

What is the community challenge?

Reading is the gateway skill to success in school as well as other endeavors. Low levels of reading skills are a challenge and barrier to efforts to improve educational outcomes, particularly for under-privileged populations. Nationally, students who read poorly in third grade are six times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. Despite the urgent need, schools often lack sufficient resources and infrastructure to provide individualized supports to students and build community support.

What is the promising solution?

Founded in 1999, Reading Partners recruits, trains, and places community volunteers into high need schools to provide tutoring for students who are one month to two and a half years behind grade level in reading and who speak conversational English. Collaborating with school leaders and teachers, Reading Partners transform a dedicated school space into a reading center, and create twice weekly opportunities for students to receive one-on-one instructions. Trained volunteers follow a research based curriculum tailored to each child's needs. In addition, Reading Partner Coordinators provide ongoing training, observations, coaching, and progress monitoring to students and community volunteers, ensuring that students are meeting their individual literacy goals.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of Mile High United Way's Reading Partners Colorado conducted by Augenblick, Palaich and Associate (APA) began in 2012 and finished reporting in 2017.

The report includes an impact evaluation, using a quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching, examining whether reading skills of students in Reading Partners improved significantly more than those of similar students not served by the program. The impact analysis includes data from the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 school years and includes a total of 698 Reading Partners students and 853 similar comparison students, for a total sample size of 1,551. The impact evaluation sought to answer four research questions:

1. Does Reading Partners Tutoring lead to improved near-term reading achievement for students in grades one through three when compared to similar students who do not receive tutoring?
2. Do differences in reading achievement between students who receive Reading Partners tutoring and similar students who are not in Reading Partners increase as students receive more tutoring?
3. Are there differential impacts of Reading Partners tutoring on different student groups, including English-language learners (ELL) vs. non-ELL students, boys vs. girls, grade level, and different races?
4. What is the effect of participating in Reading Partners for multiple years?

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Volunteer driven, pull-out, one-on-one literacy tutoring

Subgrantee: Reading Partners

Intermediary: Mile High United Way

Focus Area(s): Youth Development/Education

Focus Population(s): Elementary school students with low level of reading skills

Community(ies) Served: Denver and Aurora, Colorado



readingpartners

The report also includes an implementation evaluation, exploring whether Reading Partners Colorado implemented the program with fidelity to Reading Partners' model. The findings are based on data from multiple sources, including Reading Partners student folder reviews, administrative data, direct observations of tutoring session, and surveys and interviews with key stakeholders.

What did the evaluation find?

The final summative evaluation report incorporates data from all five years of the project and has the following major findings:

- Students who participated in Reading Partners during one school year had spring reading assessment scores that were significantly higher than the scores of similar students who did not participate in the program.
- For each ten additional Reading Partners tutoring sessions received, there was a significant additional increase in student reading assessment scores.
- Reading Partners was particularly effective for ELL students, helping them to outperform their non-ELL peers, both in and out of the program.
- The evaluation also found the program was implemented with fidelity: maintaining funding, identifying school partners, recruiting and training volunteer tutors, identifying students, developing reading plans, and delivering literacy tutoring using the Reading Partners curriculum.

Notes on the evaluation

The fourth impact research question sought to study the impact of participation duration by examining the effect of a student attending Reading Partners' program for more than one year. The available sample of students who attended the program for multiple years was too small to provide sufficient statistical power to answer this question.

How is Reading Partners using the evaluation findings to improve?

Looking forward, it will be important for Reading Partners to encourage program innovation so that its staff remains engaged and the organization can capitalize on new opportunities. For example:

- Reading Partners could include AmeriCorps members in program delivery as Reading Center Coordinators (potentially reducing costs) or as full-time tutors who could quickly grow their literacy expertise.
- Reading Partners could pursue new uses for its strong program curriculum, such as in a summer school setting or through licensing with other programs.
- Reading Partners may find opportunities to introduce new programs and foster future organizational growth by leveraging its expertise in volunteer engagement, school partnerships, and program expansion and replication.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Impact evaluation (quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching) and implementation evaluation

Study Population: 1st through 3rd grade

(Independent) Evaluator(s): Augenblick, Palaich and Associate (APA)

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Moderate

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.