Corporation for NATIONAL & COMMUNITY SERVICE

Abt ASSOCIATES

# Design Considerations When an Intervention Refuses to Sit Still

American Evaluation Association
Thursday, October 27, 2016
4:45 - 6:15 PM

AmeriCorps | Senior Corps | Social Innovation Fund | Volunteer Generation Fund

# Today's Topics and Presenters

| Topic | Presenter |
|---|---|
| Introduction of the panel and topics | Jennifer Bagnell Stuart, Abt Associates |
| Overview of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program and the national evaluation | Diana Epstein, Office of Management and Budget |
| Design of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps national evaluation | Jennifer Bagnell Stuart, Abt Associates |
| Acting on learning from the evaluation | Diana Epstein, Office of Management and Budget |
| Discussion: Trade-offs between study design and feasibility in fluid school/district contexts | Beth Gamse, Abt Associates |

# Today's Focus

**Today we will describe an evaluation design that changed because of dynamic school and local contexts:**

- Why flexibility for changing the design was important
- What was learned from the change in design
- Implications of the design changes for what we were able to evaluate
- Lessons learned about how to evaluate programs in this context
- Implications of the study for program design

# OVERVIEW OF THE GRANT PROGRAM & GRANTEE PARTNERS

## PROGRAM STRATEGIES & ACTIVITIES
## NATIONAL EVALUATION GOALS & PROCESS
## ACTING ON LEARNING FROM THE EVALUATION

Overview Of The School Turnaround AmeriCorps Program And The National Evaluation

Diana Epstein

Office Of Management And Budget
(Formerly CNCS)

# Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

- Independent federal agency that administers the nation's national service and volunteering programs
  - AmeriCorps
  - Senior Corps
  - Social Innovation Fund
  - Volunteer Generation Fund
- Focus areas
  - Disaster Services
  - Economic Opportunity
  - Education
  - Environmental Stewardship
  - Healthy Futures
  - Veterans and Military Families

- AmeriCorps engages more than 75,000 Americans/year in intensive service at nonprofits, schools, public agencies, and community and faith-based groups nationally (15,000 locations)

# AmeriCorps State and National Programs

- AmeriCorps State and National supports a wide range of local service programs
  - Grants are provided to a network of organizations and agencies using national service to address critical community needs
- These organizations and agencies use their AmeriCorps funding to recruit, place, and supervise AmeriCorps members nationwide
- Members may serve full- or part-time over a period not to exceed 12 months in each term (can serve multiple terms)
- Members receive living allowance/stipend and become eligible for the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award upon successful completion of the program

# School Turnaround AmeriCorps Program

- Federal partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and CNCS
  - 13 programs funded in 2013, three year grant timeframe

- Local partnership between grantee programs and schools
  - Programs operate in School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools and Priority schools
  - Written partnership agreements between grantees and schools
  - Programs coordinate with school leaders and use student data to target interventions
  - Annually, 450+ AmeriCorps members provided interventions aligned with school turnaround plans in about 70 schools in 15 states

# Program Partners

- Austin Independent School District
- Berea College
- Blackfoot Community Center
- City Year, Inc.
- Communities in Schools of Miami
- Denver Public Schools
- Detroit Parent Network
- Duluth Area Family YMCA
- Learning Works
- MN Alliance With Youth
- ReNEW-Reinventing Education (ReNEW Schools)
- Springfield College
- Teach For America

# OVERVIEW OF THE GRANT PROGRAM & GRANTEE PARTNERS **PROGRAM STRATEGIES & ACTIVITIES** NATIONAL EVALUATION GOALS & PROCESS ACTING ON LEARNING FROM THE EVALUATION

Overview of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program and the national evaluation

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# School Turnaround AmeriCorps Interventions

Interventions were aligned with the six strategies implemented under SIG and ESEA Flexibility:

