Executive Summary

With funding from AmeriCorps, AARP Foundation engaged Abt Associates to conduct an evaluation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) outcomes in two AmeriCorps-funded Experience Corps programs during the 2018-19 school year. This study builds on AARP Foundation Experience Corps’ prior work related to SEL and the growing body of literature supporting school-based SEL-focused interventions. Findings from the evaluation were compelling, with students seeing statistically significant improvements in social-emotional learning.

Methodology

As part of the evaluation, the Abt team reviewed several SEL measurement tools and identified a SEL-focused behavior rating system, the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), which is well aligned to the Experience Corps model and program components. The DESSA provides an overall social-emotional composite score as well as scores for eight individual domains of SEL competence: Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Self-Management, Goal-Directed Behavior, Relationship Skills, Personal Responsibility, Decision Making, and Optimistic Thinking.

The Abt team administered the DESSA to 72 teachers in nine schools within the two local programs, as well as two questions from the Social Skills Improvement System–Social and Emotional Learning Edition (SSIS-SEL) that assess reading performance and motivation. Teachers were invited to complete the survey once in November 2018 and again in May 2019.

Findings

The findings of the SEL evaluation, which focused on the 101 students with valid pretest and posttest data, demonstrate that the DESSA composite scores increased significantly between fall 2018 and spring 2019. In addition, on every subscale of the DESSA, students showed statistically significant improvements from fall to spring, with the strongest improvements found on the Personal Responsibility, Relationship Skills, and Decision Making scales. Moreover, students showed statistically significant improvements on the SSIS-SEL items (reading performance and motivation to succeed).

Although this evaluation did not include a comparison group to establish what would have happened in the absence of Experience Corps, the Abt team was able to compare Experience Corps students to DESSA national norms. Students in Experience Corps started the school year at much higher risk of developing social-emotional problems relative to these national norms and ended the year close to these national norms. Reductions by almost 50 percent were observed in the DESSA Composite’s Need for Instruction range between fall and spring, which indicated a substantial transformation of students’ SEL skills.

Conclusion

Given these promising preliminary findings, the Abt team recommends that AARP Foundation continue to measure students’ social-emotional development across the full Experience Corps network to further understand the mechanisms by which the Experience Corps program is affecting such development. Although the full DESSA may be too burdensome to administer to all Experience Corps students, future data collection options are discussed to capture SEL outcomes and ensure that this key benefit of the Experience Corps program is being monitored and recognized.

For more information about this study please contact experiencecorps@aarp.org