

OUTCOME EVALUATION OF THE Minnesota Reading Corps PreK Program

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Two of the most important educational benchmarks are readiness for kindergarten and reading at grade-level by third grade. Focusing on emergent literacy skills during the PreK years boosts reading abilities and helps young learners reach these critical goals.

Research validates what works in teaching children to read: **Well-trained tutors and teachers delivering early, targeted interventions** to students in need.

Minnesota Reading Corps does just that, translating literacy research into effective practice to help struggling students become successful readers. AmeriCorps members serving in the program provide **evidence-based interventions and data-based assessments** to children from age three to grade three.

This report summarizes a recently completed outcome evaluation of the Minnesota Reading Corps PreK program. The positive and significant findings demonstrate that the model **effectively improves preschool students' emergent literacy skills** and is highly replicable in multiple settings and across different student characteristics. Furthermore, the study highlights AmeriCorps members' crucial contributions as tutors and education partners within the Minnesota Reading Corps model.



KEY FINDINGS

This independent evaluation showed that AmeriCorps members using the Minnesota Reading Corps model can significantly boost the emergent literacy skills of PreK students (ages three, four, and five).

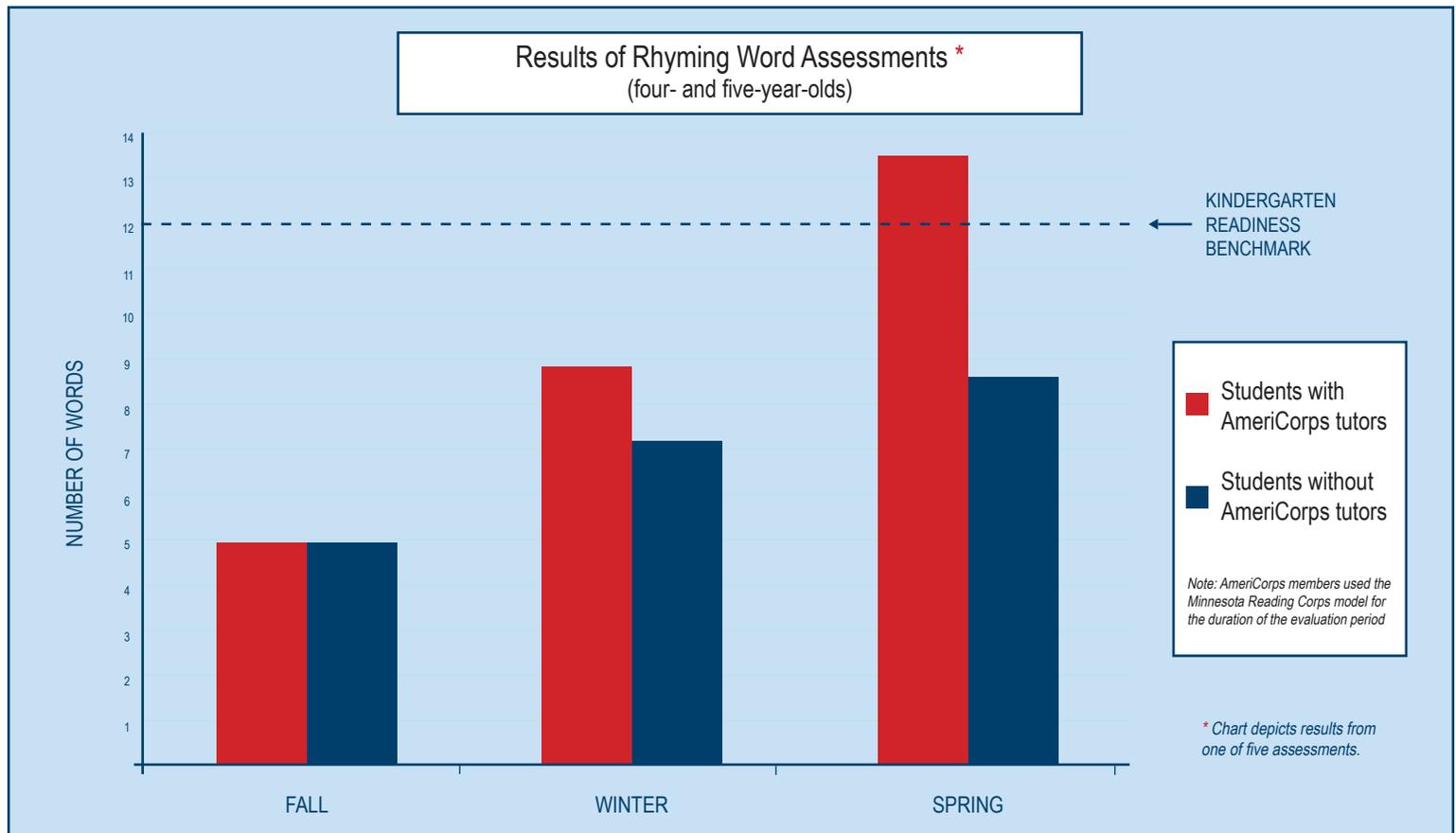
 AmeriCorps tutors with Minnesota Reading Corps helped four- and five-year-old students **meet or exceed spring targets for kindergarten readiness** in all five assessed areas. (Students in comparison classrooms did so for only one.)

 By school year's end, four- and five-year-old students in Minnesota Reading Corps classrooms **outperformed students in comparison classrooms** in recognizing letter sounds, rhyming words, letter names, picture names, and alliterations.

