

FOX, FOX and ASSOCIATES

Interim Final Report: 1999-2000 NSCC

Perceptions of Community Members

Sixty-one interviews were conducted with community members and twenty-three with parents during the end-of-the-year visit. Of the community interviews, eight were with business people, seventeen with staff members of neighborhood social agencies, five with clergymen, eight with police officers, six of whom were liaison to schools, and twenty-three with adults who were not parents. The thirteen agency staff interviewed came from a variety of private and public agencies, including several community service agencies (family resource, center, community service center, health education center), ethnic neighborhood groups representing the African-American and Hispanic communities, and a senior citizen center. The business persons interviewed were proprietors or salespersons in neighborhood shops.

Community members identified numerous contributions that the NSCC program makes to their children and community. These included academic contributions such as, "vacation reading exposes kids to the Library and helps improve their reading" (OA); "learning and playing" (OA); "computer help" (OA); "science in the summer exposes girls to the field and helps them in science" (OA); the environmental program "which had kids interested in the knowledge of plants and seeing the value of their efforts" (C) and "the drill team" which really benefited the twelve participating students.(P)

Community members also saw the benefit of the programs through provision of social support such as the program's ability "to help a lot of latch-key kids" (OA) and "the Hot Spot, where youth are very responsive and committed and relationships are being built" (C), the Stop the Violence Program (OA).

Community members also mentioned programs which linked the school and community such as the Career Fair "which had people from various schools that the kids could interact with" (C) or the grade school b-ball league "which had a strong success as large number of kids and parents attended the games". (A) Similarly, there were projects which linked local community agencies with the school such as the programs offered at one school that included an embryology project and a landscape project (A) or a social club which was sponsored at the school (A). In addition, in some settings, the corpsmembers' services are being offered via a local agency, such as the participation of a corpsmember "as a co-facilitator of an after-school homework club open to students from multiple schools offered through an agency" (A) or the site where "a corpsmember is running a GED program" through the area church (C) or another where they are working with an area ministry (A). In some cases, area businesses were engaged with the students, such as one site that had an attendance program with a local McDonalds that was extremely successful because kids get recognition for going to school. (B)

Finally, they identified programs aimed specifically at adults in the community as meaningful, such as the GED program (A). General praise included the sense that the team

"has a high respect for the community" (C), that "the program is very much needed" (A), and that "it takes kids seriously". (C) Community members reported that team leaders, and individual corpsmembers, "were central to recruiting area agencies and adult leadership into involvement with the Corps".

In considering impact, they were asked about six dynamics: whether there had been any change in community climate, in perception of the school, in adolescent crime, how well corpsmembers fit into the community, if they bring people together, and, finally, overall impact.

When asked if there had been any "change in community climate", 56 felt able to make a rating. They were provided with a seven-point scale with three positive and three negative levels of change around a "no-change" midpoint. Four community respondents (7%) felt there had been "some" or a "little" negative change, and one (2%) saw "no change". The four who saw negative change in the general feeling in the community cited broad and significant events as the root cause, rather than any poor service by the Corps. For example, they commented on family issues including the sense that "students have problems at home which are not easy to resolve", (O) and the "negativity of the parents" and the "challenge of getting parents involved", (A) "adult apathy" (B) as well as the sense that there is "a transitory population so it is difficult to have any definite sense of local climate. It changes according to the population of women who are here." (A) The business person added that there was a sense that the "school system in Philadelphia is not what it should be" which caused people to "feel less hopeful about the future".

Of the 51 who reported positive change, 22 (43%) felt they had seen "a lot" (26%) or "enormous" (17%) improvement in community climate. Those who saw positive change shared observations such as the agency staff member who remarked, "People here last year had a sense of isolation. This year there is more community building" or another adult who shared, "They feel more positive because you can see the change. More parents are concerned about themselves and their children."

Others noted that there were signs of the change including "more people turned out for community meetings", "more programs and activities offered for children", (A) "more calls from volunteers" (A and B), "more people asking about starting clubs" (A) with "so many people interested and wanting to be involved". (A). Other accomplishments which offered hope included: "a housing project being reconstructed" (O and C); "welfare program is making people go back to work" (O); and "the security in the neighborhood" being better (O).

