

Turnaround Schools Get VISTA Help

June 15, 2011 11:00 AM Mary Ann Travis
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The best schools have communities that rally around them. And if improving public schools want to sustain a successful trajectory, they would do well to match up with community partners. That's the premise of a pilot program launched through AmeriCorps*VISTA at Tulane this summer.



A Tulane student (left) tutors a young reader at Sophie B. Wright School in New Orleans. Community involvement in activities such as volunteer tutoring is essential for public school achievement, most experts agree. (Photo by Sally Asher)

The program is an initiative of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the U.S. Department of Education in conjunction with [AmeriCorps](#), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

The idea is to “help create community partnerships around school-turnaround projects,” says Michael Pizzolatto, program manager at the Tulane Center for Public Service and coordinator of the [AmeriCorps](#) program at Tulane, which includes 29 VISTA members.

Four VISTA members will be assigned to work with leadership teams at four New Orleans public schools to identify needs that community organizations can meet.

The VISTA members will be looking to neighborhood organizations, faith-based groups, local businesses, corporations and individuals from the community to provide resources to the schools.

Unlike many federal government programs, the new program is not taking a top-down approach with cookie-cutter solutions. Before VISTA members suggest resources to alleviate problems, they'll observe and listen carefully to find out where problems lie at the individual schools.

"It's going to be different at each school," says Pizzolatto.

Improving academics, decreasing negative behaviors of students within the schools, increasing attendance and developing volunteer mentoring and tutoring programs to help support classroom teachers are among the areas that the program may target.

Academic strides have been made in the almost completely reorganized New Orleans public schools since Hurricane Katrina. "What we would like to do," says Pizzalotto, "is to be able to help these pioneers in education reform in the city understand and learn how to develop community partnerships so that they can sustain the efforts that they've worked so hard to build over the past five years."