

Reading Partners: The Implementation and Effectiveness of a One-on-One Tutoring Program Delivered by Community Volunteers

Robin Tepper Jacob, Thomas J. Smith, Jacklyn A. Willard, and Rachel E. Rifkin

Competence and confidence in reading constitute the foundation for all educational achievement. Students who struggle with reading inevitably struggle with all academic course work, and those who begin school behind their peers rarely catch up without significant intervention. Given the centrality of reading skills, the national statistics on literacy attainment are deeply distressing: two out of three American fourth-graders are reading below grade level, and almost one-third of children nationwide lack even basic reading skills.¹ For children in low-income families, the numbers are even more alarming, with 80 percent reading below grade level.² Despite several decades of educational reform efforts, only incremental progress has been made in addressing this crisis. From 1998 to 2013, the number of low-income fourth-graders reading at a proficient level increased by only 7 percentage points.³

There are a plethora of literacy and reading programs that use a variety of methods and approaches designed to improve students' ability to read. Research suggests that among these, one-on-one tutoring has shown the greatest promise in improving reading performance.⁴ Such tutoring delivered by a certified teacher has consistently demonstrated

large impacts on the reading proficiency of struggling readers.⁵ Yet its high cost means that it is often not a viable option for already underresourced schools. Using volunteers or paraprofessionals may be a more cost-effective approach to the problem, but to date little rigorous evidence exists regarding the efficacy of such an approach. Though prior research suggests that tutoring by volunteers can improve the reading proficiency of students who are falling behind, most of the studies that have been conducted have used very small sample sizes (generally fewer than 100 students, with only half receiving tutoring).⁶ Thus, even if their effectiveness has been established in studies using smaller samples, there is only limited evidence that such programs can be expanded to a large scale (for example, delivered to hundreds of students in multiple locations). In addition, research on the implementation and effectiveness of volunteer programs suggests that expanding them to a large scale might be quite difficult.⁷

This policy brief tells the story of Reading Partners, a successful one-on-one volunteer tutoring program that serves struggling readers in low-income elementary schools and that has already been taken to a large scale. In the years since its inception, Reading Partners has

Reading Partners' mission is to help children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individual instruction with measurable effects.

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, and other services to students in more than 10,000 public schools, including one in three persistently low-achieving schools.)

This policy brief summarizes the early results of that evaluation, which was conducted during the 2012-2013 school year in 19 schools in three states, and which involved 1,265 students. The evaluation finds positive impacts of the program on three different measures of reading proficiency. These encouraging results demonstrate that Reading Partners, when delivered on a large scale and implemented with fidelity, can be an effective tool for improving reading proficiency.

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 time; and around 25 percent, during some other time (for example, art, recess, or physical education).¹⁰ The average student stays in the program

for more than five months, and many remain for a year or longer. Each Reading Center is directed by a Site Coordinator, whose role it is to oversee the Center's activities by training and supporting the volunteer tutors; ensuring that students are making gains in their reading abilities; and maintaining positive relationships among Reading Partners, teachers, and students' families. A separate Outreach Coordinator recruits volunteers and pairs them with the Reading Centers. Each Site Coordinator is supervised by a Program Manager (typically a credentialed teacher), who is responsible for ensuring high-quality implementation of the program and for supporting students and tutors through coaching.

During the study year, all Reading Centers used a highly structured, modular curriculum that was delivered in twice-weekly, 45-minute sessions. The curriculum consisted of two modules: a beginning module and a comprehension module. Students were tested before they began tutoring so that they could be placed into the curriculum at the appropriate level. Each tutoring lesson followed a consistent sequence. It began with the tutor reading aloud to the student, asking the student open-ended questions, and discussing the text's content while highlighting key vocabulary words. Depending on where the student finished in the prior session, the tutor would either introduce a new skill or concept or review a previously taught skill (for example, "the short vowel *e*," "compare and contrast," "fact and opinion," "making predictions") and help the student complete a worksheet task related to that skill. Finally, the tutor supported the student while he or she read independently and encouraged the student to apply the skill or concept. The

