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ASSOCIATES

Expanding Opportunities to Successfully Support Early Readers: A Five-Year Study of Reading Partners Colorado

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Mile High United Way Social Innovation Fund Grant
Subgrantee: Reading Partners

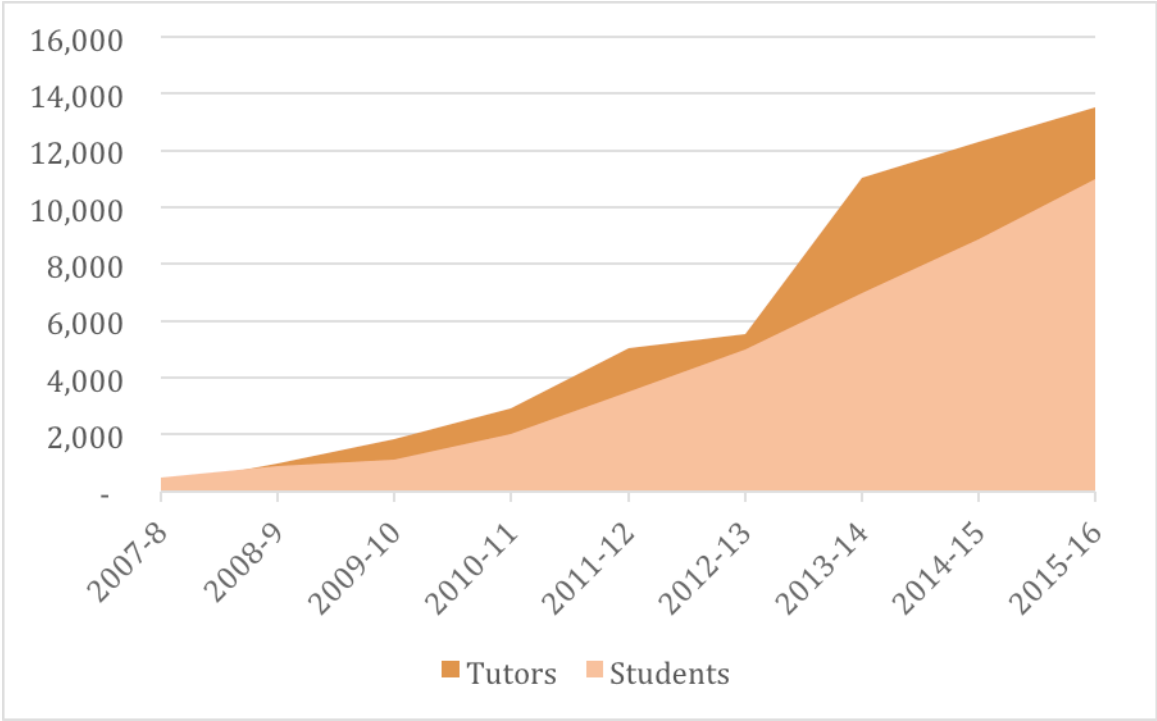
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The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) was a program that received funding from 2010 to 2016 from the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that engages millions of Americans in service through its AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Volunteer Generation Fund programs, and leads the nation's volunteer and service efforts. Using public and private resources to find and grow community-based nonprofits with evidence of results, SIF intermediaries received funding to award subgrants that focus on overcoming challenges in economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development. Although CNCS made its last SIF intermediary awards in fiscal year 2016, SIF intermediaries will continue to administer their subgrant programs until their federal funding is exhausted.

Executive Summary

Founded in 1999, Reading Partners recruits, trains, and places community volunteers into high-need schools to provide tutoring for students who are behind grade level in reading. Reading Partners collaborates with school leaders and teachers to transform a dedicated school space into a reading center, and creates twice weekly opportunities for students to receive tailored, one-on-one instruction from a trained and supervised community volunteer. These volunteers use a structured, research-based curriculum adapted for each student. Community volunteers and students receive ongoing support from Reading Partners' Reading Center Coordinators, who provide volunteer training, observations, coaching, and progress monitoring to ensure that students are meeting their individual literacy goals. Reading Partners' vision is that one day all children will have the reading skills necessary for them to reach their full potential. Reading Partners has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, illustrated in Figure E.1, and currently serves more than 11,000 students in over 200 schools across 10 states and the District of Columbia.

Figure 1: Reading Partners Has Grown Rapidly Since its Inception



Social Innovation Fund Evaluation Overview

Reading Partners began operating in Colorado in 2012, with funding from a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) awarded to Mile High United Way (MHUW). This five-year grant supported Reading Partners' expansion and implementation in Colorado from 2012-2017. The SIF grant required Reading Partners to engage an independent, third-party evaluator to study the program's implementation and impact. In 2012, Reading Partners hired Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA), a national education research and evaluation company, to serve as the external evaluator.