The community was seen to feel "encouraged", and to believe that they "have assistance and resources when needed". (OA) Collaborations were emerging, such as the business person who noted, "They are always striving for the future. Homeowners and businesses get out and work closely together. The community has a lot to offer". As an expression of optimism, members reported that, "people feel that they want to stay in the neighborhood and become part of the solution and not the problem". (O) For female community members, in particular, the "availability of positive role models" was seen "as meaningful" by a member of the clergy.

Despite the obstacles, a pervasive courage was expressed. One noted, "This is a sort of mixed neighborhood. A lot of people work, but many are unemployed. For the most part though, people have a positive outlook in this low income area" (O). In another area, a business person told the Observer, "This is a poor neighborhood. Regardless of color, the residents' economic status is similar. Collectively, they have a hope for the future of their kids". An agency staff member concurred, saying "Overall, this is a pretty strong community. This is a working community and most families are intact. For most, not all, the people are positive".

When asked, in a separate question, if "the NSCC had anything to do with the change they saw", a large majority who saw positive change (75%) said, "yes", they attributed that change, at least in part, to the NSCC. Clearly, engagement with the school aided people's sense of promise, for example, noted one adult, "The general tone of the neighborhood is that it's a bad place. Those people who are active in the school/community do see some hope".

Thirty-six felt able to comment on a "change in feelings towards the school, or towards education in general", and almost all, 32 (89%) saw positive change, with ratings of "enormous" (14%), "a lot" (36%), "some"(31%), or "a little" (8%). They attributed this improvement to the benefits derived by the children from the program (e.g., "increase in achievement", "better attitudes"), as well as to a direct positive impact on adults. This was evidenced by comments reflecting broader parent involvement, including one by two non-parent adults. One said that "some parents are attending school at night and are improving" and the other said "parents are responding. They visit the school, attend workshops and parent meetings" In a different community an agency staffer said, similarly, that, "parents show concern because they attend meetings on a regular basis". More broadly it was noted that, "people are beginning to see the difference in school programming"(A) and that "the school image has changed. I attend a lot of town meetings. People come out to school events. They feel positive". (B)

Just as a majority gave credit to the NSCC for the positive change in community climate, so did the same large majority of 75% credit the NSCC for the positive change in feeling about the school. One clergy member reported that, "The community sees the kids doing positive things through the initiative of the NSCC". One community member commented that "because the NSCC is in the classroom and helping kids, the parents feel better about education" (B), another that the NSCC has provided "activities, both educational and recreational, that they would not have if the Corps were not here""(A), while a police officer specified that "because the NSCC provides help for the students in mentoring and reading it stirs the students interest in education, jobs and the future". Consistent with the sense that the program inspires kids, one adult noted, "the one on one tutoring and extra contact received personally helps students to set goals and to have things to look forward to". Another community member concurred, stating "the NSCC only made things better. It took existing programs and improved them".(B)

Fifty-four felt comfortable rating the impact the Corps had on the community this year, with 51 (94%) seeing at least "some" positive impact. Forty (71%) believed they had seen

substantial impact with ratings of "enormous" (19%), "major" (19%), or "important" (33%). The others saw only "some" (19%) or "a little" (4%) impact.

Even those who acknowledged a low level of impact saw a beginning of "interactions between the kids and the community" (B) and that the Corps had made a "real effort" to reach the community and change the neighborhood. Although they were modest in their ratings, they were able to identify contributions of the NSCC, identifying, for example, the "after-school programs" (P), "clean-ups" attended by some parents (A), and the "great impact on the children who do take part". (C) Some made a distinction between the impact the NSCC was having academically versus in the local area, as did the police officer who noted that "the Corps has had a positive impact in the school, but I don't think they have had an impact on the community".

Those who evaluated the Corps' impact as "important", "major" or "enormous", frequently explained their positive rating by mentioning specific gains they attributed to the NSCC. These include the Corps making "a vital contribution to student lives", including the "provision of a safe haven for children" which "helps parents feel secure and comfortable" (A) and the "creation of an atmosphere of hope" (C). The program was seen to "make a major difference in the life of students" as there was "nothing or very little prior to the NSCC" (P) and so they were "filling a gap" in programming. (C)

Community members also knew of, and offered praise for, specific programs such as the "Homework Club" and "mentoring programs" which had demonstrated their impact. Although he realized these were implemented in-school, a business person felt these programs "improved the quality of community life". The Socialized Recess program was believed to have "reduced the violence in the school yard" (C) whereas the summer activities "give the kids needed structure". One adult commented, "Through the NSCC, things are being provided that never existed". The impact on students was highly valued, with one mentioning, "The NSCC means a lot of kids have someone to help them". (B) Two qualities of the programs, the fact that they "sponsor cultural activities" and that some of them are "intergenerational" was also commended. An agency person noted the "engagement of community adults in Corps programs", commenting on the extent to which parents and community members "become involved as volunteers" or "ask about jobs and classes".