curriculum used by Reading Partners during the 2012-2013 study year was research-based and aligned with California state content standards. During the past two years, Reading Partners has worked to systematically align the curriculum with the Common Core State Standards, which establish a single set of national educational standards for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The Reading Partners tutor pool consists mostly of volunteers, and no prior experience is necessary. The tutor pool is very diverse and includes individuals of different ages (from 14 to 70 years of age or older), genders, races, ethnicities, and occupations (for example, high school, college, and graduate students; working adults; unemployed individuals; and retirees). Training typically involves participation in a brief, in-person orientation called a "shadow session" and is supplemented by continuing support and coaching provided by the Site Coordinator and Program Manager.

Reading Partners students are tested at the beginning of the school year, at midyear, and at the end of the year through the use of an instrument that is administered on a one-on-one basis. The midyear and end-of-year assessments provide the Site Coordinator with a way to monitor student progress, to identify students who are not progressing, and to highlight areas in which a student might need particular attention. The Site Coordinator and Program Manager work together to update each student's individual reading plan after the midyear assessment. The update includes modifications of individual goals and specific strategies that tutors then implement with their students.

THE READING PARTNERS EVALUATION

The sample for this study consists of Reading Partners programs located in 19 schools in California, New York, and Washington, DC. Study sites were recruited based on number of years in operation and student need. Only schools in which Reading Partners had been in operation for at least one year before the start of the study were considered. In addition, since students were to be randomly assigned, only schools in which student need was expected to exceed Reading Partners' capacity were eligible to participate. This ensured that each Reading Partners program site was able to serve the same number of eligible students and did not deny services as a result of random assignment. The box below describes the importance of this design.

WHY IS RANDOM ASSIGNMENT IMPORTANT?

The Reading Partners Evaluation and many of MDRC's other studies use a random assignment research design to measure the effectiveness of programs created to help students succeed. This approach involves a lottery-like process to place students who are eligible and willing to participate into either a program group that receives a specific intervention, or a control group that receives the regular instructional services. Random assignment ensures that the characteristics of students in the program and control groups are not systematically different at the start of the study, and that any differences between the two groups at the end of the study can be attributed to the program being evaluated. By using random assignment and tracking both groups over time, MDRC is able to estimate the causal impact of the program on specific student outcomes. This rigorous method of evaluation produces results that policymakers and practitioners alike can readily understand and trust.

At the beginning of the school year, staff members in the 19 participating schools identified a group of students in second to fifth grades who needed assistance in reading.¹¹ Within each of the study schools, these students were randomly assigned to the Reading Partners program or to an "as-is" control condition. Students were randomized within grade groups (second to third grades and fourth to fifth grades) to ensure that equal numbers of upper and lower elementary students were represented in the sample, since schools often approach reading instruction differently in these two sets of grades. In the second and third grades, reading instruction generally focuses on learning to read, with more attention to basic reading skills such as decoding. In the fourth and fifth grades, the focus is on reading to learn, with greater emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension.¹²

A total of 1,265 students in the 19 participating schools were randomly assigned. The final sample included 1,166 students, which is an overall response rate of about 92 percent. Almost all of the students who were not included in the final sample were those who had withdrawn from the study schools before end-of-year testing. The response rates of the study and control groups did not differ statistically, nor were there any statistically significant differences between the baseline demographic characteristics or reading-proficiency scores of program and control groups, meaning that the two groups were equivalent to one another at the start of the study.

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 the evaluation. The assessments measured reading comprehension, fluency, and the ability to read sight-words efficiently, all key

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 ^a	81.7
RACE/ETHNICITY	
BLACK	20.7
HISPANIC	61.7
ASIAN	9.6
WHITE	5.7
OTHER	2.2
MALE	51.9
SCHOOL SETTING	
URBAN	73.7
SUBURBAN	26.3
TOWN	0.0
RURAL AREA	0.0
SAMPLE SIZE	19

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from 2011 and 2012 National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD).

