capital that only come from the hard work of solving public problems, and on which so much of our civic life depends. As Robert Putnam has written, “Social capital is not a substitute for effective public policy but rather a prerequisite for it and, in part, a consequence of it.” Service opportunities are an integral part of that process. (See Appendix III: New Efforts Promise Even More Impact)

BUILDING ON TODAY’S SUCCESS, LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

AmeriCorps’s contributions to the GradNation goals and to broader efforts affecting children and youth are increasingly clear. A rapidly emerging evidence base, to which both individual programs and new partnerships will add over the next year, shows compelling results.

The programs, organizations, partnerships, and cross-sector investments that are facilitating national service and volunteering are vital, but not sufficient. (See Appendix II on national service investments in education.) Young people need more caring navigators — more teachers, more tutors, more mentors, more youth workers, more people in their lives who ask them how they are doing and care about the answer. To improve their chances of graduating on time and staying on track to adult success, young people need greater coordination among the efforts of the institutions that can help them.
Schools and school systems, elected leaders, business leaders, policymakers at all levels, community organizations, parents, teachers and others should enlist and invest in the evidence-based practices that AmeriCorps and other national service programs are using to get the strong results for students who do not start their education with the best possible chances of success. That is how the nation will bring the solution to the scale that matches the magnitude of the challenge.

Recommendations

Achieving a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020 will require continued investment in the strategies that helped the nation move from 70 percent to 80 percent over the past ten years. We must do even more of what works; and, as Dan Cardinali suggests, we may need to do it in new ways to navigate as-yet-uncharted territory. To keep making progress together, America’s Promise recommends that national service leaders, educators, policymakers and advocates working to close the graduation and opportunity gaps focus on the following areas.

• Scale up what’s working, focusing strongly on the places that research tells us it is most urgently needed. Given the demonstrated value and cost-effectiveness of national service supports for children, youth and high-need schools, one of the first things to do is to grow what works — not only in size but also in impact and the types of communities served. Finding the people power should not be a problem: AmeriCorps receives more than five applications for each of the 75,000 spots for which it is funded. Over the next five years, Congress should move toward supporting the full 250,000 spots authorized under the 2009 Kennedy Serve America Act.

Further, we urge attention to The Franklin Project’s goal of creating one million service year positions, supported through multiple types of public and private funding streams, by 2023. As decision makers consider this recommendation, it’s important to note that scaling up doesn’t mean just more people or more money; it also means more opportunities to test new approaches and to capitalize on what’s shown to work. Appendix III, titled “New Efforts Promise Even More Impact,” shows some of the ways that interagency and public-private partnerships are reaching toward a bigger and more diverse national service landscape.

• Keep investing in and relying on each other’s strengths. Collaborative investments, cross-sector coalitions and attention to a continuum of support for children and youth all came through as themes in both interviews and our review of various kinds of reports and articles. For example, Diplomas Now — a collaboration among Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development Program, City Year and Communities In Schools — represents significant public and private investment (including from a highly competitive pool of Department of Education Funds, Investing in Innovation; private foundations; corporations; and several United Ways) that is currently serving 38 high-need schools in 13 cities, with expansion planned in future years.

“When I was a kid, there were all kinds of jobs we could work at and learn in. Our parents would ask, ‘What can they do where someone’s counting on them to do something, and they have to solve problems and perform?’ That’s an essential thing that young people have to figure out along the way, and they can’t do it themselves. They have to have opportunities for that.”

Michael Sherraden, Washington University in St. Louis
Early results are showing strong improvements in attendance, behavior and coursework for students who were off-track on these indicators.

National service programs are also working alongside nonprofit organizations, professional associations, civic leaders, business leaders and others within several coalitions like Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to create public awareness and amplify each other’s efforts toward a particular graduation benchmark. Service-focused coalitions like Cities of Service, Voices for National Service and AmeriCorps Alums are also playing a part by creating resources that facilitate sharing and replicating best practices. (See, for example, these Cities of Service Blueprints.)

