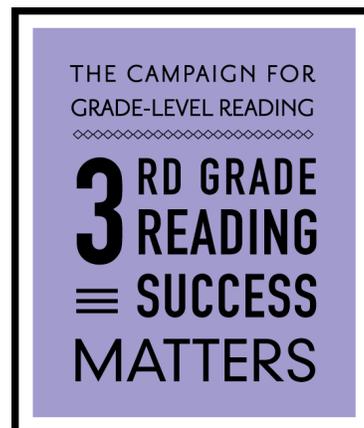


BRIGHT SPOTS

Quality Teaching



Reading Partners, Oakland, CA

The Key to Success

“Let’s get busy,” volunteer tutor Susan Sarno tells the fidgety fourth-grader as they begin their twice-weekly tutoring session. The phrase works like a charm. The girl, often distracted in the classroom, settles right down and opens the book she’s chosen. For the next 45 minutes, Sarno guides her student through a series of engaging questions, passages to read aloud, and discussions from a curriculum provided by Reading Partners, an innovative literacy program dedicated to boosting reading levels across the United States.

“With every student, you have to spend some time getting to know who they are, what they like and what will work with them,” says Sarno, a retired research librarian, now in her third year as a Reading Partners volunteer. “You look for the little key you can turn.” With her distractible fourth-grader, she invented their “concentration game,” with the magic phrase that transforms fidgets into focus. With a shy fifth grade boy, Sarno discovered his love of football, then brought him sports books.

Gateway to Possibility

For Reading Partners CEO Michael Lombardo, those keys are opening doors to lifelong opportunities. Reading is the crucial “gateway skill” to success in school and beyond. “If we have students reading on grade level by third grade, national studies show us their likelihood of going to college rises significantly,” says Lombardo. In California, where Reading Partners began, 88 percent of fourth graders from low-income communities read below grade level. Reading Partners is now working to change statistics like that through dedicated volunteers, a focused curriculum and caring, one-on-one attention. As their slogan declares: “One tutor. One child. Infinite possibilities.”

Founded in 1999 by three community activists, Reading Partners has had tremendous impact in the 65 low-income urban schools it now serves. The average student rises a grade in reading level after 26 hours of instruction. More significantly, in 2010–2011, 88 percent of first through fifth-graders

WHO THEY ARE

In 2011-2012, Reading Partners:

- Served 2,800 students, grades K–5.
 - Over 90% qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Meals.
- Collaborated with 65 partner schools in high-need urban areas.
- Extended its outreach beyond California with funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, New School Venture Fund, and Social Innovation Fund.
- Involved more than 3,000 volunteer tutors and AmeriCorps site coordinators.

\$1,400–\$1,800 cost per student.

- Median school contribution: \$15,000

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accelerated their rate of learning. On average, Reading Partners students more than doubled the rates at which their reading skills improve while in the program. Moreover, three in four students who began the year six months to 2.5 grade levels behind were closer to grade level by the end of the year.

As students' reading comprehension grows, their confidence rises. Behavior improves too. Jourdan Ringgold, site coordinator at New Heights Charter in Central L.A., has seen students with multiple detentions and suspensions excel and thrive. "Children who are behind sometimes act out to draw attention away from the fact that they're not learning," she says. "When they get attention, and instruction at their level, behavior is not an issue."

Manageable Steps/ Measurable Progress

From its founding, Reading Partners has aimed to go beyond traditional literacy programs that rely on volunteers. Lombardo asks "How can we take what has been informal and well-intentioned and make it high impact?"

The rigorous step-by-step curriculum is one answer. Like Sarno, 70 percent of Reading Partners' volunteers have never worked with children before. The curriculum, developed by Reading Partners in consultation with the Stanford School of Education, provides easy-to-follow lessons for students and tutors alike. "It allows our volunteers to feel comfortable and competent, to believe they can make a difference," says Ringgold.

"A measurable difference," adds Lombardo. Reading Partners tests students three times annually — when they begin, midway, and at the end. "Tutors leave knowing, not wondering, if they helped the students," says Lombardo.

Growing Impact

Forty-eight schools in California now partner with Reading Partners, with 170 more on a waiting list. More recently, Reading Partners expanded to high-need schools in Washington, D.C., New York, Dallas, and Baltimore. Throughout this growth, students have continued to achieve. "Our performance metrics have remained constant or even increased," says Lombardo.

Meanwhile, students spending time in their schools' dedicated Reading Centers aren't mulling over metrics. They're having fun twice a week, with someone they know cares about them. They're treasuring the books they get to take home to build a personal library.

Says Ringgold: "Kids see coming to Reading Partners as a special bonus, as a reading club. The Reading Partners room often has children coming during lunch just to be in that room, which is such a welcoming place. It's a recipe for success."

Crowning that success is a yearly recital without musical instruments, tutus or stand-up comic routines. Reading Partners students, some strutting, some tiptoeing, stand up before an attentive audience of family, teachers, and classmates. They clutch a poem in their hands. Loud and proud, they read.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

From 2008–2011, Reading Partners helped:

- **88% of children accelerate their rate of learning.**
- **Students gain an average of 1.6 months of skills for every month in the program.**
- **Students, on average, jump an entire grade level in reading skills after 26 hours of tutoring.**

HIGHLIGHTS

Reading Partners:

- **Offers students twice-weekly, 45-minute lessons, one-on-one with volunteer tutors.**
- **Provides structured curriculum, developed with Stanford Graduate School of Education.**
- **Operates in designated Reading Centers set up in partner schools.**
- **Satisfies 99% of teachers and 100% of principals whose students participate.**
- **Has received numerous Volunteer's Choice awards in communities it serves.**
- **Needs nine fewer hours of tutoring than its for-profit peers to achieve the same rate of gain.**