

Reading Partners

Evaluation of Volunteer Experiences and Impact *Executive Summary*

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Photo Credit: Reading Partners

Overview

Reading Partners partnered with Child Trends, a national nonprofit research organization, to learn more about how it can improve programming and, ultimately, maximize positive outcomes for students. In California reading centers, we focused on five key areas for this evaluation:

- **Student Reading Growth:** Understand the relationship between student outcomes and implementation characteristics, such as tutor and AmeriCorps (AC) member characteristics, and tutoring dosage.
- **Dosage:** Describe the level of tutoring dosage that students receive.
- **Tutor Engagement and Quality:** Explore opportunities to strengthen strategies for tutor recruitment, engagement, and retention, and understand tutor quality.
- **AmeriCorps Member Experiences:** Describe the skills that AC members bring to Reading Partners, and understand their experiences serving with the organization.
- **Social-Emotional Learning:** Conduct a first look at Reading Partners' student outcomes for social-emotional learning (SEL).

2016–2017 Evaluation Findings in Brief

This executive summary and its accompanying briefs describe results from Child Trends' first year of formal external evaluation for Reading Partners. The purpose of this evaluation was to provide credible evidence of the effectiveness of Reading Partners, and to help Reading Partners identify core strengths and weaknesses so that it can continuously improve the quality of its services and continue to make a difference in the lives of the children it serves. The executive summary provides an overview of the evaluation questions, methods, and findings for the 2016–2017 program year. Key findings across each evaluation focus area are highlighted in **Figure 01**.

Figure 01: Key Evaluation Findings, by Evaluation Focus Area

Student Participation (Dosage)

- California reading centers served nearly 4,000 students during the 2016-2017 school year, the vast majority of whom (94%) were reading below grade-level at baseline.
- Students attend Reading Partners consistently throughout the year: on average, students attend 31.5 sessions across the year, persist in the program for 5.3 months, and attend an average of 6.2 sessions per month.
- Reading Partners is successful in retaining the students who need the greatest support in reading.
- Students in kindergarten and fifth grade attend Reading Partners less regularly than students in first through fourth grade.

Tutor Engagement and Quality

- Reading Partners volunteer tutors:
 - Bring diverse skills important to tutoring
 - Are primarily motivated to volunteer by their desire to help others
 - Are highly satisfied with their experience at Reading Partners and the various supports provided to them as tutors
 - Demonstrate moderate to high levels of fidelity to the Reading Partners model
 - Engage in positive, supportive relationships with students

AmeriCorps Member Experiences

- AmeriCorps Members serving at Reading Partners:
 - Bring diverse skills, and report that these skills improve across the year
 - Are more likely to report that their service developed their skills than a national sample of AmeriCorps alumni
 - Consistently rate their leadership skills lower than other skills
 - Are highly satisfied with their experiences at Reading Partners

Student Reading Growth and Social-Emotional Learning

- Students demonstrate significant improvements in early literacy, reading, and social-emotional learning skills (reading engagement, social competence, persistence, and self-control) across the year.
- Tutors' perceptions of student-tutor relationship quality (conflict and closeness) are significantly associated with students' attainment of grade-level reading and improved social-emotional learning skills at post-test.
- Students may benefit from tutors who are well-equipped to manage behavioral problems.
- Students with sustained and consistent participation in Reading Partners were most likely to improve their STAR Early Literacy or STAR Reading intervention tier at post-test.

Evaluation Questions, Methodology, and Limitations

Figure 02 presents the evaluation questions and sub-questions driving the evaluation. These questions were answered via collection of Reading Partners administrative data, surveys, and fidelity observations. Each data source is briefly reviewed in the Evaluation Methods textbox and described in greater detail in the accompanying briefs. The evaluation included two samples from the 2016–2017 school year:

- **Full Sample:** The full sample includes all children served by California reading centers, all AmeriCorps members serving at Reading Partners in California, and all tutors volunteering in California reading centers. Data collected from the full sample include administrative data, AmeriCorps Member Experiences Survey, and the Tutor Experiences Survey.¹
- **Sub-Sample:** The sub-sample includes data from nine reading centers from the Los Angeles and Sacramento regions that participated in more intensive data collection efforts. Data collected from the sub-sample include tutor fidelity observations, Tutor Social-Emotional Learning Survey, and teacher surveys.