1. Promote community & **family engagement**
2. Improve **school culture** and environment
   - School safety
   - Attendance
   - Discipline
   - Students' socio-emotional health
3. Accelerate **reading/math** knowledge & skill acquisition
4. Increase **graduation rates**
5. Increase college preparation & **college enrollment rates**
6. Increase **learning time**

# Member Activities in Schools

| Activities and Interventions | Proportion of Programs |
|---|---|
| **Tutoring (11)** | Majority of programs |
| **After-school programs and extracurricular services (9)** | Majority of programs |
| **Parental and community engagement (8)** | Majority of programs |
| **Mentoring (7)** | About half of programs |
| **Behavior support and school attendance coaching (7)** | About half of programs |
| **Supportive services to build school capacity (5)** | Several programs |
| **College and test prep (3)** | Several programs |
| **Teaching (1)** | Few programs |
| **Wraparound services (1)** | Few programs |

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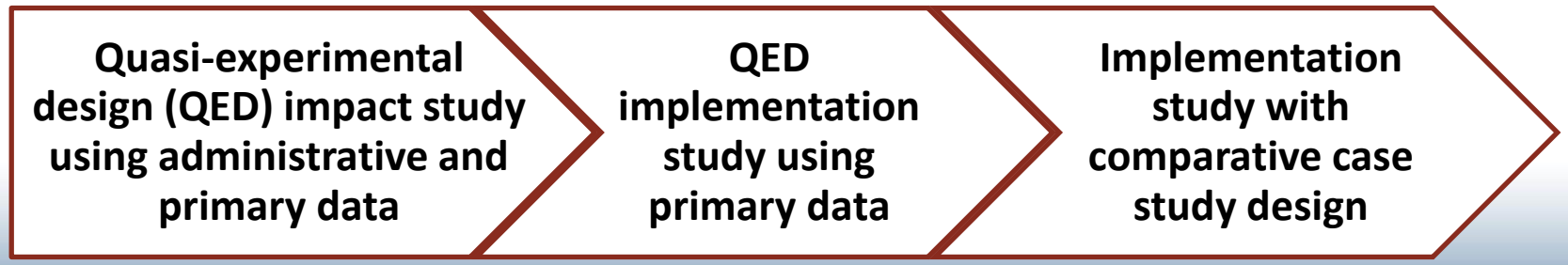
# Goals of the Evaluation

To understand the **value-added of AmeriCorps members** who provide direct services in low-performing schools ***above and beyond the school turnaround resources already invested in these schools***, and to describe the mechanisms by which this happens.

# Evaluation Process

- School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantees required to participate in national evaluation
- Evaluation design year allowed for a thoughtful and collaborative process
  - Important to assess feasibility of various design options
  - Design year coincided with program start-up year
- Iterative decision process for selecting design



# Collaboration between R&E and AmeriCorps Program Office

- Evaluation contract run out of Research and Evaluation office (R&E)
- Strong collaboration between R&E and AmeriCorps program office
  - During design phase, and as design evolved
  - Biweekly meetings to exchange information and updates
  - Simplified process to get information to contractor
  - Both offices on monthly calls with Department of Education
- R&E and program office both played a role in briefings to leadership at both agencies, presentations to grantees, etc.

# Program Implementation and Evaluation Timelines

| School Year | 2012–13 | 2013–14 | 2014–15 | 2015–16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Program implementation** | n/a | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 |
| **Program evaluation** | Baseline data | Evaluation design | Year 1 | Year 2 |

# INITIAL DESIGN
# DESIGN CHALLENGES
# MID-YEAR DESIGN CHANGE
# STUDY RESULTS
# LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT EVALUATION DESIGN

Design of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps national evaluation

Jennifer Bagnell Stuart

Abt Associates

# Design Challenges and Lessons

1st Design Challenge: **Shifting Intervention**

- ✓Ongoing communications with program participants to ensure the conditions for the design have not changed

