



Executive Summary

MOBILIZING VOLUNTEER TUTORS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LITERACY

Implementation, Impacts,
and Costs of the
Reading Partners Program

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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March 2015

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Mobilizing Volunteer Tutors to Improve Student Literacy

**Implementation, Impacts, and Costs
of the Reading Partners Program**

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Overview

This study reports on an evaluation of the Reading Partners program, which uses community volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring to struggling readers in underresourced elementary schools. Established in 1999 in East Menlo Park, California, Reading Partners' mission is to help children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individualized instruction with measurable results. At each school, Reading Partners transforms a dedicated space into a "reading center," places a full-time team member on site to manage day-to-day operations, and recruits a corps of 40 to 100 community volunteers to work one-on-one with students in pull-out sessions during the school day or after school in kindergarten through grade 5. (This evaluation included only students in grades 2 through 5.)

In March 2011, Reading Partners received a three-year True North Fund investment of up to \$3.5 million in grants from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund, matched by \$3.5 million from True North Fund co-investors, to further expand its early-intervention literacy program to elementary schools throughout the country and evaluate its effectiveness. This report is the second publication from that evaluation. A policy brief released by MDRC in June 2014 reported the initial findings from the evaluation, which was conducted during the 2012-2013 school year in 19 schools in three states, with more than 1,100 students randomly assigned to the study's program and control groups.

This report builds on those initial findings by describing the Reading Partners program and its implementation in greater detail, exploring whether the program is more or less effective for particular subgroups of students, and assessing some of the potential explanations for the program's success to date. In addition, this report includes an analysis of the cost of implementing the Reading Partners program in 6 of the 19 sites.

Key Findings

- Despite the myriad difficulties inherent in operating a program whose direct service providers are volunteers, Reading Partners was implemented in the schools with a relatively high degree of fidelity to the program model. On average, students in the study received approximately 1.5 tutoring sessions per week, and spent 28 weeks in the Reading Partners program.
- Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on three different measures of student reading proficiency. These impacts are equivalent to approximately one and a half to two months of additional growth in reading proficiency among the program group relative to the control group and are robust across a range of student characteristic subgroups as well as across groups of students who had different levels of reading comprehension skills at the start of the study.
- Reading Partners is a low-cost option for underresourced schools because a majority of the costs are in-kind contributions, primarily from community volunteers. On average, schools bear only about 20 percent (\$710 per program group student) of the total cost of the resources required to implement the program, and over half of these costs are in-kind contributions of space and staff time from the school.

Preface

Over the last two decades, numerous federal, state, and local efforts have focused on improving the literacy skills of America's young people. Yet, despite these efforts, only limited progress has been made. One approach that has consistently shown promise in improving literacy outcomes, especially for young children, is one-on-one tutoring. One-on-one tutoring delivered by certified teachers has repeatedly demonstrated large positive impacts on the reading proficiency of struggling readers. Yet, while this approach has a solid research base demonstrating its effectiveness, it is both time- and resource-intensive, placing a heavy burden on teachers and schools, and thus is an expensive way to ameliorate the problem of low literacy. As such, it may not always be a viable option for already underresourced schools.

This report explores another model: using community volunteers to provide tutoring to struggling readers, but in a structured, programmatic framework designed and managed by a dedicated nonprofit organization. The Reading Partners program recruits community volunteers who devote a few hours each week to tutoring students in kindergarten through grade 5 in reading, using a structured curriculum. Tutors come from varied backgrounds, are not required to have experience working with children or teaching reading, and receive only limited training before beginning tutoring. But children are assessed and tutors use specific materials supplied by the program, while a site coordinator ensures that each student receives the intended instruction, advises tutors whose students have specific difficulties, and fills in when tutors are unable to make appointments.

This evaluation reaches the encouraging conclusion that the Reading Partners program successfully improved students' reading proficiency, even among children in the upper elementary grades. Furthermore, the cost to the schools was quite low and substantially less than the costs of other supplemental reading services that are typically offered to struggling readers. All this suggests that strong volunteer tutoring programs, like Reading Partners, may be a cost-effective option for underresourced schools and deserve greater attention in the national effort to improve literacy skills.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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We owe special thanks to the many program managers and site coordinators on the Reading Partners staff, whose daily efforts and enthusiasm allowed us to implement the evaluation with integrity, and to Dean Elson, Michael Lombardo, Matt Aguiar, and the rest of the Reading Partners leadership team for their ongoing support.

