

*Jumpstart – Experience Corps Pilot Project
Year Two Final Report*

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Executive Summary

This report serves as the final evaluation report for the second year of the Jumpstart-Experience Corps pilot program. Over the two-year pilot period, Jumpstart and Experience Corps collaborated to develop an innovative service opportunity for older adults serving low achieving preschoolers. The collaboration leveraged each partner's expertise; Jumpstart's track record in serving preschool children, and Experience Corps' background in developing volunteer opportunities for older adults. In the first year, the evaluation focused on the collaboration between the two non-profits at the national and conceptual level, and volunteer and school site fit at the program implementation level.

Project principals requested that the second year evaluation provide a more focused look at program implementation issues, particularly the success of peer team leaders and classroom assistance time (CAT), and issues related to recruitment. In addition, the question of volunteer satisfaction was approached from a perspective of looking comparatively at the satisfaction of volunteers in the Jumpstart program, and a sampling of older adult volunteers in other education service programs.

In addition to presenting evaluation activities and findings for the second year of the Jumpstart-Experience Corps pilot program, the report concludes with a review of the Jumpstart program with older adult volunteers in light of both years of the evaluation. Recommendations are suggested for fashioning a stronger service option as related to both the particular evaluation questions and overall program model.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the evaluation questions, findings, and recommendations for each area of the evaluation. Greater detail on all of these can be found in the complete report.

Overall Volunteer Experience

The Jumpstart pilot bringing together older adult volunteers for service with preschool children has met mixed success. Over the two years of the pilot, corps members have expressed very high levels of satisfaction with the program, and show high levels of commitment and energy. However, indicators from across data collection methods, suggest key areas for improvement in the program model.

A number of survey questions present overall picture of corps member perspectives on their volunteer experience.

Corps members appear to be extremely pleased with service as suggested by the high ratings given to the various aspects of service. Volunteers were particularly satisfied with the support provided by staff, team leaders, and in the form of materials provided. They agree most strongly that keeping their children engaged is rewarding, and that CAT is valuable for learning strategies for working with children. Corps members expressed slightly weaker levels of satisfaction with finding the educational objectives of the activities easy to understand, leaving the program mentally stimulated, always knowing what is expected of them, and leaving the program energized.

Volunteers rated most highly their impact on the classroom environment, followed by their impact on other learning skills and on the social skills of the children, with 50% to 43% indicating they had a “big impact” in these areas. Notably, only 40% of volunteers felt they had a big impact on their child’s literacy skills.

Volunteers often talk of the value of their service in terms of the one-to-one relationships and friendship they provide to the children, though also are concerned about having an impact on both academic and social skills.

Volunteers are generally reticent to voice criticisms of the program. However, evidence suggests some dissatisfaction with one of the school sites and concerns about child selection, although the latter may also reflect corps member inability to successfully engage children in the program.

Recruitment

Rather than simply build on the successes of recruitment during Year One, a number of hurdles were faced in recruiting volunteers for the second year. While program partners vary on their interpretation of the success of the retention rate as to whether this was typical or created a greater recruitment need than expected, they agree that changes in staff, along with disappointing word of mouth marketing contributed to the recruitment challenges. In addition, staff were surprised that recruitment was particularly difficult in South Boston, which had been such a successful site in the previous year.

Consistent with the 2004 recruitment experience, the placement of advertisements in local papers was the most effective means of generating interest in the program. The consistent appeal of the program is the children and the bond Corps members share with the children. The extensive commitment required by the Jumpstart program can be a benefit or a detriment for different individuals. Examination of travel mode and time for this year’s corps suggests that while working in the neighborhood is preferable for many, it is not a barrier for all.

A number of barriers to recruitment were identified, which affect at least some part of the pool of potential candidates. These include limitations of the stipend, and effects of the stipend on social security and other benefits. Addition program barriers may include aspects of the program model such as the number and flexibility of hours, complexity of the program, child selection, activities, corps member support, and administrative work required.

Recommendations in this section address both recruitment activities and the program model.