Limitations

Some limitations of the evaluation should be considered when reviewing findings. First, because the results of the proposed evaluation are correlational in nature, they cannot indicate whether improvements in student outcomes were caused by participation in Reading Partners. In addition, data on tutor-student relationships, tutor fidelity, and students' social-emotional learning were only obtained from students and tutors at a sub-sample of sites in the Los Angeles and Sacramento

Evaluation Methods

To answer the evaluation questions, the following data sources were used:

Administrative Data

Data on student dosage and early literacy and reading outcomes (STAR assessments) were collected for all students attending California reading centers.

AmeriCorps Member Experiences Survey

We surveyed all AmeriCorps Members during the fall and spring.

Tutor Experiences Survey

Tutors were given the opportunity to respond to the Tutor Experiences Survey as they exited Reading Partners.

Tutor Fidelity Observations

Tutors in a selected sub-sample of sites were observed once throughout the school year using an observation tool developed for this evaluation.

Tutor Social-Emotional Learning Survey

Tutors in the sub-sample of sites were asked to report on the quality of their tutor-student relationship and students' Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. For these analyses, only spring data were used.

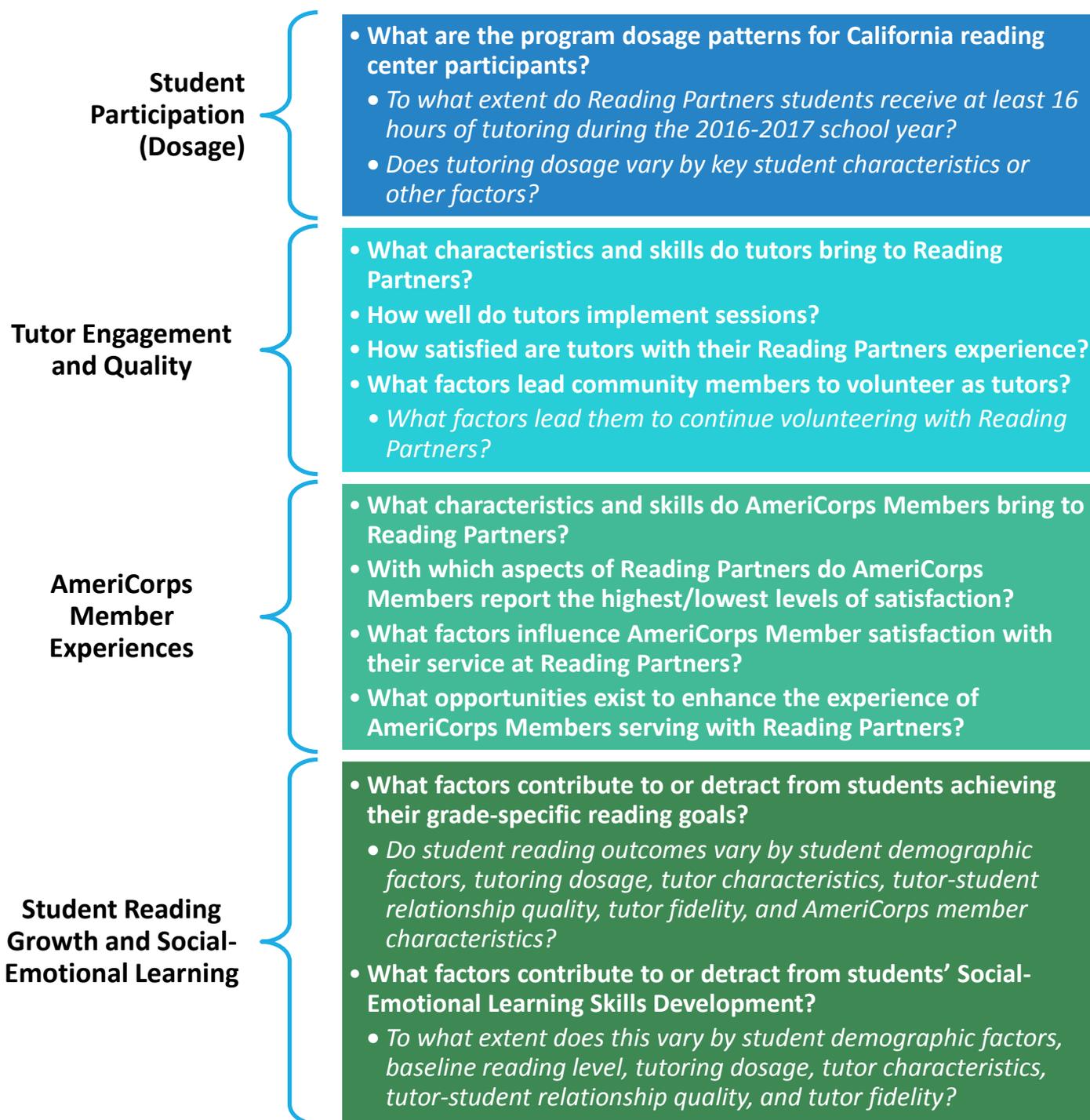
Teacher Surveys

Teachers in the sub-sample of sites were asked to report on students' SEL skills at students' referral to Reading Partners and at the end of the school year.