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This material is based on work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The mission of CNCS is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. CNCS, a federal agency, engages more than five million Americans in service through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, the Social Innovation Fund, the Volunteer Generation Fund, and other programs, and leads the president's national call-to-service initiative, United We Serve.

The Authors

Executive Summary

The Reading Partners program uses community volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring to struggling readers in underresourced elementary schools. Established in 1999 in East Menlo Park, California, Reading Partners is a not-for-profit corporation whose mission is to help children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individualized instruction with measurable results. The Reading Partners model is based on the premise that too many children in low-income communities are not reading proficiently and that many teachers, schools, and parents in those communities lack the resources and infrastructure to address the problem.

The evaluation that is described in this report finds that the Reading Partners program successfully improved students' reading comprehension, sight word efficiency, and fluency over the course of the school year by an amount that is roughly equivalent to one and a half to two months of learning. In addition to demonstrating these measurable impacts, the evaluation provides evidence that the cost to the schools was less than half the costs to schools of other supplemental reading programs. The costs for Reading Partners were lower because the volunteer tutors accounted for a large share of the resources that were used. Thus, this study provides additional evidence that volunteer programs can work and that one-on-one tutoring is effective in improving academic outcomes. Furthermore, the results suggest that effective tutoring programs, like Reading Partners, may be a cost-effective option for underresourced schools, because they bring additional resources to the school through community volunteers.

Background

In March 2011, Reading Partners received a three-year True North Fund investment of up to \$3.5 million in grants from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund, matched by \$3.5 million from True North Fund co-investors, to further expand its early-intervention literacy program to elementary schools throughout the country and evaluate its effectiveness.

In addition to answering questions about the effectiveness of the Reading Partners program, the evaluation was designed to examine the potential for volunteer tutoring more generally to help improve the reading proficiency of struggling readers. To meet its design objectives, the evaluation included an implementation study, an impact study, and a cost study. The implementation and impact studies included 19 schools with Reading Partners sites in three different states, and the cost study included a subsample of six of these schools, also across three different states. Together, the three facets of the evaluation are designed to address the following broad sets of research questions:

1. In what context was the Reading Partners program implemented, and was it implemented as intended — that is, with fidelity to the model? How much variability in fidelity of implementation was observed across the sites? What factors contributed to any observed variability?
2. On average, did the Reading Partners program have a positive impact on students' reading proficiency across three key components of early reading ability: sight word efficiency, reading fluency, and comprehension?
3. What resources are needed to implement the Reading Partners program as described in this evaluation and what proportion of the costs of implementing the program are borne by the school?

The implementation study included site visits to all the schools participating in the evaluation in the winter of the study year, interviews with key program and school staff and volunteers, and the collection of programmatic data from the sites and from Reading Partners' own management information system (MIS). The impact study used a student-level randomized controlled trial design, in which students were randomly assigned within each school either to a program group that would participate in Reading Partners during the 2012-2013 school year or to an "as is" control condition. A total of 1,265 students in grades 2 through 5 across the 19 schools were randomly assigned. Students were assessed on three different measures of reading proficiency in the fall and spring of the study year. Finally, the cost study calculated the intervention's total cost by summing the costs of all the resources that were necessary to implement the program.

The Reading Partners Model

Reading Partners is a "pull-out" program (meaning that students are pulled out of their regular classrooms or after-school program for a limited time period in order to meet with their tutors) that operates both during the school day and after school in designated spaces called "reading centers" at each of the partner schools. The program aims to serve students in kindergarten through grade 5 who are half a year to two and a half years behind grade level in reading, who are conversationally fluent in English, and who do not have any special needs (that is, do not have an Individualized Education Program).¹ The Reading Partners program consists of twice-weekly, one-on-one tutoring sessions that last 45 minutes each. Students are tutored by community volunteers who need not have any experience working in education or with children. Tutor-

¹Individualized Education Programs are developed for children who are found through assessment to have a disability that affects their learning process. The program outlines how teachers will help these students learn more effectively, considering each of their learning styles and needs.

ing sessions are overseen by site coordinators — full-time Reading Partners team members, who are usually AmeriCorps members and who are also responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the program.²

The Reading Partners model consists of six core components:

- **Regular, one-on-one tutoring**

A key feature of the Reading Partners model is to provide students with individualized reading instruction. This one-on-one support — as opposed to small-group support — is the main component that differentiates Reading Partners from many other supplemental services that are available to struggling readers.