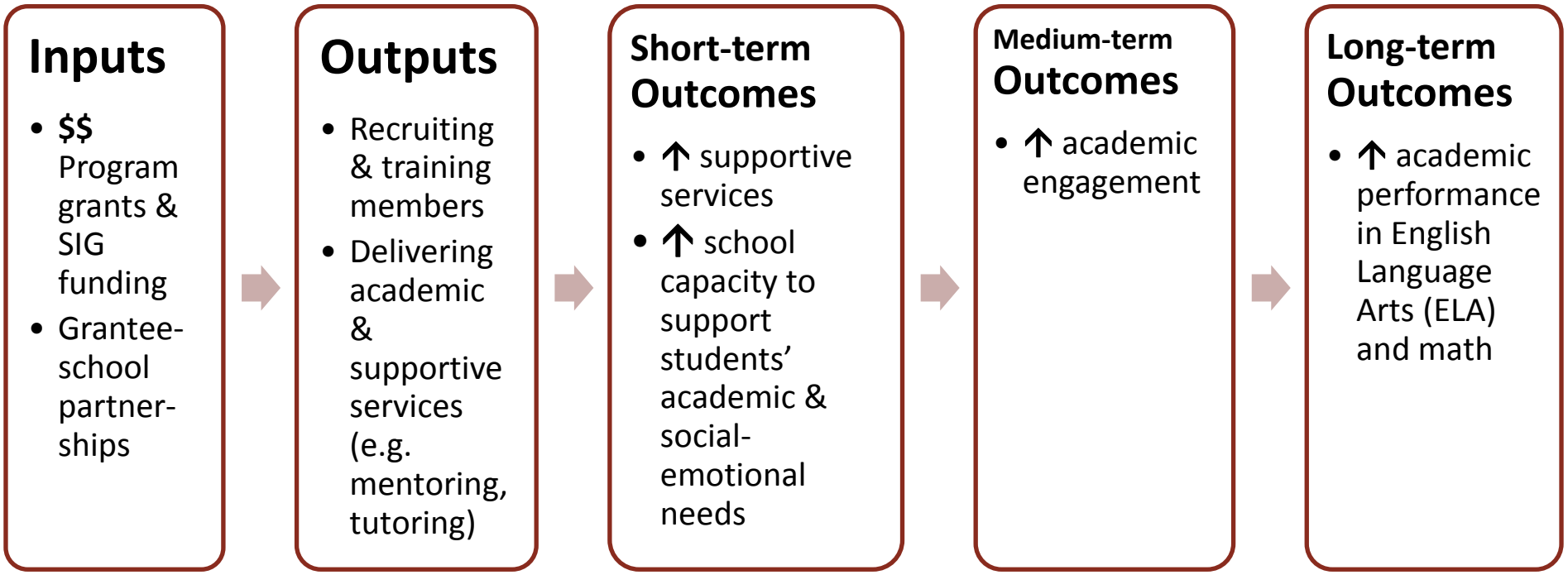
2nd Design Challenge: **Forming a Valid Comparison Group**

- ✓Understand the design parameters and comparison condition, e.g. AmeriCorps presence in low performing schools

3rd Design Challenge: **Compromised Data Collection Efforts**

- ✓Allow for flexibility to adjust to design challenges when evaluating programs in dynamic K-12 education contexts

# Theory of Change




***Premise:*** Grantees establish partnerships and work with schools throughout their 3-year funding period to effectively deploy and manage short-term infusions of human capital that typically serve in schools for 1-year terms. Members provide academic and supportive services that will help to increase student academic engagement and academic achievement.

# Year 1 Research Questions

1. How do AmeriCorps members help schools implement their turnaround plans?

2. How does local context affect program implementation and what are the best practices in supporting schools' ability to implement their turnaround plans?

3. What activities do program stakeholders perceive to be more or less effective with respect to key turnaround outcomes, and why?

