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Law Professor, Alumna Lead City Year Board

Professor Andy Horwitz and Stephanie Federico '03 co-chair advisory board of City Year Providence, aiming to dramatically cut dropout rates



August 27, 2015 | Michael M. Bowden

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- The challenges are staggering.

Roughly a third of Providence public school students are “chronically absent,” demonstrate disruptive behavior, and/or struggle with math and reading – all symptoms indicating a higher risk of dropout before graduation.

But the tide has dramatically begun to turn thanks to a deepening collaboration between the City of Providence and City Year Providence, part of the national nonprofit AmeriCorps program. One of 27 such initiatives nationwide, City Year Providence hires young adults to spend a year running support programs in high-poverty urban schools. Fifty of these “near-peer corps members” – almost all are between 17 and 24 years old – are presently spread across five Providence schools: two in elementary schools (Carl G. Lauro and Pleasant View) and three in middle schools (Roger Williams, Gilbert Stuart, and DelSesto).

City Year corps members focus on providing in-classroom support for teachers, while also tutoring, holding parent engagement nights, and organizing school clubs that cater to interests from basketball to computers to chess. In one Providence school, members organized eight “Homework Diners”

catered by local restaurants, in which parents and nearly all of the schools' teachers came to discuss how parents could help their children with math assignments and play math-related games at home.

To assist in their efforts, City Year Providence has enlisted two veteran public-service lawyers, both directly associated with Roger Williams University School of Law – Professor Andrew Horwitz, the school's Assistant Dean for Experiential Education; and Stephanie Federico '03L, former chief of staff of the Providence Public School Department. On July 1, the pair was appointed to co-chair City Year Providence's all-volunteer Board of Advisors; both have been members of the board since 2011.

"We're responsible for community relations, development and fundraising," explained Horwitz, who is also RWU Law's Dean for Experiential Education. "We're actively engaged in City Year's relationships with the City of Providence and the Department of Education, things that the City Year staff really doesn't have the bandwidth to do on its own. So we help out."

"We're essentially City Year's eyes and ears on the ground," Federico added. "I think our 'lawyerly brains' add real value. We offer a good sounding board for both the local and national organizations. They will come to us and say, for example, 'Here's our growth strategy for Providence. Is it realistic, given the political environment and the private-sector funding? Do we need to slow it down? Do we need to speed it up?' We're also its champions out in the community, spreading the word, saying, 'Let us tell you about the ABCs of dropout prevention and what our data is looking like.'"

Promising Results

And the data is looking good.

"What City Year's research shows is that, if you can track kids from grade three through grade ten, you're going to maximize your impact," Horwitz said. "And if you can get a kid through the tenth grade, on track in terms of performance, the likelihood of high school graduation is really high."

One recent case study focused on Providence's Pleasant View School, an elementary school with 480 students from kindergarten to grade five. During the 2011-12 academic year, the school issued 42 suspensions; but in 2012-13, after City Year's first corps members arrived, that number had dropped to zero.



In June, Pleasant View was singled out as a success story for an article in the national journal *Education Week*. Quoted in the piece, Principal Gara B. Field noted a dramatic improvement in the school's math scores. "We're performing above the district level and almost at the state level," Field said, adding that City Year has "been a huge partner. One of the best things we ever did was write them into our school improvement plan."

The overarching goal of all City Year's efforts, however, is to ensure that at-risk youth graduate from high school.

"We address the ABCs of dropout: Attendance, Behavior and Course performance," Federico explained. "One can determine with great statistical significance that, if a child is lacking in one of those three areas by the eighth grade, they are ripe for dropout when it comes to high school."

So corps members work closely with troubled students and their teachers to make sure that no one falls through the cracks.

"By doing these very intense, near-peer interventions in the classroom, they can help address what teachers alone often can't," Federico said. "For example, the corps members will spend the mornings holding clubs that entice kids to come to school. If you don't come to school, you don't get to participate in the clubs."

These more relaxed and casual sessions also allow corps members to get a better read on issues affecting troubled students. "They're able to say to the teacher, 'Hey, Johnny just shared with me that his parents got kicked out of their house, and now they're living in their car.' Being homeless all of a sudden will, of course, have a dramatic impact on a student's ABCs. And things like that happen all the time in Providence; they happen every day."

City Year corps members follow up with affected students, visiting them and their families to make sure they keep up with their math, English and reading work, and to reinforce school ties.

"This helps keep them on track, so that their course performance doesn't fall off; that they stay with their classmates and continue to progress forward," Federico said.

A Deep History

City Year was founded in Boston in 1988 by Harvard Law School roommates Michael Brown and Alan Khazei. Both happened to be friends of a cousin of Horwitz, who grew up in the Boston area. As a result, Horwitz participated in many early events of City Year, which was then more of a catch-all community organization. "The original concept was for kids to do all sorts of community service projects, including playground repair and painting and things like that," he said.

Beginning around 2009, however, City Year began shifting and narrowing its focus. "Now the impact is purely focused, in an incredibly data-driven fashion, on trying to address the dropout problem that we have in our failing urban schools across the country," Horwitz said.

Federico got involved with City Year via her work in both law and education. After graduating from RWU Law in 2003, she clerked with the Superior Court, and then joined the Law Department for the City of Providence (a connection facilitated by Horwitz). From there, Federico became then-Providence Mayor David Cicilline's deputy chief of staff; and later chief of staff for the Providence Public School Department.



"In those capacities, I got to see a lot of great nonprofit organizations partnering with the Providence Public Schools to help us serve the children," she said. "Because when you have 24,000 kids and you are – as we were at that time – the third poorest district for children in poverty in the nation, the needs of the kids are substantial. You can't address it all by yourself."

Among these nonprofits, Federico said, City Year immediately stood out as something special. "It was very clear, right out of the gate, that they were a model that worked. And so we, the school district as a whole, really rallied behind them to help figure out how this growth strategy could become a possibility."

A few years later, when Federico left the school department to enter private practice (she's now a partner with Anthony DeSisto Law Associates in East Providence), City Year invited her to join the Advisory Board, which Horwitz had joined just eight months earlier. For Federico, renewing an association with her former teacher and mentor was "a kind of blessing."

"I can't say that I really had the drive for public service until I attended RWU Law," she explained. "It's something I gained through the school's pro bono requirements, and specifically through my time at the Criminal Defense Clinic, where Andy really opened my eyes to the need that's out there. So to be able to circle around several years later, and serve as the co-chair of such a great organization with one of the top people who impacted my desire for public service – it is a great honor for me; a little humbling at times, but it also pushes me."

Horwitz echoed Federico's sentiments.

"I have always considered it an incredible privilege to teach people on the verge of becoming lawyers," he said. "To see former students carry on in the public-service tradition makes me incredibly happy and proud. I've loved watching Stephanie's career develop, and I look forward to collaborating with her on City Year's Advisory Board. I think there's a lot we can accomplish together."