

A School Designed for Tutors

Great Oaks Charter School, New York City

by Liz Cohen

At Great Oaks Charter School in New York City's Greenwich Village, the presence of a large cadre of AmeriCorps fellows makes it possible to combine in-person tutoring with classroom instruction during the school day. In fact, the school was founded in 2013 with tutoring at the core of its approach to teaching.

Every English language arts and math class is double-blocked: one period for whole-class instruction plus a second workshop period for small-group tutoring, with teachers available as needed during the workshop block.

In a sixth-grade math class I observed in December, tutoring fellows led small groups of students through problems on percentages. The fellows demonstrated deep knowledge of their subject matter, finding different ways to check for understanding and explain concepts when their students struggled. "When I have fellows," English teacher Jennifer Bradley told me, "I have someone who can sit with a certain kid and explain the same thing five different times until the kid gets it right."

Each year, Great Oaks Foundation, the charter school's management organization, recruits over 200 recent college graduates to work as AmeriCorps fellows at their nine campuses serving primarily low-income students of color in New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York. A federal agency, AmeriCorps funds non-profits such as Great Oaks across the nation. These organizations hire more than 200,000 Americans annually, many of them brand new to the workforce, who exchange up to two years of labor for

a living stipend and health benefits. Fellows must be at least 18 years of age and work 35 hours per week.

Nearly three dozen fellows are working at GO-NYC in Greenwich Village this year. Between three and six work full-time in every Great Oaks math and English language arts classroom. Others support science classes. As "regulars" in the schools, the fellows get to know students well, providing mentorship and emotional support in addition to the academic support students need to master a challenging curriculum. Half of the school's current teachers started as fellows.

The fellows' efforts are getting results: students who started the 2022-23 school year at the 25th

Quick Facts

Tutoring at Great Oaks Charter School, New York City

- Number of students served: 320
- Grades and content areas: Middle school reading and math
- Source of tutors: AmeriCorps fellows providing in-person tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 5 days/week

This profile is drawn from [Learning Curve: Lessons from the Tutoring Revolution in Public Education](#), an analysis of how school districts are scaling and sustaining high-quality tutoring, published in January, 2024. © 2024 FutureEd. To read the full report, visit our website: www.future-ed.org

percentile or below in math and worked with a fellow all year subsequently scored, on average, at the 43rd percentile. The same year, the percentage of Great Oaks NYC students at or above grade level in math increased to 22 percent from 13 percent in 2021-22.*

A New Approach to School Staffing

Fully appreciating the GO model means rethinking how schools are staffed and who performs each role within a school. Fellows have numerous responsibilities in addition to small group instruction and mentoring. They oversee student dismissal, hall monitoring, and lunchtime, and conduct outreach with the families of their mentees every other week.

Fellows manage after-school activities for 90 minutes, five days a week. They lead a Saturday school academic support program for students that runs for eight half-days over the course of the year. In other words, they are teachers, assistant teachers, mentors, counselors, coaches, and more.

Though prospective teachers are told during the hiring process that working with fellows is part of the job, it can be an adjustment to lead a team of assistants as well as manage a classroom of students. “When I came to Great Oaks, it was my fifth or sixth year of teaching,” explained English language arts teacher Bradley. “I had to get used to managing adults. It’s unheard of anywhere else I’ve taught to have four, five, sometimes six adults in a room. But it is awesome. I’ve learned to make things clear not only to the students but to the educators working with me, so I don’t have to handhold.”

One obvious benefit to having other adults in the classroom: teachers can teach, without being distracted by the host of other tasks that make the job overwhelming for so many public-school teachers. Fellows also help teachers by supporting tasks closely related to instruction: grading assignments, proctoring exams, and preparing lesson materials. “It’s all the help you could need or

want,” says Bradley. “It’s a load off my back with so many things.”

The presence of other adults—even younger, less-experienced ones—keeps teachers on their toes, too. In an internal survey, 90 percent of Great Oaks teachers said fellows improve student learning. “I’m more aware of what I’m doing and what I’m saying because there are four other adults in the room,” Bradley told me. In some cases, depending on teachers’ preferences, teachers and fellows create lesson plans together.