- **Students' socio-emotional health**
- **Academic achievement**
- **School climate**
- **School capacity to implement its turnaround effort**
- **Overall success in school turnaround**

# Initial Design

Mixed-methods design with a ***quasi-experimental (QED) component*** to compare implementation of turnaround models in SIG and Priority schools

| **Program Schools (n=62)** | **Matched Comparison Schools (n=62)** |
| --- | --- |
| School Turnaround AmeriCorps members placed in schools | no School Turnaround AmeriCorps members in schools |

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# 1st Design Challenge: Shifting Intervention

## Program Schools (n=62)

- Subset of schools from the first year cohort
- Excluded schools in their start-up year of implementing the program
- Included only 5 of 17 Teach for America schools

## Potential Comparison Schools (n=62)

- Designated as SIG/Priority school
- Same state and relevant grades
- No School Turnaround AmeriCorps members; may have "at most minimal" AmeriCorps member and/or VISTA volunteer presence
- Does not use the closure model

# Practical Realities in Underperforming Schools

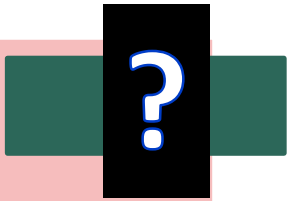
| Count of School Partnerships by School Year | 2014–2015 | 2015–2016 |
|---|---|---|
| Grantee Programs | 13 | 13 |
| Schools | 72 | 69 |
| New Schools Added to Partnerships | 4 | 13 |
| Schools Dropped from Partnerships | 2 | 16 |

# 2nd Design Challenge: Forming a Valid Comparison Group

## Steps to forming a valid comparison group:

1. Establish the **treatment group**
2. Ensure that potential comparison schools **met the selection criteria**
3. Obtain **permission from school districts** to collect data from schools
4. **Recruit matched comparison schools** to participate in the study

# Practical Realities in Matching and Selecting Comparison Schools




| Program School 1A | | Matched Comparison School 1B | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic proficiency | ✓ | Academic proficiency | ✓ |
| School demographic characteristics | ✓ | School demographic characteristics | ✓ |
| AmeriCorps member presence | ✗ | AmeriCorps member presence | ✗ |
| Geographic characteristics | ↓ | Geographic characteristics | ↓ |

# Practical Realities in School Recruitment

- Obtaining district permission to collect data from schools and recruiting matched comparison schools took longer and met more refusals than assumed
  - District IRB review/research applications
  - Other district requirements (data use agreements, active informed consent)
  - District and school refusals due to school turnaround pressures
- The result? Fewer eligible comparison schools

# 3rd Design Challenge: Compromised Data Collection Efforts

The dual challenges of a *shifting intervention* and *forming a valid comparison group* compounded and compromised more routine data collection challenges.

- Derailed the **feasibility** of the original design – too few eligible comparison schools, not enough contrast, limited statistical power
- Narrowed the **time constraints** – obtaining district IRB approvals, recruiting schools, and collecting data within one school year

# Practical Realities in Data Collection

- District-level conditions and requirements
- Local program names sometimes differed from the national program name “School Turnaround AmeriCorps”
- Interviews with principals, members, parents, and teachers required multiple contacts, frequent rescheduling, and we had some no-shows

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# Mid-Year 1 Re-Design

Mixed-methods design using a ***comparative case study approach*** to contrast implementation of turnaround models in SIG and Priority schools

| **Program Schools (n=6)** ⇩ | **Matched Comparison Schools (n=6)** ⇩ |
| --- | --- |
| with School Turnaround AmeriCorps members | with *little or no* AmeriCorps presence |

# Year 2 Additional Research Questions

The original Year 1 RQs plus….