NOTES: Sample sizes for individual outcomes may fall short of reported sample sizes because of missing data.

^aThe value given for students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch is calculated from the 2011 CCD due to missing data in the 2012 CCD. Data for all other variables are from the 2012 CCD.

components of early reading.¹³ These same three assessments were administered to students again in the spring, as close to the end of the school year as possible.

Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on all three measures of student reading — comprehension, fluency, and sight-word efficiency.

Quantitative and qualitative data were also collected from all of the study sites in order to assess program fidelity, document services received by the control group, and illuminate the context in which the program was implemented. Data sources included (1) interviews with Reading Partners, school staff members, and volunteer tutors; (2) observation of tutoring sessions; (3) student attendance information for the Reading Partners program; (4) a review of Reading Center materials; (5) teacher surveys; and (6) administrative data on program participation.

READING PARTNERS WAS IMPLEMENTED WITH FIDELITY

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 quantify the level of implementation fidelity across all 19 schools, the study team developed a fidelity index based on the following core components of the program: (1) regular, one-on-one tutoring; (2) dedicated school space and use of materials; (3) data-driven instruction; (4) rigorous and ongoing training; and (5) instructional supervision and support. The index has a maximum of 23 possible points. Fidelity scores for the 19 schools ranged from a low of 12 to a high

of 22. Only two schools received scores lower than 15, nine had scores between 15 and 19, and eight had scores of 19 or higher. Furthermore, students in the program group received an average of 1.5 tutoring sessions a week for 28 weeks, which indicates that students received, on average, at least 3 tutoring sessions every two weeks over the course of seven months.

A number of factors helped promote this relatively high degree of fidelity. First, principals and school staff members generally supported the program and believed it was beneficial for their students. The structured and scripted nature of the curriculum enabled volunteers — who had a variety of backgrounds — to easily understand their tutoring responsibilities and to deliver effective instruction, despite the fairly limited front-end training most had received.

In addition, the overall quality of the Reading Partners staff and AmeriCorps members was high. Interviews with Program Managers and Site Coordinators revealed them to be dedicated and effective in their work on the whole. Virtually all had completed a carefully designed training regimen. In interviews, they unanimously indicated that their training was clear, thorough, and of high quality. This helped ensure that staff members knew what was expected of them and that they had the appropriate skills and tools to carry out their roles effectively.

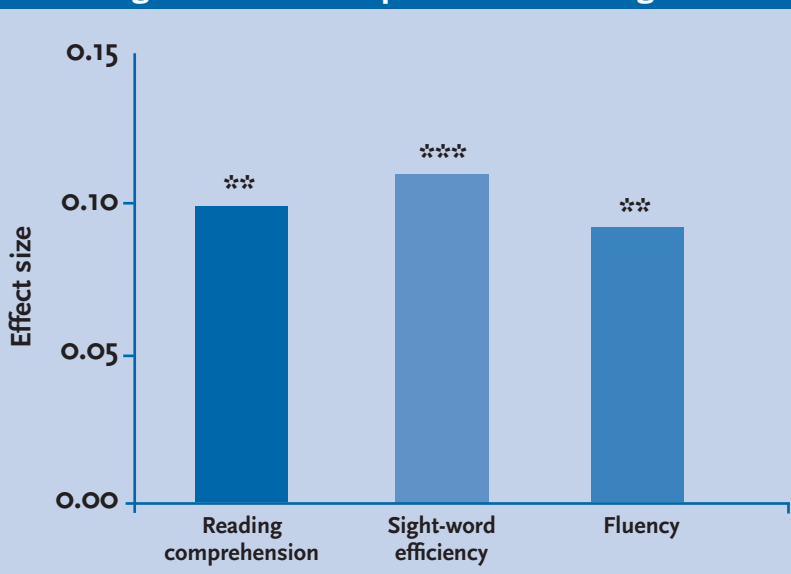
By far the biggest challenge faced by the Reading Partners programs was a lack of consistent tutor attendance and retention. On average, students were formally assigned to between two and three different tutors over the course of the school year. However, due