Over the course of its evaluation, APA produced a detailed evaluation plan outlining the study design; annual reports on project findings; and interim memoranda addressing key aspects of the study. This final summative report incorporates data from all five years of the project and has two primary components:

- An **impact evaluation**, using a quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching, designed to meet a “moderate” level of evidence under the SIF evidence framework, examining whether reading skills of students in Reading Partners improved significantly more than those of similar students not served by the program. The impact analysis draws upon Reading Partners’ and school district administrative data, as well as interviews and surveys of school leaders, to examine student literacy outcomes during the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 school years.
- An **implementation evaluation** exploring whether Reading Partners Colorado implemented the program with fidelity to Reading Partners’ model. Implementation evaluation findings span the five-year period of the SIF grant and are based on data from multiple sources, including Reading Partners student folder reviews, Reading Partners administrative data, direct observations of tutoring sessions, and surveys and interviews with key stakeholders.

Impact Findings

The impact evaluation examines whether the reading skills of students served by Reading Partners improved more than those of similar students not served by the program, as measured by state-mandated, pre- and post-, school-based literacy assessments. The analysis utilizes a quasi-experimental design with a propensity score matching approach, and includes data from the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 school years. The three-year sample includes a total of 698 Reading Partners students and 853 similar comparison students, for a total sample size of 1,551. Comparison students for the study were drawn either (1) from schools with Reading Partners sites (where comparison students included only students who were *not* served by Reading Partners) or (2) from a separate set of identified comparison schools. APA selected 30 comparison schools that were similar to Reading Partners schools in terms of geographic location, racial/ethnic makeup of students, poverty rate among students and assessment administered. Students in the final sample were matched on their assessment pre-scores and demographic characteristics. The final matched sample was very well-balanced and the two groups of students were comparable.

The impact evaluation sought to answer four research questions:

1. Does Reading Partners tutoring lead to improved near-term reading achievement for students in grades one through three when compared to similar students who do not receive tutoring?
2. Do differences in reading achievement between students who receive Reading Partners tutoring and similar students who are not in Reading Partners increase as students receive more tutoring?
3. Are there differential impacts of Reading Partners tutoring on different student groups, including English-language learners (ELL) vs. non-ELL students, boys vs girls, grade level, and different races?

4. What is the effect of participating in Reading Partners for multiple years?

Findings in response to each of these questions are summarized, in turn, below.¹

Overall Impact: On average, students who participated in Reading Partners during one school year had spring reading assessment scores that were significantly higher than the scores of similar students who did not participate in the program, controlling for fall assessment performance. For the average Reading Partners student, this improvement was equivalent to moving from the 15th percentile to the 21st percentile. This is an effect size of approximately 0.14, which is consistent with the average effect size for one-on-one tutoring programs found in a 2009 meta-analysis (Slavin, Lake, Davis & Madden, 2009). This effect size is roughly equivalent to that found in a 2015 experimental study of the Reading Partners program conducted by MDRC, which found a significant, positive effect of the program with an effect size of about 0.10 (Jacob, Armstrong & Willard, 2015). This study differs from the MDRC study in both methodology and study population.

Impact Finding #1

Students who participated in Reading Partners during one school year had spring reading assessment scores that are significantly higher than the scores of similar students who do not participate in the program.

Program Dosage: APA used two models to investigate the influence of program dosage on student literacy outcomes. The first model included only Reading Partners students. APA did not find significant effects based on dosage using this model. However, due to its focus exclusively on Reading Partners students, this model may have lacked sufficient statistical power to detect an effect.

Impact Finding #2

For each ten additional Reading Partners tutoring sessions received, there was a significant additional increase in student reading assessment scores.

The second model compared Reading Partners students to comparison students not served by the program. In this model, APA found that, for every ten additional Reading Partners tutoring sessions received, there was a statistically significant increase in student reading assessment scores: 0.7 point Normal Curve Equivalent increase for every ten additional sessions.

Differential Program Impact: APA did not find statistically significant differences in program impact based on grade level, gender, or race or ethnic identity. However, APA did identify a statistically significant differential effect for ELL students. Reading Partners tutoring had a significantly larger impact on ELL students than general population students in the program, illustrated in Figure E.2, below. Although ELL students who did not attend the program scored lower on spring assessments than non-ELL students who did not attend the program, that trend is reversed for students who attended Reading Partners: ELL students who attended Reading Partners scored higher on the spring assessment than their non-ELL counterparts who also attended the program, while controlling for fall assessment performance. This demonstrates that Reading Partners' program, as implemented in Colorado, was