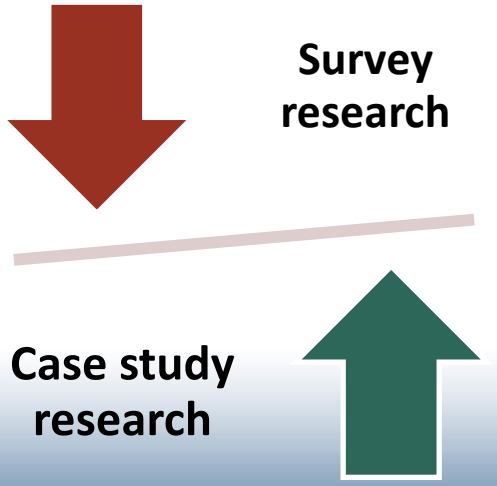
1. Which aspects of grantee-school partnerships appear to be the most promising practices in terms of involvement and satisfaction of the school leadership and the participating AmeriCorps members?

2. For School Turnaround AmeriCorps schools that have exited SIG/Priority status since the beginning of the grant period, what strategies have they used to improve?

# Methodology Changes

## Stayed the same

- Collected data from the same data sources in both years
- Surveyed and interviewed grantee staff in both years




## Changed

- Eliminated surveys that were neither feasible nor fruitful
- Added 29 case studies over both years
- Reduced administrative data collection, while increasing rigor and quality of the data collected

