

## Focusing On Texas' Low-Performing Secondary Schools Testimony for the Texas Senate Education Committee Hearing

**“National Service Organizations like “City Year” addressing gaps in educational attainment and workforce readiness by strengthening efforts in the middle grades.”**

**April 20, 2010**

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Good Morning, my name is Paul Garro and I am the Executive Director of City Year San Antonio/Texas. City Year San Antonio/Texas is approximately one of thirty AmeriCorps Texas grantee recipients utilizing the passion, innovation and willingness of 18-24 year olds to “get things done” in our communities. These young leaders, City Year AmeriCorps members, address critical community needs, particularly in schools, through citizen service, civic engagement and social entrepreneurship. The City Year AmeriCorps members serve full time as tutors, mentors and role models for San Antonio’s youth.

City Year is focused on improving educational attainment and the workforce pipeline to meaningful careers. City Year is the nation’s largest AmeriCorps program and a leader of the national service movement. Since its inception in 1988, City Year has been committed to working with children and youth from urban, low-income communities. City Year has established sites in 20 locations across the United States working in over 150 urban schools. City Year places a team of highly trained corps members (18 to 24 year olds) in each school from before school opens through the end of the day’s after school program four days a week for the entire year (before school, during school, after school & out-of-school support). City Year corps members address the needs of children in high poverty schools through research-based programming, the centerpiece of which is a holistic school partnership model called Whole School, Whole Child. Through this program, City Year supports student success through three initiatives:

- *Academic Support* – providing in-school academic support to students through in class support, one-on-one tutoring, small group tutoring and learning enrichment activities;
- *Positive School Climate* – implementing programs designed to increase student connectedness to their school community and develop their satisfaction and excitement about learning; and
- *After-school & Out-of-school Programs* – leading and developing meaningful activities for youth in after-school time. Reinforce in-school learning and build skills that correlate with success and active learning in schools.

Before entering the school, these corps members receive one month of training in relevant subject areas such as tutoring techniques and behavioral management. The power of these teams of “near peers” who build strong relationships with students in a high poverty early secondary grades school is quickly multiplied, as these corps member provide attendance monitoring, tutoring/mentoring and homework support to hundreds of students, and collectively enable schools to offer after-school and service learning opportunities. City Year teams provide assistance to teachers with the nuts and bolts of managing the data flow needed to operate and use an early warning system, and operate school-wide school climate and attendance programs.

Corps members serve in schools as tutors, mentors, role models and leaders to help students succeed. Through City Year’s standardized, outcomes-based service model, City Year deploys diverse teams of full-time corps members in school grades 5 through 9 to help improve student **attendance, behavior and course performance** – which research confirms is a way to significantly increase the urban high school graduation pipeline in America.

In each partner school, corps members are a **full-time presence**: from the first bell until the last student leaves the afterschool program.

Corps members serve on highly visible, uniformed teams and provide a powerful, dynamic presence in a school. Young adult corps members, older than classmates and younger than parents and administrators, forge meaningful relationships with students as their **near-peer role models**.

City Year's **diverse teams** unite corps members of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds and enable students to find a variety of role models.

City Year corps members provide a **critical mass of people power** that matches the scale of students who need additional adult supports.

In the 21st century all students need to be provided a pathway from secondary school to post-secondary success, via college, job training, or the military. To put it simply, there is no work that can support a family for students who fail to graduate from high school or do so unprepared for further learning. Yet for far too many of our students, in particular low-income and minority students, such pathways do not exist. In an era dominated by human capital this not only weakens our nation's competitiveness, but also, as both the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and U.S. Army have noted, threatens its social fabric. We cannot have a country in which entire communities are cut off from the only real avenue to prosperity -- a good education.

We find ourselves in this troublesome situation, in good part, because too many of our low-income and minority students are concentrated in middle and high schools that are designed and operated to fail. Classroom instruction in too many of our secondary schools lack relevant, interactive learning. The secondary school student experiences tremendous transition from the elementary school environment and now particularly, we must be cognizant of the transitions our current 7th graders will undergo as they become the first group that must pass 12 high stakes "End-Of-Course" exams in order to graduate.