• Invest even more in good data and good evidence. What’s brought us to the current 80 percent graduation rate is, in part, deep study of both the problem and the potential solutions. As we work together across fields and sectors toward the next set of gains, we need to continue learning from research and from each other. Investing money and time — not just in evaluation, but in continuously collecting and examining data — is a critical component of continued joint efforts. For more on this topic, see Robert Balfanz’s “The Power of a Penny,” recommending that the Department of Education invest one penny of every dollar spent on education programs to evaluate those programs. The Corporation for National and Community Service and the Department of Education already have a strong interagency partnership; co-investing in evaluation could build on this strength.

Equally important, we recommend that school systems, public agencies, and institutions of higher education collaborate with evidence-based service interventions to figure out an array of more accessible and more cost-effective ways to measure and track program impact.

The kinds of evidence that external evaluators can produce is essential; and people who are serving our nation’s highest-need children every day need to couple that kind of information with more real-time feedback.

• Replicate evidence-based models, piloted with federal support, at the city and state level. One of the reasons good evidence is so important is that it allows us to replicate what already exists in new settings. The Minnesota Reading Corps’ expansion from one state to seven others plus the District of Columbia is one example. Another is the new School Turnaround Program — a partnership between the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Department of Education — which placed 650 AmeriCorps members in 70 of the nation’s highest-need schools during its first year. State and local leaders can invest in and replicate with confidence the School Turnaround AmeriCorps model with a focus on their specific geography.

• Develop a set of clear, cross-program, cross-sector measures for describing program impact and costs. Describing the success of national service as an overall field, rather than the results of individual programs, too often leads to comparing apples to oranges — or apples to fruit baskets. While it may make sense for one program to describe its cost per child, another its cost per school, and the third its cost per tutor-hour, that diversity can be bewildering for potential investors and other decisionmakers.

A measure like “cost per impact,” similar to what’s used by the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania, could be an important step toward understanding more about what works, what it costs and why a particular investment makes sense. The cost and cost-effectiveness studies of national service programs, both at the national and the state level, can provide critical underlying data for such an effort. (Several examples from national networks are mentioned in this paper.)
For a single-state example, see the 2012 study of AmeriCorps in Texas, which the OneStar Foundation commissioned from the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service.)

• Catalogue best practices, best programs and best opportunities to serve; and create simple ways to share them. Too often, the best solutions remain under-adopted simply because they aren’t widely known. National service needs a way of looking at and cataloging evidence that is analogous to the Department of Education’s What Works clearinghouse — a place where decisionmakers and influencers who are looking for service solutions can reliably find answers related to the problem they’re trying to solve. Individuals who want to serve also need a simple way to answer the question: “How can I help?” For a fuller discussion, along with some emerging solutions, see Shirley Sagawa’s 2014 Democracy: A Journal of Ideas article, “From Idea to Reality: A National Service Platform.” (This article appears in a special Symposium issue of the journal, assembled in collaboration with The Franklin Project.)

• Take a systemic approach. The supports offered to the nation’s highest-need children and youth must be as multi-dimensional as the challenges they face. No single service or support can do that alone — and no combination of services and supports can be effective unless they’re all designed to work well together, with young people as the central focus.

As America Forward states in its ESEA Policy Platform: “There is often consensus about the ingredients that successful school transformation requires. However the elements are rarely assembled together, in sufficient dose, with proper sequencing, for a sufficient time period.

And all are essential to close the achievement gap — there is no magic bullet or shortcut that can take the place of an organized system of interventions that work together, along with families and communities, to enable students from high-poverty backgrounds to succeed in school.” Every community still struggling with high concentrations of young people who aren’t graduating on time should take advantage of all that national service has to offer. In turn, national service programs must be designed to integrate with and, where needed, help to transform school infrastructure. They must also join neatly with (and transfer students smoothly to) other in-school and community supports — ensuring that all of the resources that surround children and youth help them move more easily from neighborhood to school, school to school, and one developmental milestone to the next.

• Create roles and opportunities for all Americans to serve. Any American who wants the chance to serve should have the chance to do so, regardless of their age, zip code or education. Young people, older adults and everyone in between have a wealth of talent to give to their communities and to young people in particular.

“\nIn America, education must be the great equalizer — and robust engagement from communities, families, mentors, tutors and other volunteers is absolutely vital to achieving that core American ideal. As a nation, we are so much stronger working together collaboratively to advance student learning than working in isolation.”

Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education (Press release, Dec. 2012)\n
IN CONCLUSION

In today’s world, young people need to earn a high school diploma in order to gain access to the next milestones on the path to adult success. The one million young people who are not graduating on time, and the six million more who are out of school and out of work, constitute a national catastrophe. And we know, with greater and greater confidence based on recent research, in order to reach graduation day young people need an array of support from adults both inside and outside school. A “second shift” of skillful and caring adults is essential to add to what happens for children and youth in the classroom, at home and in the community. To grow and thrive, all of America’s children need caring adults with the capacity to provide the mentoring, tutoring, coaching and guidance that build strength and resilience at every developmental stage. Even the best schools and teachers, acting alone, cannot provide all that is needed, especially for young people growing up in challenging environments.

Well-designed and well-executed national service programs have become an indispensable part of the national effort to help more young people succeed in school and stay on track to adult success. Through direct service, as well as recruiting and engaging community volunteers, national service is delivering the people and purposeful relationships that are essential to help young people thrive. To maintain and extend the momentum toward higher graduation rates and greater educational attainment, we will need more people to engage in structured developmental relationships with young people who seek and need help and guidance. That is why national service, at sufficient scale and high quality, has become an essential partner in delivering the people, energy and inspiration needed to reach a great national goal.

“Great classroom instruction is at the heart of our work toward keeping students engaged in school and preparing all graduates for success, but great instruction does not take place in a vacuum. We need to ensure that our schools are places where students feel welcomed, encouraged, connected and supported. That’s where programs such as AmeriCorps play a vital role, as they provide a vast range of services such as literacy tutoring, social and emotional support, individualized support for at-risk students, opportunities for extended learning, peer mentoring, and support, encouragement, and guidance regarding college and career decisions. Clearly, the partnerships between our school systems and national service benefit students, teachers and the service providers, so we should do all that we can to nurture, sustain and expand these successful programs and partnerships.”

Deborah A. Gist, Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
What is AmeriCorps?

AmeriCorps programs provide opportunities for Americans to make an intensive commitment to service. The AmeriCorps network of local, state and national service programs engages more than 80,000 Americans in projects around the nation each year. AmeriCorps State and National is the broadest network of AmeriCorps programs. These groups recruit, train and place AmeriCorps participants, (called “members”) in direct service roles to meet critical community needs in education, public safety, health and the environment. AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) provides full-time members to nonprofit, faith-based and other community organizations as well as to public agencies to create and expand programs that bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty.

National service members are trained for a specific role and given a specific assignment. These are most commonly full-time, year-long placements, though they may be part-time or part-year when older adults, or college or high school students are the ones dedicating themselves to service. AmeriCorps members may deliver services like attendance coaching, literacy tutoring, mentoring or academic assistance in core subject areas like English and math. They may be full-time teachers, through programs like Teach for America, in hard-to-staff schools. They may facilitate, or be participants in, service-learning efforts that link students’ school experiences to the world outside the classroom. Each AmeriCorps member may also recruit, train and manage community volunteers to serve a few hours each week as tutors, mentors, or academic enrichment coaches — multiplying their own efforts many times over.

No matter the role, national service brings new energy, supportive relationships and fresh talent to settings where children and youth need more support than even the most dedicated paid professionals can provide.
National Service Investments in Education

National service has made a large and growing investment in education, fueled both by the 2009 Kennedy Serve America Act and the President’s 2013 Interagency Task Force on Expanding National Service. This paper describes only a subset of the many organizations and partnerships that are utilizing national service resources, including community volunteers, to improve outcomes for children and youth. The sidebar shows the scope of federal national service investment in education, including service in public schools, as of February 2014.

Each year, national service programs leverage more than 4 million community volunteers and $850 million in outside resources — from businesses, foundations and other sources — to strengthen impact and increase return on taxpayer dollars.

National service brings new money, new people and partner-friendly infrastructure into schools and youth-serving organizations. For example, the city of Syracuse, NY thought the Foster Grandparent program was so valuable that they are placing a Foster Grandparent in every first and second grade classroom starting in fall 2014. That’s 167 people, supported by $350K in private funding. The Corporation for National and Community Service will partner with them to set this new effort on a path to success.

