



#### Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Teresa Burton

#### Reading Partners Staff

- Jennifer Harwood, Executive Director NYC
- Kim Aira, AmeriCorps Site Coordinator
- Maddie Kahl, Program Manager for six schools

#### Executive Summary

Teresa Burton of Focusing Philanthropy visited the Reading Partners (RP) program at PS 123 Mahalia Jackson School in Harlem on October 17, 2019. The visit included observation of tutoring sessions and regular daily activities in the Reading Center and meeting with Reading Partners Executive Director Jennifer Harwood, Program Manager Maddie Kahl, AmeriCorps site coordinator Kim Aira, and volunteer tutors and students. The purpose of this visit was to see a NYC school site, meet staff, and learn more about the RP program in New York City.

#### Background

Since 1999, Reading Partners has been dedicated to closing the literacy gap by tutoring elementary students from low-income communities to boost their reading confidence and competence. 2019 is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the RP, celebrating more than 1.5 million tutoring session for over 50,00 students with more than 55,000 volunteer tutors in 14 regions of the U.S. In 2010, Reading Partners added AmeriCorps service members enabling RP to expand and serve more students. To date, 1,300 AmeriCorps and VISTA members have chosen RP for their year of service.

At each school site, RP transforms a dedicated classroom into a comprehensive Reading Center and recruits and trains 40-100 volunteers. In collaboration with principals and teachers, RP identifies 40-75 K-4th grade students per school to receive two 45-minute intensive tutoring sessions each week during the school year. Students are assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to identify their individual reading levels and to monitor progress toward achievement goals as determined by each students' particular needs.

Tutors follow an individualized reading plan using RP's curriculum tailored to each student's needs. RP's target population is K-4<sup>th</sup> grade students reading up to two and a half years behind grade level. All enrolled students attend Title I elementary schools where 40% or more students qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch programs, an indicator of poverty.

#### Training for Tutors

Training for tutors consists of:

1. Overview of community and students
2. Explanation of Reading Partners curriculum and folder system
3. Mock session with student
4. Online volunteer hub orientation



## 5. Info on optional extra trainings

### Training for AmeriCorps Members

Site Coordinators are AmeriCorps members and get 11 weeks of training.

- Summer: 5 weeks of full-time training
- Fall: members attend training every Friday from September to November

### AmeriCorps Partnership

- Reading Partners employs 33 AmeriCorps members this year in the NYC area
- AmeriCorps members commit to 1 year. Half choose to stay for an additional year.

### Book Donations & Supplies

- Students receive a book of their choice at the end of every lesson
- Books are donated by volunteers and local high school book drives
- Reading Partners holds supply drives with corporate sponsors and tutors also donate supplies
- During the holiday season, volunteers are allowed to give their students one book

### Contact with Parents

- Reading Partners opens their centers to parents during school events such as Open Houses, Parent-Teacher Conferences, in order to meet parents and highlight their work.
- Parents who pick their children up after school have more contact than those whose children are tutored during the school day.

### School Visit

- PS 123 Mahalia Jackson Elementary School, Harlem
  - RP has been onsite for 3 years
  - Students served: 68 students; Goal: 70 students
  - School enrollment: 540 students, Half live in temporary housing
  - Students are referred by teachers and Principal
  - Current Volunteers: 92; Goal: 95
  - Students receive 2 tutoring sessions per week for 45 minutes each
  - Volunteers spend at least 1 hour per week, the extra 15 minutes are for preparation and record-keeping
  - Program runs 9am – 5pm; Sessions run all day
  - Strengths at PS 123: RP has a very positive working relationship with the Principal, administration, and parents.

### New York Program

- The Reading Partners NYC program was founded in 2011 and manages 22 schools with 1,250 students, 1,550 tutors, and 33 AmeriCorps members.
- Last year, 87% of students met or exceeded their literacy goals and 91% of K-2<sup>nd</sup> graders developed mastery of key foundational skills.
- The NYC Annual Budget is \$2.8 million which is up from \$2.3 million last year. The additional funds are paying for the two newest schools and two new staff people to work on community engagement/recruitment.



- The NYC Recruitment Strategy is to recruit adults and students from all over NYC. Adults often come from the schools' neighborhoods and faith-based orgs. Students come from various local colleges, social work schools, and teaching programs. (Brooklyn College, Columbia, CUNY, City College, Albert Einstein, Fordham, etc...) The subways make all the schools readily accessible to volunteers wherever they live.
  - 40% of tutors return every year
  - 30% are students and don't return for a second year
  - 35% of tutors are older adults, many are former teachers and Principals
- Governing Boards
  - The Advisory Board consists of 15 people, 3 are regular tutors, 12 represent corporate partners, the give-get requirement is \$15k/year and will be \$20k starting next year. Jennifer Harwood manages this board.
  - The Associate Board is made up of 20 young professionals under the age of 35, the give-get requirement is \$2,500/year. This Board runs a LinkedIn fundraising event that brings in \$25k/year. The Program Manager liaisons with this Board.
  - The Tutor Advisory Council has 10 members who are tutors and focus on the tutoring experience. They conduct online trainings on topics such as cultural competency and improving lessons. The Board also hosts a tutor appreciation event every year. The Community Engagement Director manages this Board.
  - The Online Board consists of 20 millennials who pay \$10 to \$20 per month and advise on one question posed to them every month such as how best to screen AmeriCorps applicants or which computers to purchase. The Program Manager liaisons with this Board.
- The two new schools this year are located in the Bronx. The sites were chosen as part of an effort to improve learning rates there. Currently, the Bronx has the lowest performing schools in NYC. For example, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency is the lowest in NYC and teacher turnover is very high.
  - The Bronx presents challenges because it is further and a much longer subway ride.
  - Recruitment will have to be more local. Luckily there are 13 colleges in the Bronx and staff is actively reaching out to them.
  - The United Way office in the Bronx gave RP a grant, has roots in the community, and is helping RP bring in donors and corporate volunteers.
  - RP also has an elected official strategy in the Bronx – for funding, visibility, and volunteer recruitment.
- Bronx Summer Program – Reading Partners started a summer program last summer at PS 179 by collaborating with another program run by the United Way called Once Upon a Summer. It was a 6-week, full-day program to address “summer slide” among students who live in this transient community. Ten local Bronx CUNY students tutored 40 rising 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade children. The school considered the program very successful and will host again next summer. The kids enjoyed the program as well – in addition to RP sessions, it included lots of outdoor time and field trips.

### Key Observations

Reading Partners classrooms are always bright and inspiring places to visit. The NYC staff prefers to host visitors by asking them to tutor. After a brief training, I tutored a student for the first time. Even though I have observed several sessions, the experience of working with a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade girl was helpful in understanding the importance of RP's work. While I was helping my student learn, I was mostly encouraging her to keep trying, not to give up on challenging words and sounds. It's clear how students improve significantly over the course of the year. The encouragement combined with time on task and an effective, personalized curriculum is what every student needs, but doesn't always receive.

