

Improving Elementary School Literacy in Minnesota by Prioritizing Evidence of Effectiveness in AmeriCorps



Introduction

Reading is the foundation of all learning. [Third grade](#) is when children transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Children who can’t read by the third grade struggle with the increasingly complex information introduced in later grades. Those who read proficiently by third grade are four times [more likely](#) to graduate from high school than those who don’t.

Fortunately for elementary school students across the country, the results-driven decision by leaders at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of its AmeriCorps funds beginning in 2014 has helped shift taxpayer dollars toward what works in education.

This increased investment of public funds in evidence-based, results-driven solutions has, in turn, made it possible to provide evidence-based reading interventions to 6,000 additional elementary school students in Minnesota than would have been possible before CNCS’ groundbreaking policy changes.

Minnesota Reading Corps

In 2015, NORC at the University of Chicago released the [results](#) of a randomized control trial of the Minnesota Reading Corps’ (MRC) reading intervention model. This evaluation, which was performed under contract with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), found that “Kindergarten students who participated in the MRC program produced more than twice as many correct letter sounds by the end of the first semester than did students in the control [group].”

A [2018 follow-up study by NORC](#) found similar results, including significant improvements among minority students and English Language Learners. This study noted that “Overall, the results of the evaluation showed that the Minnesota Reading Corps program positively impacted Kindergarten through third grade students’ literacy outcomes... Therefore, based on findings from two highly rigorous studies of the program, it is possible to conclude that the Minnesota Reading Corps K-3 program is effective at improving K-3 students’ early reading skills.”

[Minnesota Reading Corps](#) is an educational nonprofit program administered by ServeMinnesota, the Minnesota State Service Commission. MRC was launched in 2003 by recruiting 25 AmeriCorps members to help ensure that 250 targeted preschoolers were ready to read at level by the third grade.

MRC provides its AmeriCorps-funded tutors with training and coaching all year long so that they can work effectively with struggling learners. More specifically, MRC assigns each tutor an onsite coach — usually a literacy specialist or teacher at the school — to make sure everything stays on track. MRC also provides each tutor with a literacy expert who visits each Reading Corps site several times throughout the year to help tutors and internal coaches understand and use student data to determine the right interventions.

MRC’s AmeriCorps tutors support students who are struggling with reading (many of whom receive free or reduced price school lunches and/or are English language learners) from age 3 through third grade in public elementary schools and early learning centers across Minnesota for 20 minute sessions each day for K-3 students, and multiple literacy-rich, all-day activities for pre-school students.

Tutoring strategies include evidence-informed interventions in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Learning activities include language-rich discussions, guided reading practice, and comprehension strategies. Tutors also use research-based assessments to gather data on their students' progress and work with coaches to make sure they're providing the right instruction to each child.

Since launching MRC in 2003, ServeMinnesota has also focused on using evidence and data to continuously improve its reading intervention model. These efforts have [included](#) “process evaluations, descriptive analysis of pre- and post-outcomes, and then small-scale research projects.” ServeMinnesota has also strengthened its evidence-building capacity by creating an internal “R&D” team to continuously evaluate its work.

Corporation for National and Community Service

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the federal government agency for national service and volunteering, recognized and supported MRC's efforts to build and use evidence of effectiveness by increasing its AmeriCorps grants from \$12.7 million in FY14 to \$19.9 million in FY18.

In 2013, Results for America (RFA) began urging federal departments and agencies to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in their grant programs through its annual [Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence](#) (Federal Standard).

RFA first featured CNCS in its Federal Standard [in May 2014](#). This 2014 report highlighted CNCS's results-driven decision to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of its AmeriCorps funds beginning in FY15 by setting aside up to 8 points out of 100 to be awarded to grant applicants based on their evidence of effectiveness. CNCS increased this set-aside to 12 points in FY17 and FY18 and further to 16 points in FY19.

As a result of this ground-breaking decision by CNCS -- and the Minnesota Reading Corps' (MRC) constant focus on evidence and data -- AmeriCorps grants to MRC increased by 57% (from \$12.7 million in FY14, the year before CNCS implemented its evidence set-aside policy, to \$19.9 million in FY18).

These larger AmeriCorps grants, in turn, allowed MRC to increase the number of AmeriCorps tutors by 31% (from 1,300 to 1,700 annually) between FY15 and FY18 and increase the number of students served by 18% (from approximately 31,000 in FY14 to approximately 37,000 in FY18) in 21% more schools (from approximately 800 in 2015 to approximately 1,000 in 2018). MRC's reading intervention model has since been replicated in Washington D.C. and 12 additional states.

Conclusion

Harnessing the power of evidence and data to help all of our nation's third graders read at grade level is a moral, social, and economic imperative.