In addition to the reach that the numbers illustrate, Wendy Spencer, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, states: “AmeriCorps and Senior Corps members are passionate, dedicated citizens who choose to give a year of their time to their cause. They work hard in tough conditions to meet important needs because they want to be there. Because they make an intensive, sustained commitment, they can take on complex assignments, assume leadership roles and deliver powerful results.”

Established in 1993, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) is a federal agency that engages more than 5 million Americans in service through its core programs — Senior Corps, AmeriCorps and the Social Innovation Fund. Education is one of six priority areas for CNCS grantmaking, and it represents the largest single area of investment for the agency. As of February 2014:

- About half of CNCS funding supports programs focused on improving education and outcomes for children.
- CNCS’ investment translates to a large national service presence in the nation’s schools. CNCS is in nearly 12,000 (11,716) public schools — or about 1 in every 10.
- CNCS is in more than 1 in 4 (26 percent) of the nation’s “persistently lowest achieving” schools.
- 82,100 national service participants are helping students succeed.

Read more about the agency’s investments in education here: http://www.nationalservice.gov/focus-areas/education
New Efforts Promise Even More Impact

In July 2013, President Obama created a Task Force on Expanding National Service, providing a vehicle for federal agency leaders to identify additional ways that the public and private sectors can work together to use national service as a strategy for tackling national priorities. As a result, several new interagency partnerships and public-private initiatives are supporting success for children and youth in school and beyond. All of these engage organizations that have developed a strong evidence base for their previous national service work. Over the next one to two years, these partnerships will scale up models that are already working, and they will add even more to what we know about how national service can be a powerful education partner. They include:

- **Aspire Mentoring Academy Corps**, a public-private partnership to strengthen mentoring, supported by AT&T, the Corporation for National and Community Service and MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, will engage AmeriCorps members in regions around the country to support mentoring activities for thousands of young people at risk of dropping out of school. This effort supports the My Brother’s Keeper initiative, which focuses attention and resources on closing the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color.

- **School Turnaround AmeriCorps**, a partnership between the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Department of Education, that will place AmeriCorps members in persistently low-performing urban and rural schools. National service members will help keep students on track to graduate by working to increase student academic achievement, attendance and high school graduation rates; improve college and career readiness; and provide college enrollment assistance and advice.

- **Service Works**, the nation’s largest corporate-sponsored AmeriCorps VISTA program, uses volunteer service as a strategy to help 25,000 low-income young people in 10 cities develop the skills they need for college and careers. A collaboration among AmeriCorps, the Citi Foundation and the Points of Light Institute, the initiative will engage thousands of professionals — including Citi employees — as volunteer mentors and trainers. Young people will receive training in critical 21st century leadership and workplace skills, the chance to build their networks and connections to their communities and the opportunity to use their new skills by participating in and leading volunteer service projects. Service Works is part of Citi Foundation’s three-year, $50 million Pathways to Progress initiative, the largest single investment the foundation has ever made.

- **STEM AmeriCorps**, which mobilizes AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA members to strengthen STEM education for K–12 students, including by recruiting professionals from STEM-focused industries as volunteers. The initiative also includes a focused corps within Teach for America that is designed to recruit, train and support Teach for America AmeriCorps members with backgrounds in STEM fields to become effective STEM educators and leaders in the classroom, especially in low-income rural and urban communities.

- **Youth Opportunity AmeriCorps**, a partnership between the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, will enroll at-risk and formerly incarcerated youth in national service projects sponsored by AmeriCorps. This effort also supports the My Brother’s Keeper initiative, mentioned above.

This was one of the first interagency Corps, announced just a few days after the President created the Task Force.
ENDNOTES

1 Read more about the GradNation campaign at http://gradnation.org/.


4 A growing body of research and practice is beginning to explore the value of a GED for young people who leave high school before earning a diploma. While the GradNation campaign focuses primarily on raising the on-time graduation rate, America’s Promise Alliance recognizes that more attention is needed to how we can best serve young people who may need alternatives to the traditional high school route.


14 Balfanz, R. (2012). Overcoming the poverty challenge to enable college and career readiness for all: The crucial role of student supports. Baltimore, MD: Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Education’s Center for Social Organization of Schools.