¹ The Tutor Experiences Survey was administered to all tutors volunteering in California reading centers. However, data linking tutors to children were only available for children in the sub-sample. Thus, data from the Tutor Experiences Survey can only be linked to children in the sub-sample.

regions. As such, the conclusions drawn from these data may not be reflective of all students and tutors at California reading centers. Nevertheless, the results do provide valuable information on how participation in Reading Partners may contribute to the positive development of participants.

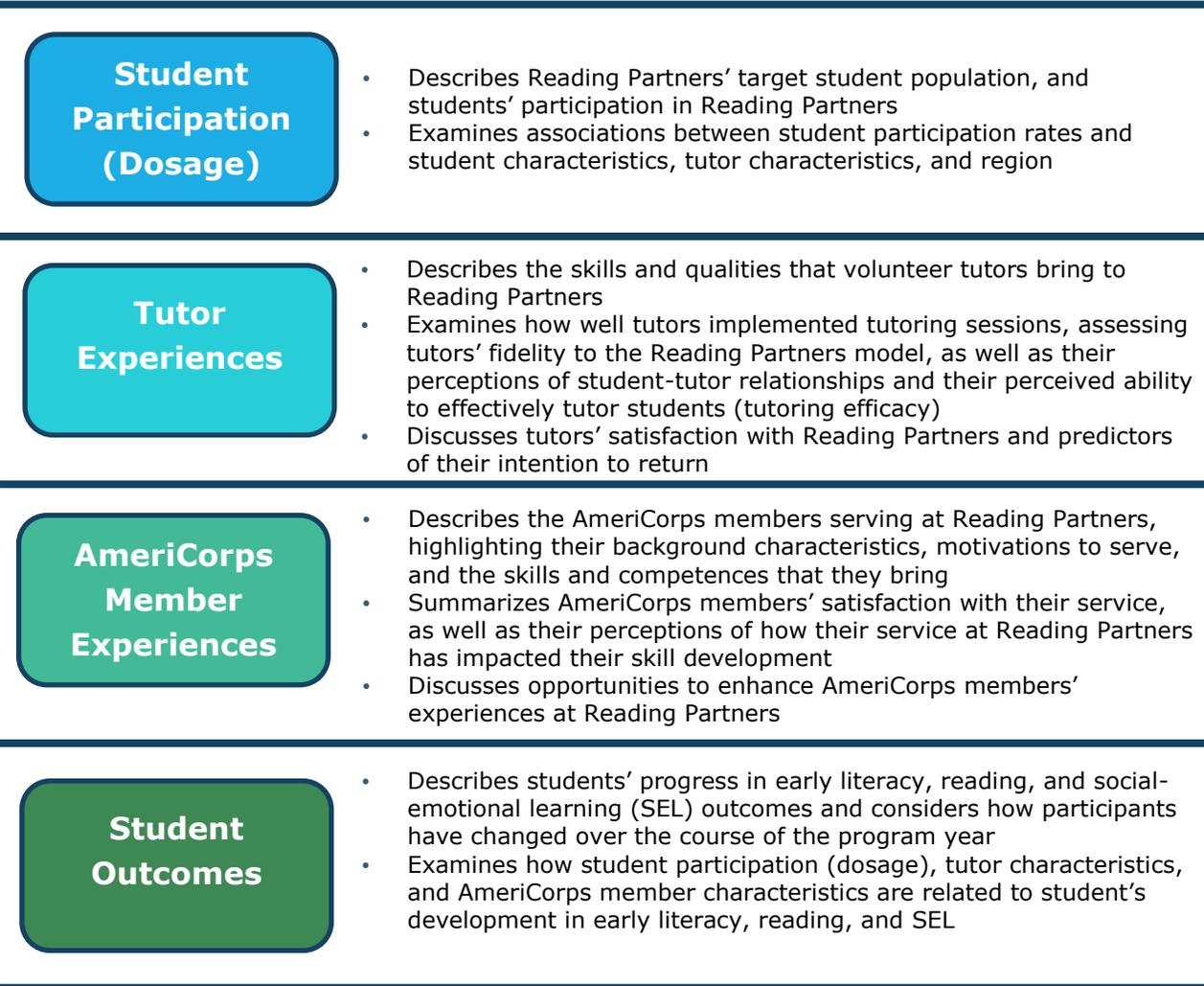
Figure 02: Research Questions and Sub-Questions Driving the Evaluation



Description of Report Structure and Companion Briefs

The purpose of this report is to provide credible evidence of the effectiveness of Reading Partners, and help the organization identify core strengths and weaknesses so that it can continuously improve the quality of its services and continue to make a difference in the lives of the children it serves. The structure of this report is organized thematically, and each of the four companion briefs covers a substantive component of Reading Partners’ program. Each brief begins with a general introduction to Reading Partners; a high-level overview of each brief is presented in **Figure 03** below.

