

Using recent graduates to strategically expand AmeriCorps will help those still in school

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The 2014 class of Maryland AmeriCorps members, along with friends and family, pledge to 'get things done for America' as part of a nationwide ceremony that year marking the program's 20th anniversary. (By Paul W. Gillespie, Staff, Baltimore Sun Media Group)

Our country's systemic racism combined with inequities exacerbated by COVID-19 threaten a 15-year trend of improving educational advancements of low income and minority [students](#). Unless we take bold action, we are on the precipice of creating a lost generation of students, without secure pathways to adult success, further increasing racial injustice and economic dislocation. A key, immediate step is to expand [AmeriCorps](#) to enable all students to receive the supports they need when schools reopen.

We've learned that national disasters, when overlaid on existing racial inequities and economic challenges, have negative consequences on education that are long-term and far-reaching. After Hurricane Katrina, [it took students in New Orleans nearly two years to recover from the learning disruption and negative consequences stretched on for a decade or more](#). We can now anticipate a similar "COVID-19" effect with three particularly worrisome impacts: [Elementary students](#) will have the largest academic losses; [middle and high school students](#) will be at an increased risk of falling off track to high school graduation; and high school juniors and seniors who lost essential college or postsecondary training transition supports will increase the ranks of out of school and unemployed youth. These effects will be further exacerbated for students of color and those from low income [families](#).

Left unaddressed, these challenges will also weaken our communities. Research shows that elementary school achievement strongly affects long term outcomes like labor market participation and [health](#). Success in grades six to nine greatly influences the odds of adult success. Once young adults are out of school and out of work, the road back is long and uncertain, with significant negative lifetime consequences and wider social and economic costs that affect all of us.

Fortunately, there are high-impact, evidence-based responses for these challenges — all of which require additional person power to reach all students who need them. [AmeriCorps](#) programs can provide an efficient and cost-effective way to respond because they are already partnering with schools and communities across the country with established relationships, infrastructure and a track record of results. AmeriCorps provides a vehicle to turn the commitment, compassion and competencies of recent graduates into effective actions.

The most effective strategy to reduce learning loss in elementary grades is providing structured, one-on-one or through small group [tutoring](#). Using trained AmeriCorps members to add capacity within existing literacy and math support programs can make large-scale tutoring support feasible and more [cost-effective](#).

Providing students with ongoing, supportive relationships, and consistently monitoring their progress and adjusting accordingly are evidence-based [practices](#) that help middle grade and high school student succeed in school. Deploying AmeriCorps members to work alongside teachers to provide middle and high school students with integrated social, emotional and academic supports — in the role of Student Success Coaches — enables a personalized and thus more effective response, preventing students from falling off track.

College access programs can bring on AmeriCorps members to augment the efforts of high school counselors to help students transition to college or career. The evidence is clear: Comprehensive guidance, application and enrollment supports are much more effective than targeted efforts aimed at just one aspect of the transition from high school to college or [training](#). Investing in AmeriCorps to support high school seniors in the transition to postsecondary schooling or training would bring significant long-term individual, community and economic benefits.

While the impact of the pandemic and current unrest in our country threaten learning and life outcomes for this generation of students, it is within our power (and it is in fact our national duty in a land where we are all created equal) to do something. Strategic expansion of AmeriCorps by tapping the powers of our nation's most recent graduates and channeling their idealism, energy and skills is how we can rapidly and more equitably provide the additional capacity to enact what is needed — and what evidence says will work — to support our students through the impact of COVID-19 and continued racial injustice. This ensures we can all benefit from their fully realized talents and contributions in the future.

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