When asked what the NSCC could do to increase its impact on the community, these community respondents either recommended "more" of what is already happening or essentially repeated what they had said in response to previous questions on improving outreach and response. Those who wanted to see "more" of what is already happening specified "get more members" (A), "maintain the same corpsmembers over time" (P), do more "community outreach" (B), "connect with other community resources" (P) and "let more people know what they are doing". Several parents and area adults called for an overall increase in "publicity about the program" including using leaflets, newspaper stories, advertising, and more flyers.

Those who made specific suggestions reiterated the need for "increased time spent with administrators, parents, external community adults (P); "being more visible" at community

events such as tables at workshops etc., "sending out newsletters" and "increasing parental involvement". Other suggestions were made which reflect existing program dimensions, including the idea that "programming could be extended after-school" (C), adding a summer program (P), and "work on a neighborhood park". That these already exist re-inforces the need some community members pointed to, for greater publicity and visibility.

One additional specific impact that was discussed with the community respondents was their sense of any change in the "youth crime rate". Only 23 felt comfortable making the rating, and 19 of them (82%) felt there had been a reduction, with three (13%) sensing "no change" and one (4%) believing it had increased. Those who saw a reduction, rated that reduction as "a lot" (22%), "some" (56%) or "a little" (4%).

The 52 who felt able to rate how well corpsmembers "fit into the community", thought the fit was excellent, for 30 (58%) said it was "thorough" and another 13 (25%) felt it was "very good". Those who explained their ratings most frequently spoke of the extent to which corpsmembers were viewed as "part of the community", how well the corpsmembers "understand the community's needs" and promoted its interests, and the positive and wide-reaching involvement of corpsmembers "in the life of the community". Examples of the first include one clergy member who noted, "There are strong, effective team members who have entered the community in a way that they have earned the right 'to be heard'" and others who celebrated their contribution to the community, noting, "every effort they make allows the school to be safer". (B, OA) In regards to the corpsmembers' positive and wide-reaching presence, respondents commented that corpsmembers "connect well and know everyone", "get along with everyone and have developed a rapport with parents" (OA) and another itemized extensive services which the Corps has provided area elderly (OA). Community members also mentioned that the "racial mix of the team reflects the racial mix of the neighborhood" as an asset in outreach. (A)

Asked how the Corps might fit in even better, half (50%) dismissed the notion, saying "they already fit in" or "they're doing a wonderful job", or that they "haven't heard anything negative about them". Community members, by and large, seemed to feel that "The Corps have a great deal of respect for the kids and the community. They offer well needed basic services". (C) A few did make suggestions. The recommendations included "participate in Home and School Association and other programs" (A); "participation in more community events and work with other community groups" (C); "more active involvement at community meetings" (A and C); "talking more to business owners" (OA); "home visits to talk with parents" (OA); "more interpersonal development" (A) and training suggestions which included and "more training on discipline" (OA) and an "increased focus on urban youth" (C).

Allied to the question on fit was the question as to whether the respondent was aware of the effort by their Corps "to bring different groups in the community together". Of the 32 who felt they could answer this question, 23 (72%) said "yes" with six (19%) adding "a lot". Asked to give examples, most cited specific activities they had mentioned before rather than any activities directly intended to bring different groups together. For example, in response to this question they named Census 2000 (P), field trips (P and B), children's programming (P), Saturday programs, Summer Camp (A), after-school programs (A), Homework Club (O),

sports (basketball, cheerleading, dancing) (P and B), parent/family night (O), community clean-ups (P), and performances at the school to which parents were invited (P). Others were more general, pointing to collaborations with area agencies (local park commission, area ministries, Big Brother/Big Sister). Still others indicated that the overall "outreach efforts of the NSCC reached some people in the community and enabled people to find out more about the school and the NSCC program" (P). Most of these efforts were considered "totally" (38%) or "generally" (31%) successful.