Figure 03: Evaluation Briefs and Topics Addressed



Examination of each factor is important to provide Reading Partners with valuable information about the amount and quality of the services provided to children, and the

potential mechanisms by which the program can have its greatest impact on student outcomes.

Key Findings and Implications

Key findings and implications for each evaluation question and sub-question are described in **Tables 01–04**, below.

Tables 01–04: Key Findings and Implications, by Evaluation Question

Student Participation (Dosage) Findings	
Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Key Findings and Implications
What are the program dosage patterns for California reading center participants?	Students in California reading centers attend Reading Partners consistently throughout the year: on average, students attended 31.5 sessions across the year, persisted in the program for 5.3 months, and attended an average of 6.2 sessions per month.
<i>To what extent do Reading Partners students receive at least 16 hours of tutoring during the 2016–2017 school year?</i>	The majority of Reading Partners students (73%) met or exceeded the recommended dosage threshold of 16 hours of tutoring (~21 sessions).
<i>Does tutoring dosage vary by key student characteristics or other factors?</i>	Student dosage patterns varied by region, with students in the Los Angeles region demonstrating some of the highest rates of program dosage. Dosage also varied by baseline reading level; students who scored in lower intervention tiers at baseline attended Reading Partners more consistently than their peers. In addition, students in kindergarten and fifth grade attend Reading Partners less regularly than students in first through fourth grade.

Tutor Engagement and Quality Findings	
Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Key Findings and Implications
What characteristics and skills do tutors bring to Reading Partners?	Tutors who volunteer at Reading Partners are a diverse group of individuals who bring a wealth of experiences and skills to help the children in their communities become more proficient readers. Over 70 percent of tutors have a four-year college degree or higher, almost two-thirds had prior experience in school settings, half had at least three years' experience in social services, and one in ten held teaching credentials. Finally, tutors report high levels of soft skills (self-concept, social competence, civic engagement, and commitment to community).
How well do tutors implement sessions?	Overall, tutors demonstrated a strong grasp of the Reading Partners model and could lead sessions with students as intended. Additionally, tutors reported positive, close relationships with students, with limited levels of conflict, and felt efficacious in their role as tutors. However, across all metrics of implementation quality, there was a subgroup of tutors who would benefit from additional training and coaching to better engage challenging students.
How satisfied are tutors with their Reading Partners experience?	Overall, tutors report being very satisfied with their experience as a tutor with Reading Partners: nearly 80 percent report being completely

	satisfied with their experience, with an additional 17 percent being somewhat satisfied. Only three percent of tutors report being dissatisfied with their experience.
What factors lead community members to volunteer as tutors?	Tutors reported that helping others was one of the primary factors driving them to volunteer. Interestingly, despite the fact that 88 percent of tutors report volunteering because they think it is important to help others, only 57 percent volunteered at Reading Partners because they felt it was important to learn more about the cause for which they were working. This suggests that tutors may be driven to volunteer because they feel it is important to help others in general, rather than the importance of helping close the fourth-grade reading gap. Encouraging tutors to better understand the importance of helping children become more proficient readers may be a way to both increase tutors' satisfaction with their role, and to increase their engagement in other aspects of Reading Partners.
<i>What factors lead community members to continue volunteering with Reading Partners?</i>	Nearly two-thirds of tutors reported that they plan to return next year. The small proportion of tutors who said they would not return indicate mostly logistical challenges (e.g., schedule, lack of time, moving), rather than dissatisfaction with the program, as the primary reason for not returning. One-quarter of tutors were unsure about their plans for next year. There may be an opportunity to have site coordinators engage tutors at the end of the year with messages about the importance of returning as volunteers, or engage veteran volunteers to talk with first-year tutors about what they gain by returning.