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 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

As shown in Figure 1, Reading Partners had a positive and statistically significant impact on all three measures of student reading proficiency, with effect-size impacts of 0.10 on reading comprehension scores, 0.09 on reading fluency, and 0.11 on sight-word reading. The impacts shown in Figure 1 indicate that at the end of the year, students in the Reading Partners group scored 2 to 3 percentile points higher than students in the control group on these assessments.¹⁴ For example, on the sight-word reading assessment, students in the program group scored at the 36th percentile compared with students in the control group, who scored at the 33rd percentile. This is equivalent to

FIGURE 1:
Reading Partners Improves Reading Skills



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using study-administered reading tests, student records from school districts, and Reading Partners program data.

NOTES: Reading comprehension is measured by SAT-10 scaled scores, sight-word efficiency is measured by TOWRE-2 scaled scores, and fluency is measured by AIMSweb sample-normed scores. All impacts are presented as effect sizes. A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

WHAT IS AN EFFECT SIZE?

An effect size is a way of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups by dividing the impact estimate by the standard deviation of the outcome measure. Calculating an effect size allows researchers to compare impacts across things that are measured in different units. For example, increasing a test score by 2 points on a test that ranges from 1 to 5 points is much more meaningful than increasing a score by 2 points on a test that ranges from 1 to 100 points. One way to interpret the substantive significance of the impact estimates is by using the following rule of thumb: effect sizes of about 0.20 or less are considered “small,” effect sizes of about 0.50 are considered “moderate,” and effect sizes of about 0.80 or more are considered “large.”*

*Cohen (1988).

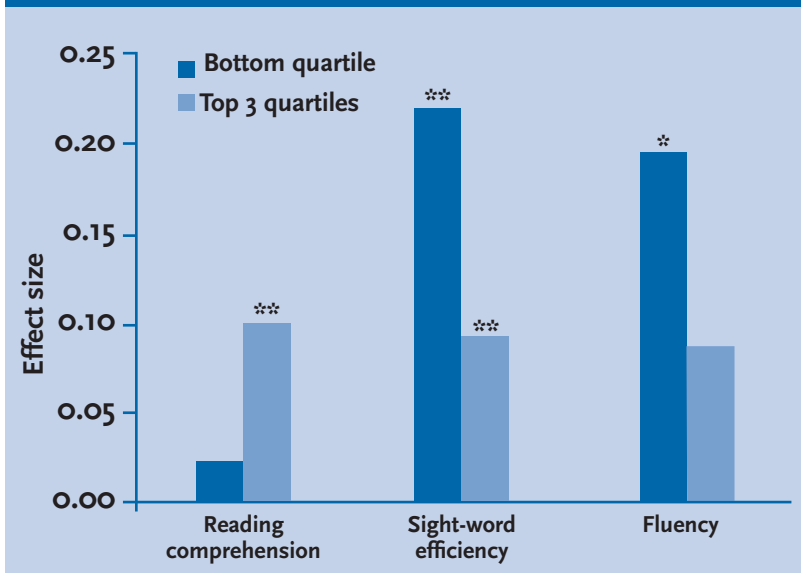
approximately one and a half to two months of additional growth relative to the control group. An examination of growth between the beginning and end of the year on two of these three assessments shows that both groups scored higher in reading comprehension and fluency at the end of the year than they did at the beginning of the year, but that growth on these two assessments was greater for the program group than for the control group. On the sight-word reading test, there was no growth among the control group but positive growth for the Reading Partners group.

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.

FIGURE 2:
Reading Partners Improves Reading Skills for the Lowest-Achieving Students



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using study-administered reading tests, student records from school districts, and Reading Partners program data.

NOTES: Quartiles reflect the student performance on the baseline reading comprehension test relative to the full study sample.