1. Simplify and clarify the presentation of the program to potential recruits to both improve program appeal and minimize potential misunderstandings. This can be achieved by involving previous volunteers in recruitment, using video to illustrate the nature of service, and creating clear, concise messaging. In addition, recruitment should not be limited to the neighboring community as at least some volunteers are willing and able to travel from their communities to others.
2. Changes to the program model may also improve program appeal. For instance, consider a program model with greater flexibility in terms of hours, allowing volunteers greater opportunities to miss and not make up sessions, improve support for understanding the impact of stipends on benefits, and replace the educational award with an incentive more appropriate for this group.

Team Leaders

Team leaders are successful in providing support for and cohering their teams, performing administrative functions, managing materials, and observing volunteers and children during sessions. However, volunteers require substantial training and support to successfully implement sessions, and it is unlikely that peer team leaders, with however much training or years of experience as volunteers in the program, will be able to provide that support, both because of their own lack of early childhood education background and the inherent tensions between being peers and leaders. Another source of expertise needs to be tapped and a position created to provide the needed coaching, including ongoing training in areas such as classroom management and dialogic reading.

Recommendations include narrowing the role of team leaders and creating a separate coaching position.

Team leaders can continue to work as managers, leaders, and observers. In particular, they can play roles in supporting corps members, conducting administrative and managerial tasks, organizing social functions of team, and being session observers.

Coaches should be engaged to provide training and support in early childhood education and age appropriate strategies for working with preschoolers. Coaches could be hired on an hourly basis and drawn from early childhood educators who are out of the workforce raising children, or retired early childhood or early elementary teachers. Coaches could lead training sessions during one team meeting a week for each team and also be available to team leaders for consulting about additional team concerns. Coaches can provide support in classroom management such as the establishment of rules and routines during the Jumpstart sessions, strategies for addressing inappropriate behavior, dialogic reading practice, and grounded instruction in early literacy education.

A number of additional recommendations are offered to more closely align program materials and training to the learning styles of older adult volunteers. Currently, Jumpstart materials and session plans are inaccessible to many corps members and team leaders, who are functioning outside of an academic environment. Materials should be simplified, with clear statements explaining the goals of various activities, and scaffolded instructions for achieving those goals. These could include checklists and concrete strategies for detailing the different activities during session and deepening corps members understanding of literacy skills and strategies for supporting their development. Visual media (photographs and video) should be integrated into training and sessions to promote observation and discussion of volunteer-child interactions

Additional suggestions related to providing a better fit between the Jumpstart program model and corps member abilities are included in the final section of the report.

CAT

Study of CAT revealed that corps members generally enjoy their CAT service, readily follow the lead of the teacher, and are familiar with the children and classroom routines. Many corps members are content to assist the teacher in modest ways with lunchtime or sit side by side with children coloring, while other corps members with higher expectations of their contributions in the classroom, were frustrated with their CAT experiences. And while most

corps members feel CAT is a valuable component of service, the goals of CAT in terms of corps members and/or children learning is not entirely clear.

Corps members relate that CAT is valuable for observing their partner children in the classroom setting. However, given Jumpstart's goal of supporting children's language growth and development, time spent in a classroom could potentially offer an opportunity for modeling appropriate strategies for working with preschoolers. The modeling of effective teaching strategies could be of great benefit in helping volunteers understand what role they can play in children's learning and how to use specific techniques to extend children's learning and/or even reinforce what the teacher has begun by helping children practice language. Unfortunately, depending on the classroom assignment, a volunteer is just as likely to have someone model inappropriate strategies.

Either classrooms need to be selected based on having appropriate management and teaching strategies in place or there needs to be a Jumpstart coach who has sufficient early childhood expertise to help volunteers differentiate between the types of teaching they observe in classrooms.

Recommendations for CAT include ensuring teacher buy-in and engaging teachers more fully in the Jumpstart program through orientation, training and incentives.

Establish guidelines allowing corps members to serve in different classrooms so as to develop more critical skills in observing classroom dynamics and extracting valuable strategies.

Provide training for volunteers so that they can learn from their CAT experiences, differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate classroom strategies, and improve their own skills in working with preschoolers. Also focus training on how volunteers can be effective in classrooms during table top activities, such as coloring, and other common parts of the preschool day.