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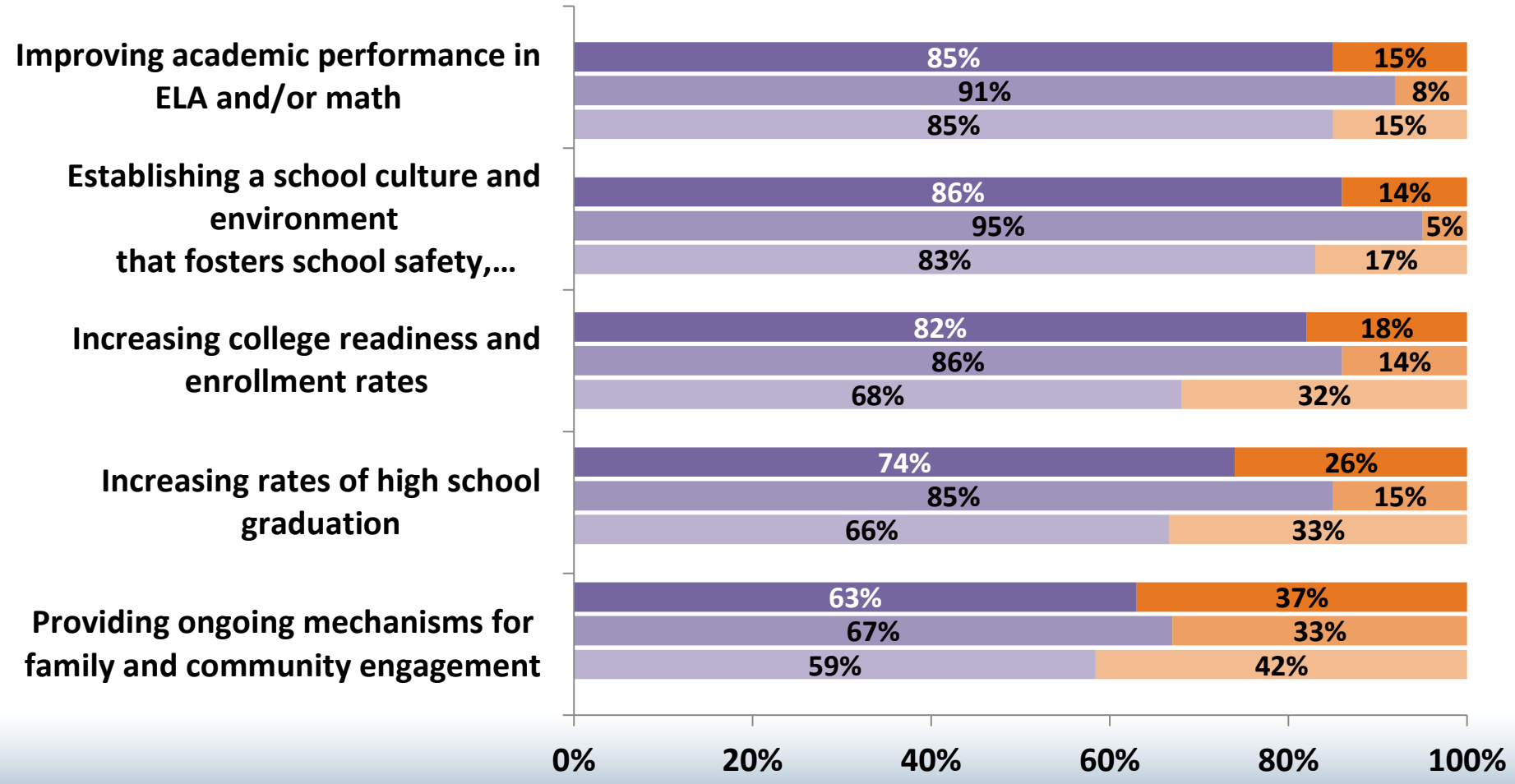
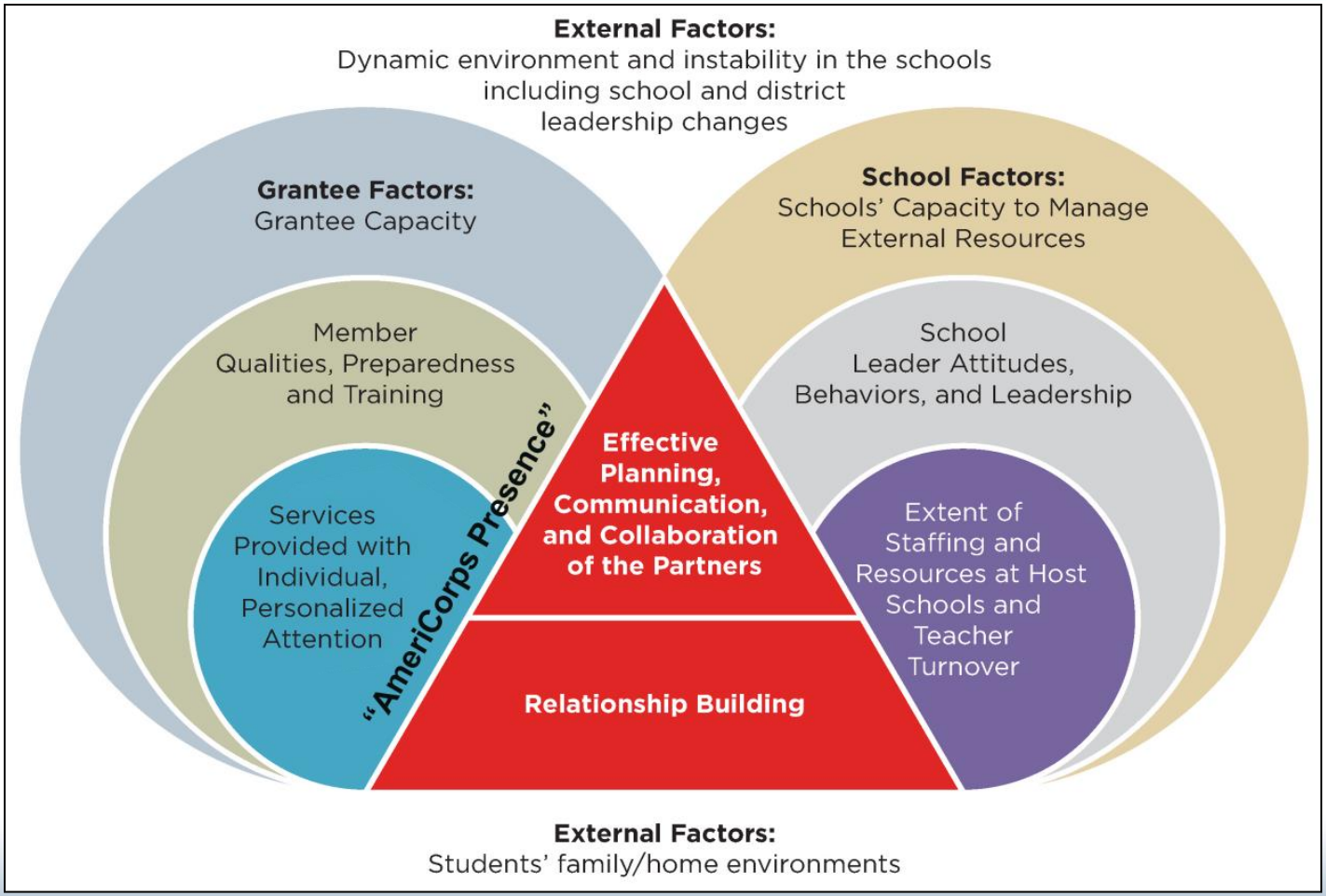
# Study Results: School Leader Perceptions



