

Fall 2014 Program Site Visit Reports

Reading Partners Colorado

Program Overview

Reading Partners recruits, trains and deploys volunteers to provide weekly 1:1 literacy tutoring to struggling readers in elementary schools, employing a highly structured program overseen by professional staff. Launched in California in 1999, Reading Partners is now also active in New York, Washington, Maryland, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Washington D.C., with plans for continued expansion. In the 2013-2014 school year, Reading Partners served over 7,000 students from 130 schools and engaged more than 5,000 community volunteers.

Site Visit

On October 6, 2014, one member of the Focusing Philanthropy team visited Valdez Elementary, a Reading Partners Colorado school site in Denver, Colorado. The visit included observation of tutoring and regular daily activities and meeting with several Reading Partners regional staff members including Colorado Executive Director Jess Simmons.

Reading Partners Colorado Background

Reading Partners launched in the Colorado region in 2012 with reading centers in seven schools, including five in Denver and two in nearby Aurora. This launch was supported by a five-year federal grant through the Mile High United Way focused on increasing state-wide reading proficiency for elementary students. Reading Partners Colorado is now in year three of this five-year partnership.



A Reading Partners volunteer works one-on-one with a student at Valdez Elementary in Denver, Colorado.

Due to restrictions on the number of federal funding sources permitted per nonprofit, Reading Partners Colorado does not employ AmeriCorps members. Often described as the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps is a federally administered program to engage citizens in direct public service. In most Reading Partners regions, AmeriCorps members staff the majority of program positions, including at School-Site Coordinators. Reading Partners Colorado offsets the additional cost of staffing these roles with full-time permanent team members through an exceptionally lean regional leadership team and cost-savings in areas such as a very modest office space.

Local Growth & Outcomes

Since 2012, the region has grown from 7 schools to 13 in the Denver metro area, including in the cities of Denver, Aurora, and Sheridan. Reading Partners Colorado is on track to serve 660 students in the 2014-2015 school year. National and regional program leadership have aspirations to serve additional schools within existing parts of the cities and new regions of the state. This may include pilot modifications of the Reading Partners program model to efficiently reach more rural areas.

Before enrollment, the typical Reading Partners Colorado student acquired only 0.6 months of reading skills for every month of instruction. After joining Reading Partners, students gain an average of 1.6 months of reading skills for every month in the program.

Volunteer Recruitment & Retention

A key activity in each Reading Partners region is the successful recruitment, training, and retention of hundreds of community volunteers who serve as tutors one or two days per week. Reading Partners Colorado has made great investments in both recruiting and retaining local volunteers. In the 2013-2014 school year, 803 weekly tutors provided nearly 15,000 hours of individual tutoring. An impressive 65% of these volunteers returned to volunteer with the program this fall.

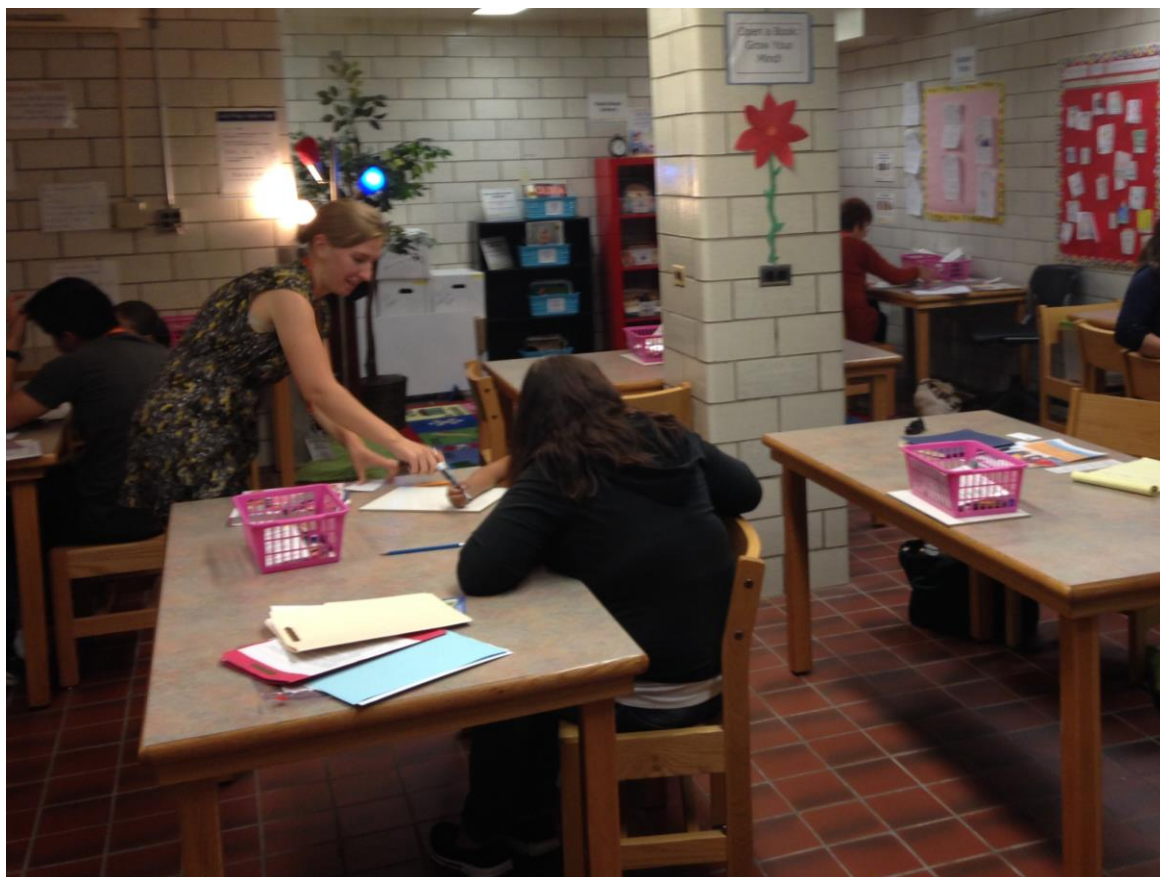
In addition to sourcing volunteers from community groups and local high schools and colleges, as is common in many regions, Reading Partners Colorado has focused on recurring cohorts of volunteers from local small businesses and corporations. Reading Partners Colorado has developed a system to track and aggregate the time contributions of these volunteers and is able to report back to company leadership the total number of volunteer hours provided by their employees and the students impacts tied to these hours.