- **Dedicated school space and use of materials**

Reading Partners tutoring is designed to take place on school grounds in a dedicated space, or reading center, which contains specific features designated by Reading Partners, such as work stations for tutor-student pairs, a library with materials that are suitable for readers at different levels, an area with resources for volunteers to use, and posters and other materials with a reading theme that can be displayed on the wall.

- **Structured and individualized curriculum**

Tutoring sessions follow a consistent structure. The tutor begins by reading aloud to model fluent reading and pausing periodically to ask the student comprehension questions or to check the student’s knowledge of key vocabulary. The tutor then uses curricular materials to introduce or reinforce a specific reading skill or concept. Finally, the tutor works with the student to apply the skill or content while the student reads aloud.

- **Data-driven instruction**

Reading Partners uses data to implement and support the model, including the results of student assessments that are given three times a year. These assessments are used to create and update a student’s Individualized Reading Plan (IRP), which identifies student goals and areas on which to focus.

²AmeriCorps is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service that places young adults in service positions at nonprofit organizations, schools, public agencies, and faith-based entities. In return for their service, AmeriCorps members receive a living stipend, health insurance, and, when they complete their program, an education grant. See Corporation for National and Community Service, “Our Programs: AmeriCorps,” online publication (2014), at www.nationalservice.gov.

- **Rigorous and ongoing training**

Reading Partners school-based staff and AmeriCorps members participate in organized training sessions before the school year begins as well as ongoing (usually monthly) sessions throughout the school year. Topics covered in these training sessions include the Reading Partners model, a detailed review of the curriculum, how to train volunteer tutors, and how to use data and the Reading Partners data system. A short initial training session, as well as periodic training on specific topics, is offered to tutors as well.

- **Instructional supervision and support**

Instructional supervision and support are provided on an ongoing basis by and for Reading Partners staff and volunteers. Site coordinators supervise volunteers during tutoring sessions and provide guidance and suggestions to tutors who need additional support. Program managers — more experienced staff members who generally have a background in teaching — work with site coordinators to troubleshoot a range of issues, including those related to communications with school staff, managing tutors, or identifying best practices to better support the progress of a specific student.

Key Findings

- **The Reading Partners Program was implemented with fidelity.**

Despite the myriad difficulties inherent in operating a program whose direct service providers are volunteers, Reading Partners was implemented in the schools with a relatively high degree of fidelity.

Students received regular one-on-one tutoring in a dedicated school space. On average, students in the study received approximately 1.5 tutoring sessions per week, and spent 28 weeks in the Reading Partners program. Although this intensity is slightly less than the program model recommends, on average students consistently received three tutoring sessions every two weeks. All sites in the study had a designated reading center where tutoring took place and where selected materials and resources were made available to program staff, tutors, and students.

Students' reading progress was monitored regularly. Ninety-five percent of the program group students who participated in the Reading Partners program for the entire year were assessed by Reading Partners staff using their own internal assessments at the three prescribed points that the Reading Partners model dictates: when a student first enters the program, mid-way through the school year, and at the end of the school year.

Staff and volunteers believed that they had adequate training and support to perform their jobs successfully. Although the volunteers received limited training before they began tutoring (approximately an hour of orientation and tutoring observation), most tutors indicated that they felt adequately trained for the role. They also felt well supported by the site coordinators, who provided monitoring and assistance during tutoring sessions as well as additional feedback on how to address specific issues with students outside of the tutoring session. The full-time Reading Partners staff and AmeriCorps members (including program managers and site coordinators) consistently indicated that they had access to ongoing support from their supervisors.

The biggest challenge that Reading Partners faced in implementing the program was ensuring tutor attendance and retention. Reading Partners requests that tutors make a one-semester commitment, and site coordinators at the study sites reported that many volunteers, particularly high school and college students, did not stay beyond that period of time. As a result, new tutors had to be brought on throughout the year. Furthermore, volunteers varied in their consistency and commitment. Site coordinators reported that tutors sometimes failed to arrive at their scheduled time and at times did not notify the site coordinator beforehand. However, Reading Partners put structures in place to address these problems, including the use of substitute tutors, make-up days, and tutoring sessions conducted by site coordinators. These tactics meant that a student did not necessarily miss tutoring sessions as a result of tutor inconsistency.