Investigate the possibility of creating unique corps member roles in the classroom related to reading and writing, such as the lending librarian role played by one corps member. Provide training on book selection and deepening dialogic reading skills.

Volunteer Satisfaction: A Comparative View

This component of the evaluation provided a comparative view of the Jumpstart experience in light of other older adult volunteer experiences. Most significantly Jumpstart and Experience Corps programs differ in the age of children they serve; Jumpstart volunteers work with preschoolers, while Experience Corps volunteers work with early elementary children. Participating Experience Corps volunteers included volunteers in programs comparable to Jumpstart service, and from three different cities. The data suggests areas of similarity and difference between Jumpstart and other volunteer experiences.

Jumpstart volunteers are at least as satisfied with their service experience, if not more so, than the volunteers in the other programs surveyed. Overall, Jumpstart volunteers tended to rate aspects of service, from training to overall program satisfaction, more highly than other volunteers. Jumpstart volunteers were also consistent in rating the importance of different aspects of the program model more highly than other volunteers, although the differences are slight.

Jumpstart responses generally tracked the responses of volunteers in the other programs, with similar patterns of what was rated more or less highly. In other words, the general patterns of what Jumpstart versus other volunteers enjoy or felt what was important about their programs tended to be similar. Thus, for instance, across all groups, volunteers agreed strongly that “keeping my child engaged is rewarding,” while “leaving the program energized” was less enthusiastically agreed upon also across all groups.

The most notable difference between Jumpstart and Experience Corps responses was on perceptions of the impacts of their work. Volunteers across the Experience Corps programs felt they had the greatest impact on *children’s early literacy/literacy skills*. In contrast, Jumpstart volunteers felt they had much lower impact on these skills, while having a greater impact in other areas, such as the *school apart from the classroom* and the *community*.

Summary: Data comparing Jumpstart to other service opportunities for older adults suggests that the Jumpstart program offers a satisfying volunteer experience for older adults. However, the relatively low ratings given to the impact volunteers have on children’s literacy skills suggests further investigation of corps members’ perception of the importance of improving literacy skills on the one hand; and the possible implication that corps members would like to feel more effective in this area, but due to aspects of the program, do not.

Reflections on the Pilot

The Jumpstart model was developed for use with college students, immersed in an environment of intellectual pursuit, and aims at developing their interest in pursuing early childhood education as a profession. Evidence strongly suggests that older adult corps members approach service from a different perspective, and are not interested in a rigorous and academically oriented program. Training methods, support print materials, and the modeling strategies developed for the college student volunteers are not adequate to serve the needs of older adults. A number of modifications are suggested to develop a better fit between the program model and the capabilities of the corps members.

Recommendations program model changes are suggested including developing a less intensive program model, particularly reducing the length of sessions, providing incentives that appeal to this age group (rather than the educational award), and greater support in understanding stipend impact on social security benefits.

Program goals, session plans and learning objectives should focus on corps member proclivities and strengths, particularly in reading and writing, and build from concrete skills and activities, clearly stated learning objectives, and coherent session plans with transparent learning intentions. Session activities, especially choice time, should be more highly structured and the length of choice time reduced.

A new Coaching position should be established to provide ongoing training in classroom management and teaching strategies for corps members, and to provide support for team leaders in assisting them in their leadership roles in the classroom. Training should include opportunities for role plays and repeated practice of key behaviors.

Printed support materials, such as session plans should be simplified, and more accessible training materials created, including checklists and guidelines for session activities such as small group reading, and classroom management.

Visual media can be integrated into trainings and session reflections as a way of illustrating appropriate strategies for working with preschoolers and building observation skills.

Strategies for developing stronger school and family relationships should be explored, including providing greater opportunities for teacher involvement, and offering teacher incentives, and review of child selection process and conditions of their continued involvement in the program.

Conclusion

Evidence from the two-year evaluation strongly suggests both the potential for the Jumpstart program to provide a satisfying and effective service option for older adults and the need for greater alignment of the program model to volunteer capabilities.