

Fall 2014 Program Site Visit Reports

Reading Partners

Pasadena, CA

Program Overview

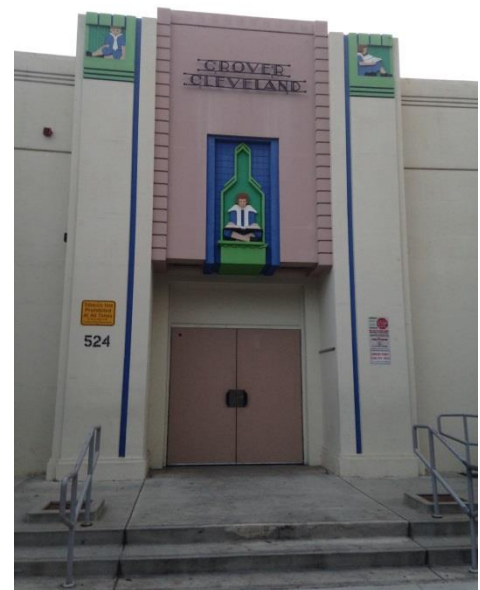
Reading Partners recruits, trains and deploys volunteers to provide weekly 1:1 literacy tutoring to struggling readers in elementary schools, employing a highly structured program overseen by professional staff. Launched in California in 1999, Reading Partners is now also active in New York, Washington, 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 December 15, 2014, one member of the Focusing Philanthropy team visited Cleveland Elementary, a Reading Partners Los Angeles school site in Pasadena, to attend a reading recital. The afternoon also included a visit to the reading center and meeting with several members of the Reading Partners national and local leadership team, including the new Reading Partners Executive Director for the Los Angeles region, Laura Zachar.

Reading Partners in Pasadena Background

Based on results from the 2013 California Standards Test, more than 44% of low-income 4th graders in the Greater Los Angeles area read below grade level, while 15% lack even basic reading skills. In Pasadena, 39% of all 4th graders are reading below grade level. Students not reading at grade-appropriate proficiency levels by the end of the 4th grade, they are four times as likely to drop out of school before high school graduation.



The entrance to Cleveland Elementary in Pasadena, CA.

Reading Partners began programming in Pasadena Unified in 2008 at Washington Accelerated Elementary when the program first expanded to Los Angeles. Since then, Reading Partners in Pasadena has grown to serve 163 students at 3 schools during the 2013-2014 school year, with the support of 130 community volunteers who provided 4,194 hours of one-on-one tutoring. In the 2014-2015 school year, the program expanded to a fourth school, Madison Elementary, with a goal of serving 200 PUSD Unified students in total this school year. Together with generous local supporters, Focusing Philanthropy and Reading Partners have launched an ambitious initiative to triple the program's reach in the Pasadena Unified School District, increasing the number of students served annually from 163 in 2013-2014 to 505, and from 3 to 10 schools, all over the next five years.

Before enrollment, the typical Reading Partners Pasadena student acquired only 0.6 months of reading skills for every month of instruction. After joining Reading Partners, students gain an average of 1.4 months of reading skills for every month in the program.

The Reading Recital

Reading Partners typically holds a reading recital at the conclusion of each semester at each partner school. Formats can vary from formal after-school programs that double as program celebration or graduation events to

more informal readings during the school day. Regardless of the format, the goal is consistent – to provide an opportunity for students to practice public speaking and to show-off their new reading skills in a celebratory environment.

At Cleveland Elementary, the fall 2014 reading celebration was held afterschool, beginning at 4:30pm, and in partnership with the district-wide afterschool program LEARNs. It was a very happy and festive event with many holiday decorations - Santa hats, cookies and refreshments.

Approximately 60 students and 60 guests were in attendance. This included several Reading Partners volunteer tutors, staff, parents and families. In conversations prior to the start of the event, one Reading Partners volunteer, a retired school teacher and principal, shared that she has tutored with the program at Cleveland for three years. She spoke highly of Reading Partners and the difference she sees in the confidence and reading skills of the students she works with each year.

The recital alternated between song performances by LEARNs students and poems read by pairs and groups of Reading Partners 2nd – 4th graders. The students who read were very well rehearsed, having practiced for several days in both Reading Partners and in LEARNs, an alignment made possible through the collaboration of these two programs at Cleveland. The poems selected were often funny and with a twist, drawing laughs from the audience. Titles included “Chubby Snowman,” “New Year,” and “Cookies for Santa” in which a child claims to have accidentally eaten all of Santa’s cookies.

Reading or speaking on stage, through a microphone, in front of over 100 people, including peers and family, can be a nerve-racking experience for many literate adults, let alone elementary students with a pattern of falling far behind in their reading skills. The enthusiasm and confidence displayed by the Reading Partners students was evident and impressive. Applause, high-fives and other encouragements followed each poem. When one soft-spoken student became stuck on a line, a peer on stage helped to sound out the words and her get back on track. Those two received the biggest applause. It was clear from the interactions between the Reading Partners Site Coordinator (an AmeriCorps member) and the students that they had developed a great rapport during the fall semester. While most of the students in the audience squirmed during the song performances, they were unusually still and quiet during the poems, clearly very interested in their classmates. This must be very meaningful to the Reading Partners students who braved reading to a large crowd, and helped to impress upon all in attendance that reading is fun and is to be celebrated.



Two Reading Partners 2nd graders read a short poem about building a snowman.



A group of LEARNs students, some also in Reading Partners, perform a holiday song. Proud parents, teachers, and volunteers cheer on the students and record the performances.