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22 Balfanz, R. (2012). Overcoming the poverty challenge to enable college and career readiness for all: The crucial role of student supports. Baltimore, MD: Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Education’s Center for Social Organization of Schools.


24 The GradNation campaign is guided, in part, by a Civic Marshall Plan [http://www.americaspromise.org/civic-marshall-plan-build-grad-nation/] that outlines ten “planks,” or focus areas, that research affirms are essential to closing the graduation gap and creating clear pathways for all youth to college and career. The programs whose evidence we review in this paper respond to one or more of these focus areas, and they are also strongly aligned with the Civic Marshall Plan’s core principles: a strategic focus on communities with low graduation rates; high expectations for all students; accountability and support for what is working; and collaborations that are carefully planned, guided by shared metrics and thoughtfully integrated to maximize impact.


THE ROLE OF NATIONAL SERVICE IN CLOSING THE GRADUATION GAP


America’s Promise Alliance gratefully acknowledges support for the research, writing and promotion of this paper from The Bilger Foundation, which was established by Arthur and Dahlia Bilger to support a wide range of causes with particular emphasis on the education and development of young people. Special thanks to GradNation Presenting Sponsor State Farm for their sustained commitment to service and education.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to each of the people who gave generously of their time during July and August 2014 for phone interviews and email exchanges about this paper.

Jim Balfanz, City Year
Erin Brackney, OneStar Foundation
John Bridgeland, Civic Enterprises
Michael Brown, City Year
Mary Bruce, AmeriCorps Alums
Dan Cardinali, Communities In Schools
Ann Maura Connolly, City Year and Voices for National Service
Elizabeth Darling, OneStar Foundation
David Eisner, Repair the World
Deborah A. Gist, Rhode Island Department of Education
Emily Haber, Massachusetts Service Alliance
Eric Hanushek, Stanford University
Nancy Henry, Education Northwest
Mary Hyde, Corporation for National and Community Service
Jeff Jablow, City Year
Russell Krumnow, Opportunity Nation
Leslie Lenkowsky, Indiana University
Zach Maurini, ServiceNation
Jennifer Ney, Voices for National Service
David Parker, Serve Minnesota
Gregg Petersmeyer, America’s Promise Alliance and Personal Pathways, LLC
Robert Putnam, Harvard University
Shirley Sagawa, Center for American Progress
Tom Sander, Harvard University

Eric Schwarz, Citizen Schools
David Shapiro, MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership
Michael Sherraden, Washington University in St. Louis
Simran Sidhu, YouthBuild Philadelphia
Wendy Spencer, Corporation for National and Community Service
Emily Steinberg, OneStar Foundation
Dorothy Stoneman, YouthBuild USA
Audrey Suker, Serve Minnesota
Stefanie Weiss, Points of Light Institute

About the Authors

Michelle Hynes is a consultant and coach with more than 20 years of experience in connecting community resources with public schools on behalf of struggling students. She was also part of the team that authored the 2014 America's Promise Alliance report Don't Call Them Dropouts.

Jon Margolick is a policy analyst, attorney and Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps who has written extensively about the nature and practice of citizenship. He is working on a book about the role of national service in a democratic society.

Both of the authors were previously associated with Experience Corps (now AARP Experience Corps), a multi-state AmeriCorps program that engages people 55+ as tutors and mentors for K–3 students in high-need elementary schools.
OUR VISION
All young people in America will have access to the fundamental resources they need to realize their full life potential.

OUR MISSION
We mobilize people from every sector of American life to fulfill Five Promises to young people, which will empower them to share in the Promise of America.

THE FIVE PROMISES

Caring Adults
Young people need to be surrounded by caring adults providing love, challenge, active support, a vision for a brighter future and opportunities for them to take responsibility for their own lives.

Safe Places
Young people need physical and psychological safety at home, in school, online and in the community.

Healthy Start
Young people need the conditions that make it possible to grow physically, socially and intellectually starting at the earliest ages.

Effective Education
Young people need not only a high school diploma, but a high-quality learning experience that prepares them for college and career.

Opportunity to Serve
Young people need service opportunities to help them develop belonging in their communities, empowerment to be positive contributors and a sense of personal responsibility.