

grown to serve more than 7,000 students in over 130 schools throughout California, Colorado, New York, Oklahoma, Maryland, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington, DC. In March 2011, the program was awarded a three-year investment of up to \$3.5 million from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), matched by \$3.5 million in grants from the True North Fund and coinvestors, to further expand its literacy program to elementary schools throughout the country and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. (Reading Partners has also been expanding with the support of AmeriCorps, a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. AmeriCorps members provide teaching, mentoring, after-school support,

THE READING PARTNERS PROGRAM

Established in 1999 in East Menlo Park, California, Reading Partners is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation that has developed an innovative approach to addressing the problem of low literacy skills. The mission of the program is to help children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individual instruction with measurable effects. Reading Partners typically operates in underresourced elementary schools where supervised volunteers from the community provide one-on-one literacy tutoring to struggling readers in kindergarten to fifth grade. The program primarily serves students in federally designated low-income schools.

At each school in which it operates, Reading Partners transforms a space into a designated “Reading Center,” places an AmeriCorps member on site, and recruits a corps of 40 to 100 volunteers. Students who meet the target criteria of Reading Partners (those who are six months to two and a half years below grade level, who do not have an Individualized Education Program for special education services,⁸ and who speak conversational English) are identified by the school and matched with tutors on a rolling basis, as more and more tutors are recruited during the school year.⁹

The Reading Partners program takes place in the Reading Center. Students are either taken out of their regular classrooms in order to participate or take part after school. Program data indicate that around 40 percent received tutoring after school; approximately 30 percent were taken out of class during English language arts time; fewer than 5 percent, during math

complete a worksheet task related to that skill.

Descriptive statistics for the school sample are shown in Table 1. Consistent with the Reading Partners model, the schools that participated in the study are in low-income communities and have high percentages of minority students. Relative to the average school receiving Title I funds from the federal government for serving low-income students, the Reading Partners study schools include a higher percentage of Hispanic students, reflecting the large concentration of Reading

Partners schools in California that participated in the study. The sample also includes more urban schools than are represented among all Title I schools, since Reading Partners does not attempt to serve small schools in rural areas, in which the number of available volunteers is quite limited.

Following random assignment in fall 2012, the study team administered three reading assessments to students participating in

TABLE 1:
Characteristics of Reading Partners Study Schools

CHARACTERISTIC	PERCENTAGE
ELIGIBLE FOR TITLE I SCHOOL-WIDE PROGRAM	88.9
STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH*	81.7
RACE/ETHNICITY	
BLACK	20.7
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average, students were formally assigned to between two and three different tutors over the course of the school year. However, due to tutor and student absences, students often saw more tutors than that. A review of student folders indicates that over a two-week period, during which students would ideally participate in four tutoring sessions, 59 percent of students who received tutoring four times or more saw at least three different tutors. There were structures in place to address these challenges. As noted earlier, a full-time staff member or AmeriCorps member was charged with recruitment on a continuing basis, which helped to ensure an adequate supply of tutors to respond to the relatively high level of turnover. Similarly, if a tutor was absent, the Site Coordinator or another volunteer would typically fill in, which helped mitigate the impact of inconsistent attendance. As a result, most students were tutored at least three times every two weeks throughout the year. A forthcoming report will explore whether or not tutor consistency is associated with program effectiveness.

READING PARTNERS WAS EFFECTIVE IN IMPROVING READING PROFICIENCY

Additional analyses indicate that the Reading Partners program was effective for a wide variety of students — impacts did not vary significantly for students from different grade or baseline reading achievement levels, for male and female students, or for those who are not native English speakers. Exploratory analyses suggest that Reading Partners may have been particularly effective for the lowest-achieving students. As shown in Figure 2, among students who scored in the lowest quartile of the study sample on the baseline assessment of reading comprehension, the impacts on reading fluency and sight-word reading were equal to 0.19 and 0.22, respectively. On the sight-word efficiency test, for example, the control group scored at the 16th percentile while the program group scored at the 22nd percentile.

These findings compare favorably with those of other rigorous volunteer tutoring programs for students in similar grades. One study found effect sizes in the range of 0.10 to 0.13 for students in first to third grades.¹⁵ Another found effect sizes in the range of 0.08 to 0.10 for students in the second and third grades.¹⁶ A forthcoming report will explore variation in these findings more fully, including whether the program was more effective for students who received tutoring for a longer period of time.

schools were unlikely to allow the non-Reading Partners students to struggle without providing additional support. In fact, as shown in Table 2, the amount of supplemental reading instruction that students in Reading Partners received was only somewhat greater than that received by the control group. The time spent in classroom-based reading instruction (including in-class time that was spent one-on-one) was nearly identical for the Reading Partners students and the control group. Additionally, the Reading Partners group received only about one more hour of supplemental reading instruction per week than the control group. Thus, the apparently modest impacts shown here reflect around

an hour of additional instructional time in reading each week — instruction that was being provided by volunteers, who, for the most part, did not have prior experience teaching reading and had very limited training.

Overall, 65 percent of the students in the control group received some type of supplemental reading instruction over and above what they obtained in the classroom. They participated in a range of other supplemental reading services (21 percent received other tutoring and 32 percent benefited from additional small-group support from a school-based interventionist), even though they were not being served by Reading Partners.

TABLE 2: Reading Instruction Received

CONCLUSIONS

Most important, this research demonstrates that the Reading Partners model can “work.” The findings indicate that the program produced measurable impacts on reading skills among students with a fairly broad range of reading abilities, across a wide range of grades (second to fifth), and across a wide range of school districts with different curricula, standards, rules, and conventions. Reading Partners produced these impacts despite the lack of prior experience among tutors, the somewhat limited training they received, and the relatively high degree of tutor turnover.

In addition, the impacts of the Reading Partners program are notable, given the

services offered in a sample of participating schools, and will compare the findings reported here with those of other rigorous evaluations of early literacy interventions.

NOTES

1 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

3 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

4 Slavin, Lake, Davis, and Madden (2011).

5 Wasik and Slavin (1993).

6 Ritter, Barnett, Denny, and Albin (2009).

7 Hager and Brudney (2004).

8 Individualized Education Programs are designed for children who are found through assessment to have disabilities that affect their learning processes. The plans outline how teachers will help these students learn more effectively considering their learning styles and needs.

9 In order to accommodate the evaluation, the typical enrollment process was modified during the study year. To complete randomization as early as possible, all student referral lists were generated by schools and submitted to Reading Partners at the beginning of the year.

10 These data were provided by 6 of the 19 sites in the study.

11 The funding priorities of the granting institution, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, typically focus on older children and adolescents. For this reason, the decision was made to include only second- to fifth-graders in this evaluation, though Reading Partners serves students in kindergarten to fifth grade.

12 Chall (1983).

13 Sight words are common words that students should be able to recognize quickly and easily. Reading comprehension was assessed using the Stanford Achievement Test, Tenth Edition, Reading Comprehension subtest (SAT-10); fluency was assessed using the AIMSweb One Minute Oral Reading Fluency subtest (AIMSweb); and sight-word reading was assessed using the Test of Word Reading Efficiency, Second Edition, Sight-word Reading subtest (TOWRE-2).

14 Percentile scores were analyzed for the SAT-10 and the TOWRE-2 but not the AIMSweb.

15 Lee, Morrow-Howell, Jonson-Reid, and McCrary (2012).

16 Markovitz, Hernandez, Hedberg, and Silbergliitt (2014).

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