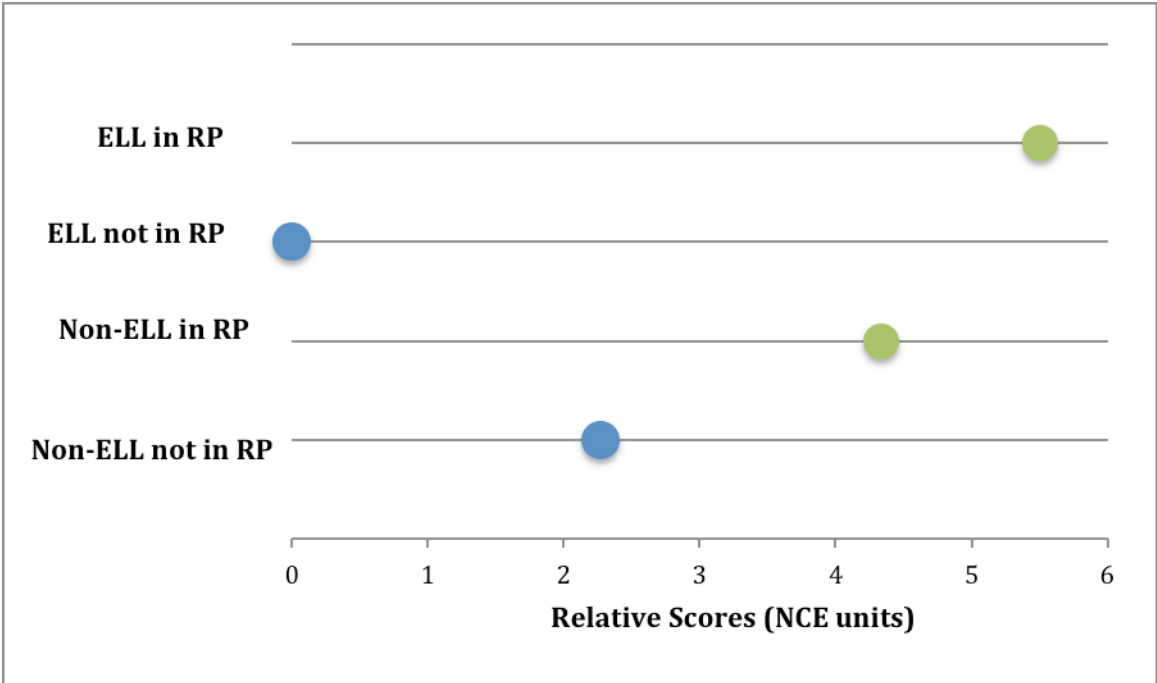
Impact Finding #3

As implemented in Colorado, Reading Partners was particularly effective for ELL students, helping them to outperform their non-ELL peers, both in and out of the program.

¹ For each analysis model, APA accounted for both student- and school-level factors using a Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM) with student-level variables at level one and school-level indicators at level two.

particularly effective for ELL students, helping them to outperform their non-ELL peers, both in and out of the program. This is especially important as 55% of Reading Partners students included in the analyses were identified as ELL.

Figure E.2: Relative Spring Literacy Assessment Score of ELL students in and out of Reading Partners



Participation Duration: The fourth and final impact research question sought to examine the effect of a student attending Reading Partners’ program for more than one year, but the available sample of students who attended the program for multiple years was too small to provide sufficient statistical power to answer this question.

Implementation Findings

In brief, the implementation evaluation found that Reading Partners was able to quickly launch, sustain, and implement its program with fidelity in a new region. Reading Partners Colorado was able to secure funding, engage school partners, recruit and train volunteer tutors, identify students meeting program enrollment criteria, assess and develop reading plans for those students, and ultimately deliver literacy tutoring to those students using Reading Partners’ curriculum.

Volunteers and school staff both perceived the Reading Partners curriculum as appropriate for struggling readers.

Implementation Finding #1
The Reading Partners program was implemented with fidelity: maintaining funding, identifying school partners, recruiting and training volunteer tutors, identifying students, developing reading plans, and delivering literacy tutoring using the Reading Partners curriculum.

School leaders reported that Reading Partners required much less of their time and engagement to implement successfully than similar supplemental programs for students; volunteers felt supported by the program and said it was easy to use the curriculum.

Error! Reference source not found.1 shows the school districts, number of schools and students served, number of tutors engaged, and the average number of sessions per student for each of Reading Partners’ first four years in the state.