Research (i.e. Johns Hopkins May, 2009; Herzog/Iver 2007), tells us that we know the students who will drop out of high school. Students who exhibit at least one of three off-track indicators – poor attendance, unsatisfactory behavior, course failure in math and English – as early as the 6th grade have less than a 25% chance of graduating from high school.

Students in Philadelphia, who in sixth grade failed either a math or English course, had an attendance rate of under 80 percent, or had a final —unsatisfactory behavior mark in at least one class, had at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out of high school.

Three out of four students who ultimately dropped out of Philadelphia schools had either a failing grade in math or English or attendance rates below 80 percent in the eighth grade.

Seventy-five percent of the dropouts from the Boston Public Schools' Class of 2004 fit into one of four distinct categories: 1) students with multiple ninth-grade course failures; 2) students with one or more eighth-grade risk factors (attendance below 80 percent, two or more years over-age, or failing multiple core courses); 3) late-entrance English language learners; or 4) special education students taught in —substantially separate class-rooms.

Chicago Public Schools' eventual graduates and dropouts were accurately identified 80 percent of the time using an "on-track" indicator based on the number of credits earned and the number of failures in core courses by the end of the ninth grade.

We must develop and actively respond to these early warning indicators with an aggressive "early warning and intervention system" with our middle school students. These systems are critical to identifying potential drop outs & intervening strategically (just right and just-in-time interventions) with structures for greater school connectedness, increased course performance, in especially Math, Science and English, and innovative approaches to credit protection, credit recovery & credit acceleration.

City Year is one of many National Service organizations that seek to provide the right interventions to the right students at the right time through:

- Attendance Monitoring and Incentive Programs – Corps members work closely with students & teachers to monitor and improve attendance through special initiatives and communications to parents and guardians.
- Behavioral Support – Corps members coach students toward positive behavior through general instruction, mentoring and incentive programs.
- Course Performance: Math and English – Corps members tutor one on one, in small groups and during whole class activities and lead out-of-class extension activities that complement the school's instruction.
- After-school and Extended Day Programming – Corps members lead after-school and support extended day programs that reinforce learning and good behavior through homework assistance, enrichment activities and service projects that explore and address needs in students' communities.
- Positive Climate of High Expectations and Civic Engagement – Corps members lead school community engagement events that foster strong connections to the school community and build students' motivation to succeed and serve others.

Early warning and intervention systems provide the necessary means to unify, focus, and target efforts to improve the attendance, behavior, and course performance. Their fundamental purpose is to get the right intervention to the right student, at the right time.

To achieve this consider the following:

Focus on effective intervention not just identification. As research has shown, it is possible to identify as early as sixth grade large numbers of students who, absent successful intervention, will likely not graduate. Identifying students as they are just beginning to fall off the graduation path, enables schools to target resources effectively and move from a reactive to a proactive intervention strategy.

What will likely be required, however, for early warning and intervention systems to fulfill their promise is collaboration among states, districts and schools to design, implement, and staff multi-tiered intervention systems. In the areas of attendance, behavior-effort, and course performance, these intervention systems will need to provide research-based and practice-validated whole school prevention strategies; targeted supports for students who need more and intensive supports for students for whom whole school and targeted approaches are not enough.

Recognize and build on student strengths. It is also vitally important that early warning and intervention systems are not built around deficit models. Student strengths, as well as areas of struggle, need to be recorded, recognized, analyzed and used to help build and deliver effective interventions.

Provide time, training and support to teachers to implement early warning and intervention systems. For early warning and intervention systems to work, teams of teachers (pairs, triads, four-six person teams can all work) must share a common set of students and have dedicated time at least once every other week to monitor student progress, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and adapt strategies as needed to make sure that the right intervention is getting to the right student at the right time. Teachers will need technical assistance on how to run and operate early warning and intervention systems, as well as on-going support and facilitation to help them establish effective teaming and intervention practices.

Match resources to student needs but practice intervention discipline. For early warning and intervention systems to work, schools will need access to the resources required to respond to their students' needs. In this case, there may be a need to recruit and support additional adults from the community or national service organizations, like City Year, to act as shepherds for these students.