

Volunteer Organization Profile: Higher Achievement, Washington, DC

Volunteering in America 2011

Research in the United States has shown that there is an achievement gap in academic performance between students of different races and socioeconomic statuses. In Washington, D.C., approximately 85 percent of white students score proficient or advanced on standardized tests, but only 50 percent or less of black and Hispanic students score at those rates.¹



Higher Achievement, a nonprofit organization founded in 1975 and based in Washington, D.C. (with sites in Baltimore and Richmond, Va.), is working to close this discrepancy by providing year-round academic enrichment for students. Over the course of a four year program, Higher Achievement mentors and volunteers work with middle school students in fifth to eighth grade to develop strong academic habits, behaviors, and skills. The organization provides support through three different programs: Summer Academy, After-School Academy, and a High School Placement Program.

Higher Achievement tends to deviate from the typical lecture-style classroom and includes more project-based versions of traditional courses in math, literature, science, and social studies. These courses are taught in combination with elective classes such as chess, hip-hop dance, and yoga. The program takes its students on annual three day overnight trips to college campuses in order to expose them to a more concrete idea of college.



“We take our scholars on field trips and hold academic competitions – from mock trial to science fair,” said Lynsey Wood Jeffries, the executive director at Higher Achievement D.C. Metro. “Fun and learning are not mutually exclusive. We work to make learning fun and make it come to life.”

¹ District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System - DC CAS. (2008). *Technical Report*. Retrieved from http://osse.dc.gov/se0/lib/se0/2008_DC_CAS_Technical_Report.pdf

About 500 mentors who serve weekly and a large number of other volunteers work with 500 local middle school students at Higher Achievement D.C. Metro. The majority of the volunteers are young professionals and college students.

Lynsey, who started as a volunteer mentor before joining the Higher Achievement staff, emphasized the importance of the volunteers. “Mentoring changes two lives, the student and the volunteer,” she said. “Many people are passionate about education but become paralyzed when trying to think of what they can do to help—my answer to them is to become a mentor.”

Higher Achievement has found that targeting middle school students improves both high school graduation and college success rates. “Little attention is paid to middle school students, compared to elementary and high school students,” said Lynsey. “Yet middle school is a period of really critical transition.”

Ninety-three percent of Higher Achievement participants go on to college, more than double the rate of their peers. Eighty percent of these students are the first ones in their families to attend college. On average, Higher Achievement scholars complete middle school with a 3.5 grade point average, and 95 percent are placed in top-choice high schools in the D.C. area.



The Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) has placed AmeriCorps members at five of the local Higher Achievement D.C. sites. These members provide resources to the scholars and work to close the gap between in-school and out-of-school time. The AmeriCorps VISTA program has worked with Higher Achievement on a number of projects, including helping to launch a center in Anacostia, a neighborhood in southeast D.C., last summer.

More information about Higher Achievement is available at <http://www.higherachievement.org/index.php>.

The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through its Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs, and leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, United We Serve. For more information, visit NationalService.gov.