In response to a request for suggestions to better bring groups together, interviewees outlined four areas for improvement: "more outreach" and "networking" (P and C), "more publicity" such as press releases and ads in the neighborhood newspaper (A and B), "improved communication" and "networking" with both school leadership, staff and community agencies (C) and more programs for parents (OA). For example, one police person mentioned, "If the corpsmembers worked to connect and develop the PTA and churches in the area and worked more with the grandparents", while an agency staff person recommended, "They could have tried to motivate the Principal to bring in some groups that he has access to in an effort to showcase Corps activities". A clergyman suggested that, "by making the NSCC more familiar with different types of organizations in the community the program could network with leaders and devise a strategy". Specific outreach occasions were mentioned including the idea that they "perform their dances, drills and banners in the local parades" (A) and that they "get involved" in the community youth fair or career days. (A)

Others felt that they had "done all they could under the circumstances" (P), that they had "done a good job at this point given their current stage of development" (A) and that "they had pressure this year to produce in the school not the community". (A) Community members seemed to also feel that the Corps had done a good job of publicizing the program, including mass distribution of flyers, presentations, radio programs, community walks, posters etc. There were some suggestions offered for how that publicity could have been improved. These included: "greater collaborations with the local civic associations"; and program changes such as "workshops just for parents" or "more programs for children"; "ads in the local Spanish newspaper"; "posters in area stores" and the suggestion that the team leader "attend board meetings". For the most part, community members saw this as a challenge and felt that the NSCC was doing a good job.

Agency staff, police, clergy and business people were asked to indicate "the extent to which the NSCC "had an impact on" their "access to interactions" with the local school. Of the 35 who made this rating, seven chose the option which said that there was "no impact because we were already fully involved". Of the 28 whose interactions might have improved, all but three (90%) reported a positive impact, with two-thirds (65%) rating it as "enormously helpful" (40%) or "a lot of help" (25%) and the others as "some help" (25%). The three who chose the option that "we weren't involved and still aren't" involved two agency staff members and one business person.

Local community leaders had a range of positive comments regarding their interactions with the NSCC team leaders or corpsmembers. Team leaders, for example, were praised for being "direct" (A) and "professional". (A) One agency staff member commented on the

strength of the communication, "whenever the team leader comes in the building, she always shares with me. She provides information about the NSCC program" and another agency person concurred, "They keep me aware of the things that they are trying to do".

Corpsmembers came "prepared to do the projects" as well as being seen as "professional", "cheerful" and "mature". Corpsmembers were seen as "responsive" (A), "approachable" (A), as a "great group of people" (A) who "take the kids and the community seriously". (P) Several adults, not parents, mentioned the sense that corpsmembers were "friendly", "willing to help" and "always trying to get something done".

One police person reported the effective collaboration between corpsmembers and community members, indicating, "corpsmembers tell me what the problems are. We work together to help students and resolve conflicts and problems". A police person in a different community indicated, "They are the eyes and ears for security and serve as feeders for action to be taken by security or Principal". Agency members suggested that the program maintains "good communication", and parents indicate that the program also contributes to creating a "safe school".

One agency member added, "I can always count on the NSCC program. When dealing with a project or parent, I can go to the NSCC program for anything, because we interact well". Another concurred that it is the strength of the collaboration that is a building block for meaningful service, "I have a relationship with the team that enables us to work well together".

Another strength agency representatives mentioned is the power of the connection the corps- members are able to make to youth in the community. One noted, "Our kids come from abuse and difficult homes. The corpsmembers make some very real connections with them. It is very remarkable and shows how good the team is". Similarly, corpsmembers were seen as able to reach out effectively to parents. One commented, "Because a lot of students are problem children (i.e., drug/alcohol problems and low-income households and low self-esteem problems), a great deal of parents need a lot of help. The NSCC works well with my department. The NSCC reaches parents that the school can't reach through their efforts with the children. The result is that we start to see parents making positive changes. I feel that the quality of the interaction with the NSCC has been so positive that we reach difficult parents and more children."