- **Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on three different measures of student reading proficiency.**

The study quantified the impact of Reading Partners through three different assessments: the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-10) for reading comprehension; the AIMSweb oral reading fluency measure; and the Test of Word Reading Efficiency, 2nd Edition (TOWRE-2), for sight word efficiency. The effect size of each impact, which reflects the magnitude of the difference between the program and control groups, was 0.10 standard deviations for reading comprehension, 0.09 for reading fluency, and 0.11 for sight word efficiency. These statistically significant impacts are equivalent to approximately one and a half to two months of additional progress in reading among the program group members relative to students in the control group, who did not participate in the Reading Partners program.³

These results (between 0.09 and 0.11 standard deviations) are comparable in magnitude with results of other reading interventions that have been rigorously evaluated on a large

³Statistical significance indicates that the impact is likely a result of the intervention rather than a chance occurrence.

scale in grades 2 through 5. Although some interventions have produced large impacts for kindergarteners and first-graders, for students in grades 2 through 5 most rigorous evaluations of reading programs generally have found impacts between 0.10 and 0.25 standard deviations, and among rigorously evaluated tutoring programs in particular, impacts have been between 0.10 and 0.15 standard deviations.⁴

Since students in the control group were also receiving supplemental reading services, the impact of Reading Partners should be interpreted as the impact of the program relative to other supplemental service receipt, not the impact of Reading Partners compared with no intervention. Approximately two-thirds of students in the control group received at least one supplemental reading service and were more likely to receive small-group intervention support than were their counterparts in the program group. Because the control group students were also receiving supplemental reading instruction, the program group members received, in total, only about an hour more of reading instruction each week than the control group received.

Program impacts are robust across a range of student characteristic subgroups as well as across subgroups of students with varying levels of reading comprehension skills at baseline. Positive and statistically significant impacts were found on at least one measure of reading proficiency for each of the following student groups: male students, female students, English language learners (that is, students whose first language is not English), students who are fluent in English, students in lower grades (grades 2 and 3), students in upper grades (grades 4 and 5), and students with baseline reading comprehension scores in the lowest three quartiles of the study sample.

Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on the percentage of students who moved out of the lowest national quartile in terms of reading comprehension. At the end of the year, 19 percent of the program group students who had scored in the bottom quartile nationally at baseline had moved out of the lowest quartile, as opposed to only 12 percent of the control group students.

There were no consistent patterns between the impacts and various school-level measures of program context or fidelity. The study team explored the relationship between impacts and several aspects of program context and fidelity, including tutor consistency, fidelity of

⁴Yung Soo Lee, Nancy Morrow-Howell, Melissa Jonson-Reid, and Stacey McCrary, “The Effect of the Experience Corps® Program on Student Reading Outcomes,” *Education and Urban Society* 44, 1 (2010): 97-118; Carrie E. Markovitz, Marc W. Hernandez, Eric C. Hedberg, and Benjamin Silberglitt, *Impact Evaluation of the Minnesota Reading Corps K-3 Program* (Chicago: NORC at the University of Chicago, 2014); Henry May, Abigail Gray, Jessica N. Gillespie, Philip Sirinides, Cecile Sam, Heather Goldsworthy, Michael Armijo, and Namrata Tognatta, *Evaluation of the i3 Scale-up of Reading Recovery: Year One Report, 2011-12* (Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2013).

implementation, years of operation, and dosage (the frequency and intensity of service delivery). Across these analyses, there is no indication of particular aspects of implementation or context that made Reading Partners more effective.