Reading comprehension is measured by SAT-10 scaled scores, sight-word efficiency is measured by TOWRE-2 scaled scores, and fluency is measured by AIMSweb sample-normed scores. All impacts are presented as effect sizes.

A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Differences between subgroups are not statistically significant.

THE STUDY CONTROL GROUP ALSO RECEIVED EXTRA READING INSTRUCTION

The design of this study compared students who received Reading Partners services with equally reading-challenged students who did not. However, since reading is an integral component of elementary education, 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.

Overall, 65 percent of the students in the control group received some type of supplemental reading instruction.

TABLE 2:
Reading Instruction Received

METRIC	PROGRAM GROUP	CONTROL GROUP	ESTIMATED DIFFERENCE
READING INSTRUCTION TIME (WEEKLY MINUTES)			
IN CLASS TOTAL	352.4	360.3	-7.9
IN CLASS, ONE-ON-ONE ONLY	36.0	35.2	0.8
IN SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICES	177.7	120.5	57.2 ***
STUDENTS RECEIVING ANY SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICE (%)	97.2	64.8	32.5 ***
HOMEWORK HELP	11.2	10.9	0.4
ONE-ON-ONE TUTORING ^a	95.2	20.8	74.4 ***
SMALL-GROUP INTERVENTION SUPPORT	22.6	31.5	-8.9 **
TECHNOLOGY-BASED PROGRAMS	8.3	10.0	-1.7
OTHER PROGRAMS	7.2	7.5	-0.2
SAMPLE SIZE	580	554	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from teacher survey, student records from school districts, and Reading Partners program data.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between research groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in differences.

^aOne-on-one tutoring includes the receipt of Reading Partners.

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 control group’s high rate of participation in other supplemental reading services. Reading Partners participation amounted to only about an hour of additional reading instruction each week, relative to the control group.

The findings from this study also provide further evidence that, when the right design and administrative structures are put into place, volunteer tutoring programs can be effective when implemented on a large scale. Reading Partners — a well-designed, well-run, volunteer tutoring program serving diverse groups of low-income students representing many different ethnic and racial backgrounds — warrants wider use in school reform efforts to help improve reading proficiency.

A forthcoming report will provide a more detailed description of these findings, along with a closer look at program implementation across sites. Additionally, the report will explore the cost-effectiveness of the Reading Partners program in comparison with the other supplemental

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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Reading Partners Evaluation and this policy brief would not have been possible without the collaboration of Reading Partners and funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund. We owe special thanks to the many Program Managers and Site Coordinators on the Reading Partners staff, whose daily efforts and enthusiasm allowed us to implement the evaluation with integrity, and to Dean Elson, Michael Lombardo, Matt Aguiar, and the rest of the Reading Partners leadership team for their ongoing support.

We additionally thank Rob Ivry, Fred Doolittle, Rekha Balu, John Hutchins, Gabriel Rhoads, Jehan Velji, and Elizabeth Reisner for their thoughtful comments on this brief and Andrea Shane, Claire Montialoux, Ellie Leahy, Nicole Clabaugh, and Catherine Armstrong for their contributions to the project.

This material is based upon work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, the Corporation or the Social Innovation Fund program. The mission of CNCS is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. CNCS, a federal agency, engages more than five million Americans in service through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, the Social Innovation Fund, the Volunteer Generation Fund, and other programs, and leads the president's national call to service initiative, United We Serve.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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his policy brief summarizes the positive results of a rigorous evaluation of Reading Partners, a widely used program that offers one-on-one tutoring provided by community volunteers to struggling readers in low-income elementary schools. A total of 1,265 students in 19 schools in three states were randomly assigned to receive Reading Partners' tutoring or to an "as-is" control condition. Findings revealed that the program had a positive effect on reading comprehension, on the ability to read sight-words efficiently, and on fluency. These encouraging results demonstrate that, when delivered on a large scale and implemented with fidelity, Reading Partners can serve as an effective tool in improving reading proficiency and warrants wider use in school reform efforts.