AmeriCorps Member Experiences	
Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Key Findings and Implications
What characteristics and skills do AmeriCorps members bring to Reading Partners?	AmeriCorps members who serve at Reading Partners are an educated group, with over 90 percent having a four-year college degree or higher and 8 percent holding teaching credentials. Additionally, approximately 80 percent of AmeriCorps members worked in a school setting prior to serving at Reading Partners, and just over one-third worked as a tutor at Reading Partners prior to their current service. Although AmeriCorps members report high levels of soft skills in the beginning of their service, the vast majority report that their skills grew during their service at Reading Partners. In fact, generally, Reading Partners' AmeriCorps members were more likely to report that their service enhanced their professional skills a "great deal" than a national cohort of AmeriCorps members. ²
With which aspects of Reading Partners do AmeriCorps members report the highest/lowest levels of satisfaction?	AmeriCorps members are generally very satisfied with their service at Reading Partners. Members overwhelmingly feel like they make an impact at Reading Partners and develop skills that will help advance their careers, and are happy with the way that Reading Partners staff treat them. However, nearly 15 percent of AmeriCorps members report feeling like they neither receive career guidance nor have a mentor at Reading

² Cardazone, G., Farrar, A., Frazier, R., Gabbard, S., Hernandez, T., et al. (2015). *AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes Summary Report*. Burlingame, CA: JBS International, Inc.

	Partners. Thus, while AmeriCorps members are generally satisfied, more opportunities for career guidance and mentorship may enhance their overall experience at Reading Partners.
What factors influence AmeriCorps members' satisfaction with their service at Reading Partners?	Satisfaction varied by AmeriCorps member role, with site coordinators expressing higher satisfaction than literacy leads. This difference may be related to the fact that some of the lowest-rated items in the Job Efficacy Scale had to do with engaging challenging students, and literacy leads often work most closely with such students. Thus, AmeriCorps members, particularly literacy leads, may benefit from additional training related to engaging more challenging students. Satisfaction also varied by region, although these results should be interpreted with some caution given the small sample sizes across these subgroups of AmeriCorps members.
What opportunities exist to enhance the experience of AmeriCorps members serving with Reading Partners?	Opportunities exist to further enhance the experiences of AmeriCorps members through targeted training on communication with school partners and working with challenging students, as well as the provision of additional opportunities for career guidance, mentorship, and leadership skill-building.

Student Reading Growth and Social-Emotional Learning	
Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Key Findings and Implications
<p>What factors contribute to or detract from students achieving their grade-specific reading goals?</p> <p><i>Do student reading outcomes vary by student demographic factors, tutoring dosage, tutor characteristics, tutor-student relationship quality, tutor fidelity, and AmeriCorps member characteristics?</i></p>	<p>Students demonstrated significant improvements in early literacy, reading, and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills (reading engagement, social competence, persistence, and self-control) across the year. Several factors emerged as predictors of growth in students' early literacy and reading skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with sustained and consistent participation in Reading Partners were most likely to improve their STAR Early Literacy or STAR Reading intervention tier at post-test. • Students in kindergarten and first grade were more likely to improve intervention tiers and to read at grade level at post-test than were older students. • Students whose tutors reported no conflict in their student-tutor relationship were more likely to read at grade level at post-test than students whose tutors perceived some conflict in their relationship. • Students' Early Literacy and Reading outcomes varied by region, with students in the Los Angeles region demonstrating some of the greatest improvements.
<p>What factors contribute to or detract from students' Social-Emotional Learning skills development?</p> <p><i>To what extent does this vary by student demographic factors, baseline reading level, tutoring dosage, tutor characteristics, tutor-student relationship quality, and tutor fidelity?</i></p>	<p>Children made significant gains in all SEL skills (reading engagement, social competence, persistence, and self-control) other than school engagement, with the greatest gains made in students' reading engagement. Only student-tutor relationship quality emerged as a consistent predictor of students' SEL skill development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive, warm relationships between tutors and students were significantly associated with students' school engagement, persistence, and social competence. Students whose tutors perceived more positive relationships had significantly higher school engagement, persistence, and social competence than students whose tutors perceived less positive student-tutor relationships, even after statistically accounting for students' pre-test scores.

- Similarly, there were also significant associations between tutors' perceptions of conflict in the tutor-student relationship and students' reading engagement and self-control. Students whose tutors perceived more conflict had significantly lower reading engagement and self-control at post-test than students whose tutors perceived less conflict in their student-tutor relationship, even after statistically accounting for students' pre-test scores.

Conclusions

Overall, Reading Partners clearly reaches students most in need of reading support and engages these students at high levels in terms of attendance and dosage. Participation in Reading Partners results in more positive outcomes for students, in terms of both children's development of SEL skills and in early literacy and reading. In addition, the tutors and AmeriCorps members who serve at Reading Partners are highly satisfied with their experiences, and AmeriCorps members report increased skill development across the year.