# Study Results: Context Matters



# Study Results: Delivering Effective Interventions in Schools

*What about the program model and AmeriCorps service contributed to or hindered these results?*

- Programs' focus on communication and relationship building with school stakeholders helps
  - Build program buy-in
  - Increase program understanding, and
  - Ease challenges inherent in serving in low-performing schools, such as high turnover of school leaders and staff
- Programs ensure member quality and consistency by
  - Improving member recruitment and retention
  - Providing specialized member training and preparation, and
  - Providing on-site supervision and support

# Study Results: AmeriCorps Presence

Members effectively deliver school-based services by:

- Giving individualized attention and building trusting relationships with students

- Maintaining a consistent presence to aid with classroom management
- Collaborating with teachers to review student data and target supports to students' needs
- And being flexible in meeting schools' needs

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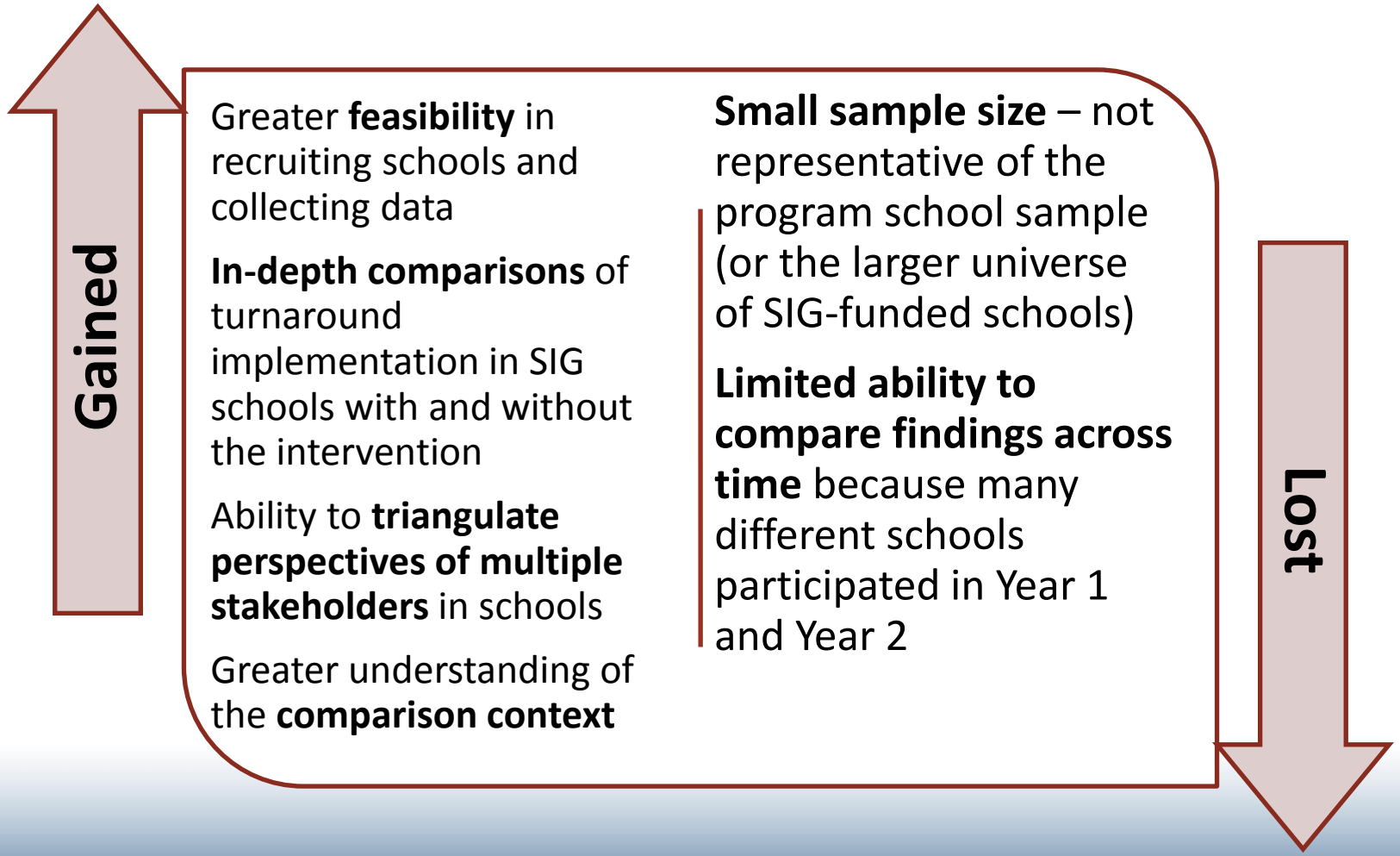
# Evaluation Design Pros and Cons