For those who had more mixed results interacting with the corpsmembers, concerns were limited reflected in the comment that "some corpsmembers have not responded positively to working with my agency" and a sense that "some of the programs that were started were very weak". (O)

In providing more specific examples of the interactions these community members had with members of the NSCC, agency members mentioned specific collaboration on projects such as parent workshops, socialized recess, hallway monitoring, field trips, homework club, recreational programs, classroom assistance, after-school program, service projects, art projects as well as MLK Day and other special events. Overall, corpsmembers were seen to "help in

many ways" (A) including providing "discipline" and "academic support" and "smoothing the way" in general.

When asked to indicate how the Corps might better serve their needs in the future, community members had a wide range of ideas and recommendations. In many cases, community members hoped for a continuation of existing contributions including specific programs such as Socialized Recess, the GED program, and tutorial and mentoring for to students. Corpsmembers were also acknowledged for their ability to "diffuse trouble-some situations". (P)

Programmatic suggestions included: "work on more children's programs" (A) and greater involvement within the collaborating community agencies. Some already had well-developed ideas for new programs including a "bowling League for Youth", "A Video project which documents positive neighborhood experiences", "start a 4-H Club" and "the development of an intergenerational program".

Less specific were suggestions including "work with more students" (P) and "come out to meet more people in the community". (B) and the need to "promote their programs in this neighborhood". (A). It was also suggested that "ties" to area businesses be improved, "They need to get more community businesses involved to get more funding and sponsorship, which is critical". (O)

Several suggested improvements in communication were again made, such as the agency staff person who hoped for "more consistent communication" and "more information about their observations of children's issues and concerns." They also asked for "a little more supervision of corpsmembers" and stronger "communication between the team leader and my agency". Along these same lines another commented, "When they are working with the parents or children, it would help if they could provide more information about the problems these people may be facing because I could intervene and provide whatever supportive services may be needed. I think the NSCC should send me a message about those who need outreach and referral services from my office".

Some community members used this question to reiterate their general satisfaction with the program and the attitude and support of corpsmembers, noting, "They have been willing and responsive to all requests" (A) and the hope that they would "continue what they are doing" and "keep giving from the heart". (O). One commented that, "They can't be more perfect. Corpsmembers can work with everyone. They are good people". (O) Another parent concurred, "I think they are doing a great job". (P)

In conclusion, community members were asked to offer any additional commentary on the NSCC and its role in the community that might be informative in moving forward in future years. Improvements in the training were mentioned as an instructive improvement, with one noting "The corpsmembers need additional training and professional development" and another hoping they could be "more professional". One agency member called for "more interaction between their supervisor and my agency" and "the need for the NSCC to provide consistent help". Another recommended that there be "greater clarity about the program's goals".(O)

Corpsmember absences were also identified as an area of concern since in one case this "did not allow the NSCC program to work to its full capacity".(A)

Two different community members hoped for "more recognition" for corpsmembers for "doing a good job" and for having a "great program". (O, P) Still another hoped that they could help "get the word out in the community" in the future.(B) Greater publicity and communication was seen by many to be key to expanding success, with another hoping that "the NSCC could let parents and the community know what programs and services they offer to help the children". (O)

In many cases, agency representatives, parents and other community members used this question as an opportunity to once again share their gratitude and sense that the NSCC makes a vital contribution to their community. For example, one remarked, "They backed us on any program we asked for help with. We are grateful".(A). A parent commented, "They did an excellent job this year". Still others noted of the corpsmembers, "They are good people to work with" and "very helpful" and yet another community leader noted that, "I really love to see them here". (C)

One summarized a feeling clearly shared by many, "I hope the program continues. We are counting on it".(A) Other area adults also commented on the need for program continuity, stating that, "I would love to have the group come back again---to see school kids involved and make a special impact on the kids. The corpsmembers can really connect with them. The fact that our kids opened up to them in such a short period of time speaks volumes to the quality of their interaction and the impact they made here."(A)

Area business people noted that they "look forward to working with the NSCC" Others commented that they were "satisfied with the supervision", the "response times from NSCC leaders".

In celebrating the program, the community leaders repeated that the corpsmembers are "fantastic", "do wonderful work" and that the kids "really love them". For virtually all of the community members, the NSCC was seen as a "positive influence on students" (P) and the NSCC was thought to "run a good program".(A) Mostly, community members were simply "thankful for them" and felt that they "do a good job" (P) which they hope will "continue in the future".