Increasing Rigor and Relationships

At the start of the school year, each fellow is assigned a group of about eight students to mentor. Fellows meet daily with their mentee groups and call or text each mentee’s family every week. Some fellows say their work as mentors is more valuable to students than their tutoring. “I had a really easy time in the classroom because of the mentoring,” explained former fellow La Tisha Parkinson, who came to New York from Trinidad in pursuit of a teaching degree. “I didn’t know a lot about classroom management and managing behaviors. But these students want me to be a good teacher because I built really good relationships with my mentees from the start.” Parkinson joined the staff as a science teacher following her fellowship year.

Those relationships can help draw out students when they are disengaged from an academic subject. During a sixth-grade language arts workshop period, the class divides into four groups, each having its own discussion of “The Watsons Go to Birmingham.” In the group led by first-year fellow Matty Sebolai, Ava, a high-performing student, is much more engaged than Riley, who is sitting next to her.** But Sebolai has the bandwidth to attend to both students. “Riley?” she asks, “Why are the strings important?” Reluctantly and quietly, Riley responds.

In many whole-group instructional environments, a student like Riley would just be left alone.

* Information provided by Great Oaks.

** Student names have been changed at the school’s request.

During workshop periods at Great Oaks, every student is called on by name and asked to participate at least once.

Muhammed, a high school junior, said that the Great Oaks environment provides the combination of rigor and relationship he needs to succeed. “When I got here, I could really see how much people here actually care about me. In my old school, if you didn’t do the work, they didn’t care. They were like, ‘Ok, you don’t want to do the work? That’s your problem.’ But here, they’re like, ‘You need to do this. Do it. Trust me.’ They push you, and they make sure you get your work done because they know it’s going to help you.”

“The culture here isn’t something you can just get at a different New York City school,” adds another 11th-grader named Alonzo. “You can see the uniqueness in our culture, our students, and how we behave with each other. We’re like a big, happy family.”

Recruiting and Supporting Tutors

GO Foundation, the charter management organization, leads fellow recruitment for all Great Oaks schools. Just over 60 percent of applicants find the fellowship via the job-seeking site Handshake. Another 15 to 20 percent come through referrals from current or former fellows. Most applicants are finishing their bachelor’s degree and looking for a job, typically with an interest either in public service or working with children.

Before the school year begins, fellows from all Great Oaks schools participate in a week-long, overnight training called “GO Forum.” This training focuses on the three primary components of the Great Oaks program: develop a community, mentor for leadership, and instruct for mastery. Fellows then receive site-specific pre-service training at the school where they will work, including how they will support instruction, mentor students, and support school operations.

Once the school year begins, fellows typically participate in whatever professional development is provided to teachers at the school. The GO Foundation hosts monthly in-person sessions focused on career and personal development, including opportunities for fellows to think about professional goals after their service year.

Great Oaks Charter School also pays for fellows’ housing, since their federally funded annual stipend, which ranges from \$17,000 to \$20,000, comes nowhere near the cost of renting an apartment in New York City. All Great Oaks campuses provide housing for tutors close to the school where they work. In the past, GO-NYC rented safe, reasonably priced apartments so that fellows serving a particular school could live in the same building. The school managed to do that in a daunting Manhattan housing market by adopting a staffing model that effectively shifts a teacher salary to housing for four fellows. To further reduce costs, as of fall 2023, fellows live in dormitory-style housing (two fellows per room) on the two floors above the five-story school, housed in a former church. Across the street, one-bedroom apartments rent for more than \$3,300 per month.

In addition to the nine Great Oaks campuses, the GO Foundation has begun partnering with several District of Columbia public schools, Achievement First charter schools in Connecticut, and others to bring AmeriCorps fellows into those schools as tutors. This bid to retrofit the Great Oaks tutoring model onto existing schools will be an important test of scaling the approach.

“What we’re doing at Great Oaks isn’t just about tutoring,” said Michael Duffy, the founder of Great Oaks and the president of the GO Foundation. “We’re reimagining how to run a school, how to staff classrooms, and how to recruit and inspire the next generation of educators. But we’re doing it by focusing on giving each student the attention and support they need to realize their full human potential.”