# Lessons Learned: Evaluation Design

- **Flexibility** to change the design is important
- Understand the **design parameters** and comparison condition
- Ensure an adequate **incentive structure** to improve study participation/ school recruitment/ response rates

# Lessons Learned: Recruitment and Data Collection

*Important considerations in studying school-based programs:*

- Communicate effectively with school districts
- Timing is critical – begin planning outreach, and recruitment well in advance of data collection (and before the study year)
- Customization (e.g., use local program names)

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# Using the Findings - Grantees

- More grantees instituted on-site coordinators to supervise members and the services they provide
- More tailored and specialized training was provided to members, school administrators, and staff in advance of Year 2
- Schools increasingly used test scores and other data to target students alongside teacher referral; this came with program-wide learning about FERPA requirements and allowed for easier data-sharing

# Program Design Implications

- Infeasibility of impact study during planning year, which allowed for evaluation to be redesigned and still provide meaningful information
- Additional clarification on member roles was included in Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) revision
- New expectation that written partnership agreements are updated annually
- Challenges discussed during Portfolio calls
- Grant program is looking into providing clarified instructions to grantees for completing grantee progress reports (GPR), including expectations for when goals are exceeded and the ability to report on programs like School Turnaround discretely

# Cross-Office Learning at CNCS

- So What Session – space and time dedicated to helping CNCS staff:
  - Read research for understanding
  - Identify key lessons and takeaways
  - Learn from and with other programs and offices
- Sessions held in August 2016; 40 attendees from offices across the agency engaged in robust discussion
- Presentations at Grantee Symposium
  - Grantee panel with AmeriCorps program officer and grantee
  - Included in session on state of the field for education research in national service

# Contact for copies of materials

Design Considerations When an Intervention Refuses to Sit Still

Jennifer Bagnell Stuart, Abt Associates

301-347-5825

Jennifer_BagnellStuart@abtassoc.com

To access the full School Turnaround AmeriCorps national evaluation report, please visit www.nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange