



The Minnesota Reading Corps

History

The Minnesota School Readiness Year-Two Study, released in 2003, reported that only 43 percent of Minnesota kindergarteners entered school with the literacy skills they needed to begin learning to read.

In January of 2003, while serving as a state representative, Education Commissioner Alice Seagren recognized the need to provide the state's youngest children with the skills needed for kindergarten. She brought together Head Start, the St. Croix River Education District and ServeMinnesota, the non-profit agency that administers the AmeriCorps community service program in the state, to propose a collaboration aimed at helping Minnesota's youngest learners with reading.

AmeriCorps*Early Literacy Corps was the result. Pilot programs began in 23 Head Start classrooms in 2003 and grew to 45 classrooms in 2004.

For the 2004-2005 school year, the program expanded to include children age 3 to grade 3 in four Minnesota communities. The expanded program was called the Minnesota Reading Corps.

The model and its early results

The Reading Corps model sets the program apart from other tutoring efforts. It relies on:

1. A clear definition of "literacy" and its key component skills, identified in research done by the University of Minnesota and the University of Oregon. The component skills include such things as rhyming, letter naming and vocabulary comprehension.
2. Innovative assessment tools, designed by education experts at the University of Minnesota. These tools enable teachers to frequently and accurately measure how well children are learning the component skills needed to read. The ability to evaluate component skills allows instructors to tailor instruction to each child's precise needs.
3. The people power of AmeriCorps members, who serve as tutors – and who recruit and train community volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring to children.

Once a school or community chooses to implement a Minnesota Reading Corps program, ServeMinnesota prepares its grantee programs to train one or more AmeriCorps members to implement the program. They are trained:

- In research-based, early literacy skill development techniques. This prepares them to work with children one-on-one in the critical skill areas.
- In how to use the assessment tool to identify what skill areas need additional instruction – and in using proven "best-practice" instructional techniques to teach the skills.
- To recruit and train other volunteers – including parents – so they also can work effectively with the children in the classroom and at home. The AmeriCorps members trained by ServeMinnesota have a "multiplier" effect on the number of involved volunteers.

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The Reading Corps model follows a cycle: Measure and evaluate proficiency, then teach to areas of deficiency or push the child ahead to the next level in the component skill areas. Measure again to determine progress – and tailor instruction based on the results.

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Quantitative and qualitative evidence show the Reading Corps model is working. In the first year, AmeriCorps*Early Literacy Corps children (all in Head Start):

- Gained picture naming skills at nearly twice the rate of students in other pre-school programs;
- Increased rhyming skills at approximately four times the typical rate; and
- Developed alliteration skills nearly twice as fast.

What is envisioned for the Minnesota Reading Corps? What will it take to achieve the vision?

ServeMinnesota envisions the Minnesota Reading Corps eventually providing a qualified, trained volunteer for every child age 3 to 3rd grade who struggles to learn to read. By the end of Program Year 2005, the goal is to have Reading Corps members serve more than 3,000 Minnesota children in 25 different communities.

To help communities build and sustain a Reading Corps program, ServeMinnesota has developed the Leadership Fellows program. It aims to attract energetic, emerging business and community leaders to help establish the Reading Corps locally. Specifically, Leadership Fellows are instrumental in helping to raise the necessary “seed” money and create awareness of the program. In return, they are provided opportunities to enhance their own leadership skills. Communities need to raise \$5,000 in seed money in order for ServeMinnesota to attract federal matching dollars of \$20,000 – funds which go to support training and AmeriCorps member living expenses.

Once identified, the local Leadership Fellow gathers a group of community “champions” to assist in raising the local funds and creating visibility for the program. The Fellow and his or her team are paired with an established, respected community leader who serves as a mentor, offering insights on leadership, management, networking and other professional and personal development topics.

Why a Minnesota Reading Corps?

In Minnesota, where education has always been a leading community priority, one in four third-grade students cannot read at grade level. In Minneapolis, nearly 50 percent of third graders are not reading at grade level.

Poor early reading skills put children at a serious disadvantage throughout school and life.

- Low achievement in early literacy correlates with high rates of school drop-out, poverty and underemployment (Snow, Burns, & Girffin, 1998; Wagner 2000).

Failing to teach our children to read is more than a personal issue. It's a community issue:

- 43 percent of Americans with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty and 70 percent have no job or only a part-time job. Only 5 percent of Americans with strong literacy skills live in poverty.