- **Reading Partners is a low-cost option for underresourced schools.**

The total resource value, or cost, of Reading Partners is approximately \$3,610 per program group student. Other effective early literacy interventions that have been evaluated at scale are at least as costly as Reading Partners.⁵ However, unlike many other resource-rich programs, a majority of Reading Partners' costs (\$1,910 out of \$3,610) are in-kind contributions, primarily from community volunteers. As a result, Reading Partners schools bear only a small portion of the total costs of the program. On average, schools contribute only 20 percent of the total resources required to implement the program (\$710 per program group student), and over half of these costs are in-kind contributions of space and staff time.⁶

The volunteer time and transportation represent the largest portion of the total resources needed to implement the program. Almost half (42 percent) of the resources required for Reading Partners can be attributed to volunteers. Volunteers contributed, on average, the equivalent of \$1,520 per program group student, which included both their time and transportation costs. Because the tutors are not compensated for their time or transportation, they subsidize a large portion of the costs of the program.

While Reading Partners is often more resource-intensive than the other supplemental services that are available to students in the study schools, many of those resources are provided in-kind and thus schools are required to contribute a much smaller portion of those costs. In addition to Reading Partners, the six school sites that were included in the cost study offered other supplemental services that provided reading instruction beyond what students received during regular classroom teaching. Those other services were provided to both program and control group students, although control group students received more of them than did the program group. The cost per student for the average of the other supplemental reading services of-

⁵Fiona M. Hollands, Yilin Pan, Robert Shand, Henan Cheng, Henry M. Levin, Clive R. Belfield, Michael Kieffer, A. Brooks Bowden, and Barbara Hanisch-Cerda, *Improving Early Literacy: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of Effective Reading Programs* (New York: Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2013); Jessica Simon, "A Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of Early Literacy Interventions," unpublished paper (New York: Columbia University, 2011).

⁶To calculate the cost per program group student, first the total cost (or the total resource value) of the Reading Partners program at each site was divided by the total number of Reading Partners tutoring sessions provided to all students in the program during the year (not just the sessions provided to students participating in the study), including students in kindergarten and first grade, to obtain the cost per session. Then, to determine the average cost of serving each program group student, the average cost per session was multiplied by the average number of sessions that the students participating in the study received.

ferred at the six sites was \$1,780 and ranged from \$1,050 to \$4,890 per student. The range in the total resources provided by the supplemental services across the six sites depended on both the number and type of supplemental services that were offered. Some services, like computer-based programs, were much less resource-intensive. When the cost of Reading Partners is compared with the cost of other supplemental services that schools offered to struggling readers, the cost to the school for Reading Partners was \$710 per program group student, as noted above, while the average cost of the other supplemental reading services borne by the school or school district was \$1,700.

Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation finds that the Reading Partners model is effective. The program produced measurable impacts on reading skills among students who had a fairly broad range of reading abilities when the study began and among students from a wide range of grades (grades 2 through 5). Reading Partners produced these impacts despite the lack of experience among tutors, the somewhat limited training the tutors received, and the relatively high degree of tutor turnover. Furthermore, the findings illustrate the high value of the Reading Partners program from the perspective of the schools. The program uses many resources, but the volunteers account for a large part of those resources. As a result, the schools bear only 20 percent of the costs.

Thus, the study provides evidence that if the right design and administrative structures are put into place, volunteer tutoring programs can be effective when implemented at scale, and volunteer tutoring programs may be a cost-effective option for underresourced schools.

Reading Partners manages to be effective even in the absence of oft-cited key components to successful tutoring, including, in particular, extensive tutor training and tutor consistency.⁷ Further research is required to understand whether improving these components of the model would affect the magnitude of the impacts and whether the impact of Reading Partners is sustained for more than one year.

⁷Batya Elbaum, Sharon Vaughn, Marie Tejero Hughes, and Sally Watson Moody, "How Effective Are One-to-One Tutoring Programs in Reading for Elementary Students at Risk for Reading Failure? A Meta-Analysis of the Intervention Research," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 92, 4 (2000): 605-619; Gary W. Ritter, Joshua H. Barnett, George S. Denny, and Ginger R. Albin, "The Effectiveness of Volunteer Tutoring Programs for Elementary and Middle School Students: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of Educational Research* 79, 1 (2009): 3-38; Robert E. Slavin, Cynthia Lake, Susan Davis, and Nancy A. Madden, "Effective Programs for Struggling Readers: A Best-Evidence Synthesis," *Educational Research Review* 6, 1 (2011): 1-26; Barbara A. Wasik, "Using Volunteers as Reading Tutors: Guidelines for Successful Practices," *The Reading Teacher* 51, 7 (1998): 562-570.

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