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Mobilizing Volunteer Tutors to Improve Student Literacy

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

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Funders for the Reading Partners Evaluation

This report is based on work supported by the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a key White House initiative and program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The Social Innovation Fund combines public and private resources with the goal of increasing the impact of innovative, community-

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

Acknowledgments

This evaluation of the Reading Partners program would not have been possible without the collaboration of Reading Partners and funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) and the Social Innovation Fund. ()-(t)-(h- -W)-(e)-(u)-(h)-(o)-(l)-(b)-(e)-(n)-(o)-(c)-(i)-(a)-(l)-(h)-(k)-(t)-(c)-(e)-()-(t)-(h)

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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

ing sessions are overseen by site co

- **Rigorous and ongoing training**

Reading Partners school-based staff and AmeriCorps members participate in organized training sessions before the school year begins a

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 transporta-

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.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