Program Implementation

With 12 regions and more than 100 partner schools throughout the country, consistent implementation standards and program fidelity is a key focus for Reading Partners national and regional leadership. Program implementation as observed by Focusing Philanthropy staff across Reading Partners region and schools has been extremely consistent and highly impressive. The reading center at Valdez Elementary was no exception.

During the visit, a handful of volunteer tutors and students cycled through the reading center. With each pair, it was clear that the volunteer had a consistent process of checking-in, reviewing the student's file, collecting curriculum packets, retrieving the student from class, leading the 45 minute one-on-one session, returning the student to class, and making follow-up notations in the student's file.

Throughout the sessions, Reading Partners staff observed the one-on-one tutoring, and provided support and suggestions as needed. Below, a Reading Partners staff member works with a volunteer and student pair.

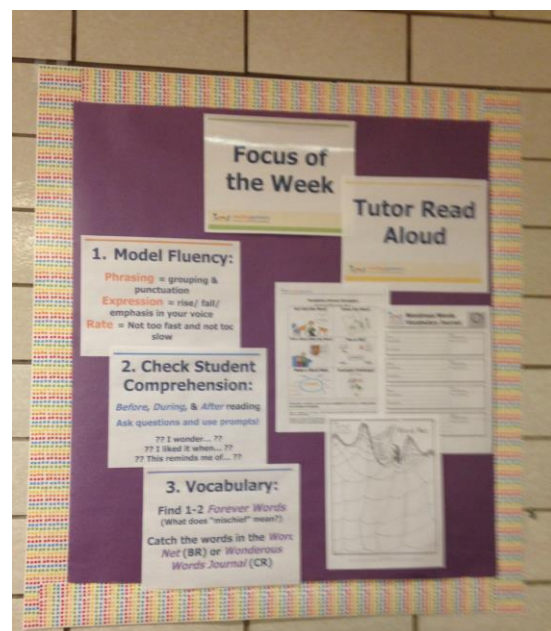


The Valdez Elementary student body, faculty, and staff have been relocated to a temporary campus for one school year while renovations are made to their permanent facility. Typically Reading Partners is located in a spare classroom which the program stages as a reading center. The Reading Partners space at this temporary campus is in the basement. It lacks windows, any natural light, and was formerly used as storage room. Reading Partners has made the space feel warm and welcoming by utilizing plants, softer lighting from floor and table lamps, and lots of bright posters and decorations on the walls.



Like many Reading Partners sites, tutoring sessions take place during the school day and for some time after school. The structure is highly organized, with clear tutor arrival, session, and tutor departure times.

	Tutor arrival	Session	Tutor Departure
Before school	7:50	1 8:00-8:45	8:50
	9:10	2 9:20-10:05	10:10
	9:50	3 10:00-10:45	10:50
	11:45	4 11:55-12:40	12:45
	12:40	5 12:50-1:35	1:40
	1:40	6 1:50-2:35	2:40
	2:45	7 2:55-3:40	3:45
After school	3:50	8 4:00-4:45	4:50



The “Take Reading Home” library and book selection system are more elements that are consistent throughout Reading Partners regions and schools. Students earn the opportunity to take a book home (and keep it) as a reward for program participations and progress. Reading Partners staff described the common surprise and excitement that comes when students realize these Take Reading Home books do not need to be returned. For many program participants, these books are often the few, if any, books that they own personally or have access to at home.

