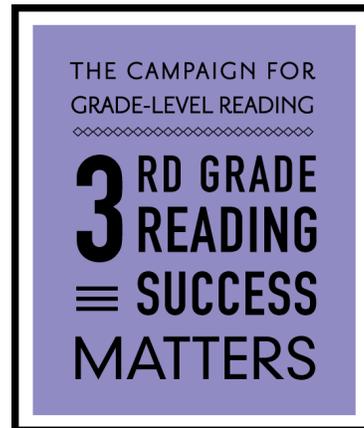


BRIGHT SPOTS

Quality Teaching



Minnesota Reading Corps, Minnesota

Low rates of early literacy in Minnesota simply would not budge when Alice Seagren — chair of the Minnesota House’s K–12 finance committee — was charged with crafting a new strategy. Since she was also a board member for Minnesota’s national service commission (ServeMinnesota), Seagren saw potential in harnessing the expandable people power of AmeriCorps. She reasoned that Corps members could implement the growing science of how to help children read on a large and unprecedented scale.

As a result of Seagren’s foresight, the Minnesota Reading Corps launched in 2003 with bipartisan support from the state legislature. The program has grown into the nation’s largest state AmeriCorps program. Today, hundreds of tutors implement a research-based, early-literacy model to help thousands of struggling readers throughout the state, age three to grade three. Reading Corps’ trained literacy tutors currently serve in 487 sites, including school districts, Head Start and community centers. The number of children served is expected to leap to 30,000 in the 2012–2013 school year.

“This is real education reform,” says Executive Director Kathy Saltzman. “Reading Corps works with kids who are projected to score below grade-level standards on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. Most of them now surpass the state average on the tests. That’s pretty remarkable.”

“Bubble kids”

Specifically, Minnesota Reading Corps focuses on students just below grade level — the so-called “bubble kids” — who tend to be ignored. “We are part of a continuum of service — Tier 2 on the three-tiered Response to Intervention model,” says Cheryl Reid, Master Coach Coordinator for K–3. “We free up resources at the schools so reading specialists can focus on the deep-need students.”

WHO THEY ARE

In 2011–2012, the Corps:

- Engaged 789 literacy tutors.
- Worked with 487 sites throughout Minnesota.
- Served 20,758 students who were:
 - Pre-K–Grade 3.
 - Projected to score below proficient on state reading tests.
- On average, 72% of students in the 10 largest districts qualified for Free and Reduced-Price Meals.

HIGHLIGHTS

Designed for students who are reading just below grade level.

Pre-school tutors:

- Focus on outcome-based measurements including rhyming, letter sound fluency, picture naming, alliteration and letter naming fluency.
- Deliver explicit instructions in reading and writing skills.

Elementary grade tutors:

- Work with individual students every day for 20 minutes.
- Provide guided practice that supplements classroom instruction.

The University of Minnesota and University of Oregon developed the curriculum-based measures used to select students and assess their progress weekly. Students move out of the program when they reach targets for reading proficiency, and new students move in. If students fall behind their targets after leaving the program, Reading Corps pulls them back in for more tutoring.

Literacy tutors in K–3 work one-on-one with individual students every day for 20 minutes to build phonics, phonemic awareness and fluency skills. Tutors provide guided practice that supplements classroom instruction rather than teaching new material. In 2010–2011, 68 percent of the 13,391 students in those grades gained more than one year on curriculum-based measurements in one year's time. In 2011, 80 percent of third-grade students who exited the Reading Corps program met or exceeded expectations on the statewide reading assessment, compared to the 78 percent statewide average. That is remarkable in students who started out at risk of not meeting standards.

Mythbusting

Pre-school literacy tutors focus on the “Big Five” emergent literacy skills — oral language and comprehension, vocabulary and meaning, concepts about books and print, phonological awareness and alphabetic principles.

“We’re major mythbusters in the early childhood field, where rigor is often thought to have no place in learning,” says Kate Horst, pre-K Master Coach Coordinator. In “rigorous play,” the tutors give students explicit instruction in skills related to reading and writing. “It’s fun,” says Horst, “but it’s also intentional.” In 2011, 74.6 percent of pre-K students whose fall scores were below target for letter naming, one of the greatest predictors for later reading ability, achieved spring scores at or above target. Spring scores on the other skills ranged from 49.4 (alliteration) to 68.2 percent (picture naming).

Serving and Returning

Minnesota Reading Corps tutors come from all walks of life, and range in age from 20 to 75. Selection is rigorous: 3,000 applicants vie for 1,000 positions. The training is also rigorous — starting with three-and-a-half days of intensive preparation in the science of reading, reading intervention strategies, data collection and coaching. The work itself is challenging, but satisfaction is high. More than one-third of this year’s team plans to return for a second year.

Replicable and scalable, the program offers opportunities for systems change through training for school staff as well as Reading Corps tutors. Says Saltzman, “In a recent survey, our school literacy coordinators agreed that the Reading Corps model adds value, complementing their instructional program.”

Twenty states have contacted the Reading Corps to explore replication, and Texas, Colorado and Washington, D.C. are in the early stages of implementation.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

Among K–3 students:

- **68% make more than one year’s growth on curriculum-based measures in one year.**
- **69% of those exiting the program meet grade-level expectations with no further Reading Corps service.**
- **Only 1.5% need a special education referral, compared to 5.4% of students in a matched sample.**

Among 3rd graders in 2010–2011:

- **80% met or exceeded reading targets on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, compared to 78% statewide.**

Among pre-schoolers, age 4–5:

- **Scores are significantly higher in phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and total literacy than those of children entering kindergarten in Minneapolis Public Schools.**
- **Consistent gains have held for 8 years in 5 literacy indicators — rhyming, picture naming, alliteration, letter sound fluency and letter naming fluency.**

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