*As one example, students in Minnesota Reading Corps classrooms had fall-to-spring growth in rhyming fluency that was, on average, **93 percent greater** than the growth seen in comparison classrooms (see chart below).*

 The program was **effective across a range of settings** – both in public schools and Head Start Centers – and for all students regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, or dual language learner status.

 By the end of the school year, three-year-old students in Minnesota Reading Corps classrooms **significantly outperformed students in comparison classrooms** (those without AmeriCorps tutors) in rhyming words and picture names.



METHODOLOGY

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) sponsored a quasi-experimental design (QED) outcome evaluation to determine the effects of the Minnesota Reading Corps program on PreK students' emergent literacy skills. The evaluation involved 1,534 three-, four-, and five-year-old PreK students who attended either a Minnesota Reading Corps PreK program site or a comparison site during the 2013-2014 school year. Students were enrolled at 25 Minnesota Reading Corps PreK sites and 25 comparison PreK sites matched to each program site on specific site-level characteristics. The evaluation tracked the same outcomes at both program and control sites throughout the school year (fall, winter, and spring).

The Minnesota Reading Corps program sites had all been operating the program for a year or more, without interruption. They were located in a mix of urban, suburban, and rural locations throughout Minnesota. They constituted a mix of public school settings, Head Start Centers, and community-based preschools.

The comparison sites had never participated in the Minnesota Reading Corps PreK program. Their staffs had not been trained in the particular approach to adult-child interactions that is integral to the Reading Corps model. Matches to individual program sites were based on key variables which research has shown to be related to student outcomes. These matching variables included urbanicity, institution type, age composition of classrooms, socio-economic composition of families served, percentage of students with dual language learner status, number of students enrolled in PreK at the site, instructional hours per week, and student to teacher/adult ratio.



RESEARCH COMPONENTS

Funded by CNCS, researchers from NORC at the University of Chicago conducted the following studies:

- Feasibility study
- Process assessments
- Survey of AmeriCorps members
- QED outcome evaluation of the PreK program (as summarized in this brief)
- RCT impact evaluation of K-3 program

THE “BIG FIVE”

Research has highlighted a range of teaching and learning strategies that are effective as young children develop. At the PreK level, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) has identified the following “Big Five” Early Literacy Predictors:

- 1) conversation skills
- 2) vocabulary and background knowledge
- 3) book and print rules
- 4) phonological awareness (rhyming and alliteration)
- 5) alphabetic knowledge (letter name recognition and letter sound correspondence)

The Minnesota Reading Corps PreK program integrates the “Big Five” into all aspects of daily classroom routines. AmeriCorps members trained in the model provide essential people-power and create literacy-rich classrooms using evidence-based practices.

THE READING CORPS MODEL

Minnesota Reading Corps, a strategic initiative of ServeMinnesota, is the nation's largest state AmeriCorps program. The program demonstrates how service and science can accelerate improvement in both students and systems. AmeriCorps members serving in Minnesota Reading Corps provide proven literacy interventions to children from age three to grade three.

The Reading Corps PreK program is designed to attend to the particular developmental needs and learning environments of three-, four-, and five-year-olds in preschool settings. The model combines the human capital of AmeriCorps members with evidence-based program elements, including:

- a Response to Intervention (RtI) approach to differentiated instruction,
- ongoing formative assessments of students' skills and learning needs (explicitly linked to the Big Five),
- a daily schedule rich in literacy,
- a particular approach (known as the SEEDS approach) to high quality adult-child interactions, and
- intensive individual or small-group literacy tutoring for students who need specialized assistance.

AmeriCorps members serving in Minnesota Reading Corps receive rigorous training and ongoing support throughout their term of service to prepare them for their roles in the classroom.

COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

Each year since 2006, ServeMinnesota has conducted evaluations that give evidence of **thousands of at-risk students reaching critical literacy milestones**. ServeMinnesota invested in five years of quasi-experimental research with preschool participants which demonstrated that Reading Corps participants outperformed their peers on validated assessments that predict school readiness. Further research conducted by the Center for Learning Solutions (2012) shows that **Reading Corps participants are two to three times less likely to be assigned to special education** than non-participants, creating a permanent benefit to children and a **significant ongoing savings** to schools that can be redirected back into the classroom for the benefit of all children.

This research report complements an earlier randomized controlled trial impact evaluation of the Minnesota Reading Corps program for kindergarten through third grade (March 2014). The combined results tell a powerful story of what a carefully designed and developed program that relies on evidence-based literacy interventions delivered by AmeriCorps members can accomplish. Results from this study underscore the **value of national service in pursuit of the nation's goals**.

PROGRAM GROWTH

Since 2003, **Minnesota Reading Corps has helped more than 100,000 struggling readers** progress toward proficiency by the end of third grade. The program has grown from serving just 250 students to reaching more than 36,000 annually – all while improving its effectiveness.

With support from CNCS and matching funds from the private sector and other sources, the Reading Corps program has expanded to seven states and the District of Columbia. Altogether, an estimated **1,500 AmeriCorps members** are serving students nationwide using the Reading Corps model.

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AMERICORPS AND EDUCATION

CNCS invests **more than half of all AmeriCorps grant dollars in education**, bringing tens of thousands of caring adults to schools across the country. AmeriCorps members provide teaching, tutoring, mentoring, afterschool support, and other services to students in **more than 10,000 public schools**, including one in three persistently low-achieving schools. A recent report from America's Promise Alliance, *The Role of National Service in Closing the Graduation Gap*, gives further description of key investments and successes of AmeriCorps in education.

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Full report and methodology: nationalservice.gov/research

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