Table 1. Growth of Reading Partners Colorado

	Districts	Schools	Students Served	Tutors	Average Sessions per Student
Year 1 2012-13	APS, DPS	8 (all new)	323	481	25
Year 2 2013-14	APS, DPS, Sheridan ²	11, (4 new)	558	803	32
Year 3 2014-15	APS, DPS, Sheridan	13 (6 new)	770	1,332	31
Year 4 2015-16	DPS	14 (9 new)	881	1,219	34

Data source: APA analysis of Reading Partners data

Reading Partners Colorado experienced constant growth in the number of students served, tutors engaged, and the average number of sessions provided to students. At the same time, Reading Partners Colorado experienced a substantial amount of transition in its school and district partnerships. Denver Public Schools (DPS) remained an active partner throughout the study period, while partnerships with Aurora Public schools (APS) and Sheridan Schools were shorter-lived. Even in DPS, Reading Partners Colorado experienced substantial turnover among school partners, with new schools added and existing schools leaving each year, in part due to changes in school needs and resources and in part due to funding issues.

Implementation Finding #2 *The majority of students participating in Reading Partners received at least 20 tutoring sessions in a school year.*

The majority of students participating in Reading Partners received at least 20 tutoring sessions per year. For example, in 2014-15: 75 percent of students received 20 or more sessions, over 50 percent received 30 or more sessions, and one-third received 40 or more sessions.

Data from reviews of Reading Partners’ student folders conducted in 2015-16 also provide insight into the relationships between student enrollment, the number of tutors per student, and the rate of session delivery:

- Students who enrolled earlier in the year generally received more sessions.
- About one in ten sessions was provided by Reading Partners staff, rather than volunteers.

² Sheridan was not part of the impact or implementation studies.

- More tutoring sessions often translated to more tutors. On average, students worked with two additional tutors for every five additional sessions received.
- Working with multiple tutors did not necessarily mean that students did not have opportunities to build relationships with another caring adult. The median student received 45% of sessions from a single tutor and over half of students had a primary tutor who provided at least 13 of their sessions.
- Reading Center Coordinators play a pivotal role in ensuring that students receive two tutoring sessions per week and establish strong relationships with their tutors. Specifically, Coordinators broker multiple schedules, including that of the tutor, student, and the student's teacher, to meet program goals for number of sessions and strong tutor-student relationships. Coordinators were effective at navigating any one scheduling challenge (e.g., a student missing a session due to illness). However, challenges with more than one schedule (e.g., volunteer cancellations and difficulty with school scheduling) often reduced the share of students receiving two sessions a week and increased the number of tutors per student.

The implementation evaluation catalogued changes, challenges, and opportunities over the first four years of implementation in Colorado. First, Reading Partners made several important programmatic changes affecting all of its regions:

- Revised curriculum for and increased emphasis on serving students in the early grades (K-3);
- Modified approach to tutor orientation and training;
- Changed the literacy assessment tools used with enrolled students; and
- Revised student enrollment criteria.

Over the same period, Reading Partners Colorado faced multiple evaluation and fundraising challenges and opportunities, including some specifically associated with being a SIF sub-grantee.

Additionally, Reading Partners experienced significant organizational change, at both the national and regional levels. APA used Stevens' *Nonprofit Lifecycle Model* as a conceptual framework to describe these changes (Stevens, 2011). The national organization evolved through the growth stage into the mature stage, a transition characterized by increasingly formalized organizational structures and policies. This included adding professional staff and growing the role, responsibilities, and supports for regional executive directors. In particular, it built professional capacity and created an internal policy system needed to support a mature nonprofit. Its relationship with regional offices evolved to include a more nuanced view of autonomy and authority. During the same period, Reading Partners Colorado navigated the growth stage, with a focus on establishing a strong presence in and relationships with the local education community, including schools and district leaders, tutors, and funders.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, Reading Partners Colorado implemented the program with fidelity. This adherence to Reading Partners' program model translated to significant positive literacy outcomes for participating students, with students who received more tutoring sessions seeing even greater literacy gains. Notably, Reading Partners Colorado was especially effective for English Language Learner (ELL) students, helping them to outperform their non-ELL peers, both in and out of the program.

Looking forward, it will be important for Reading Partners to encourage program innovation so that its staff remains engaged and the organization can capitalize on new opportunities. For example:

- Reading Partners Colorado may benefit from its new freedom to include AmeriCorps members in program delivery.³ These new team members could be engaged as Reading Center Coordinators (potentially reducing costs) or as full-time tutors who could quickly grow their literacy expertise.
- Reading Partners could pursue new uses for its strong program curriculum, such as in a summer school setting or through licensing with other programs.
- Reading Partners may find opportunities to introduce new programs and foster future organizational growth by leveraging its expertise in volunteer engagement, school partnerships, and program expansion and replication.

Pursuing opportunities such as these will help ensure that Reading Partners can continue to evolve and grow as it seeks to reach greater numbers of students across multiple states and communities.

³ With the end of the five-year SIF grant, Reading Partners Colorado will no longer face restrictions on use of AmeriCorps members as Reading Center Coordinators.