The Corporation for National and Community Service's decision to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of its AmeriCorps funds has helped support evidence-based reading interventions for 6,000 additional elementary school students in Minnesota than would have been possible before it implemented its evidence set-aside policy.

Through its leadership, CNCS has also shown other local, state, and federal government agencies that investing taxpayer dollars in what works is not only possible — it should be the “new normal.”

Appendix: Prioritizing Evidence of Effectiveness in AmeriCorps

In FY15, CNCS reformed its AmeriCorps State and National grants (\$216 million in FY15) application by setting aside up to 8 points (out of 100) to be awarded to applicants based on their evidence of effectiveness. As part of this scoring system, the AmeriCorps State and National program classifies applicants as having “strong”, “moderate”, “preliminary”, or “pre-preliminary” (no) evidence (The definitions of these evidence levels are included below)

CNCS increased this evidence set-aside within its AmeriCorps State and National program from 8 points out of 100 in FY15 to 12 points out of 100 in its FY17 grant competition (\$230 million in FY17) and FY18 grant competition (\$253 million in FY18). These strategies have helped increase the percentage of AmeriCorps State and National grant dollars allocated to grant applicants with a strong evidence-base from 20% in FY16 to 26% in FY18.

In FY19, CNCS: (1) increased the evidence set-aside within its AmeriCorps State and National program to 16 points out of 100 (see page 14 of the [2019 AmeriCorps grant application](#)); (2) included the implementation of evidence-based education interventions as one of its “Funding Priorities” in which it “seeks to prioritize the investment of national service resources;” and (3) prioritized funding for applicants that proposed using one of 13 pre-approved education interventions, including the Minnesota Reading Corps, that meet the agency’s definition of “strong” evidence of effectiveness based on evaluations of [existing evidence-based AmeriCorps programs](#). (For information on this funding priority, see page 2 of [2019 grant application](#) and for more details on the designated evidence-based interventions, see page 2 of the [supplementary guidance](#).)

CNCS defined the 4 evidence levels for AmeriCorps applicants in its [2019 grant application guidance](#) (see page 4) as follows:

- **Strong evidence** means the applicant has submitted up to two evaluation reports demonstrating that the same intervention described in the application has been tested nationally, regionally, or at the state-level (e.g., multi-site) using a well-designed and well-implemented experimental design evaluation (i.e., Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)) or a Quasi-Experimental Design evaluation (QED) with statistically matched comparison (i.e., counterfactual) and treatment groups. Alternatively, the proposed intervention’s evidence may be based on multiple (up to two) well-designed and well-implemented QEDs or RCTs of the same intervention described in the application in different locations or with different populations within a local geographic area. The overall pattern of evaluation findings must be consistently positive on one or more key desired outcomes of interest as depicted in the applicant’s logic model. Findings from the RCT or QED evaluations may be generalized beyond the study context. The evaluations were conducted by an independent entity external to the organization implementing the intervention.
- **Moderate evidence** means the applicant has submitted up to two well-designed and well-implemented evaluation reports that evaluated the same intervention described in the application and identified evidence of effectiveness on one or more key desired outcomes of interest as depicted in the applicant’s logic model. Evidence of effectiveness (or positive findings) is determined using experimental design evaluations (i.e., Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT)) or Quasi-Experimental Design evaluations (QED) with statistically matched comparison (i.e., counterfactual) and treatment groups. The ability to generalize the findings from the RCT or QED beyond the study context may be limited (e.g., single-site.) The evaluations were conducted by an independent entity external to the organization implementing the intervention.
- **Preliminary evidence** means the applicant has submitted up to two outcome evaluation reports that

evaluated the same intervention described in the application and yielded positive results on one or more key desired outcomes of interest as depicted in the applicant’s logic model. The outcome evaluations may either have been conducted internally by the applicant organization or by an entity external to the applicant. The study design must include pre and post-assessments without a comparison group or a post assessment comparison between intervention and comparison groups. In some cases a retrospective pre-post assessment may be considered, but its use must be justified in the text of the evaluation report.

- **Pre-preliminary evidence** means the applicant has not submitted an outcome or impact evaluation of the same intervention described in the application, although the applicant may have collected some performance data on the intervention (e.g., data on intervention outputs and/or outcomes). Applicants in this tier must describe in the Evidence Base section of the application how their program design is evidence-informed. Applicants may also cite prior performance measure data if applicable.

Results for America

Results for America is helping decision-makers at all levels of government harness the power of evidence and data to solve our world’s greatest challenges. Our mission is to make investing in what works the “new normal,” so that when policymakers make decisions, they start by seeking the best evidence and data available, then use what they find to get better results.

Invest in What Work Policy Series

This Federal Impact Snapshot is part of Results for America’s Invest in What Works policy series launched in 2012 to help local, state, and federal policymakers harness the power of evidence and data to increasingly shift taxpayer dollars toward results-driven, evidence-based solutions.

Acknowledgements

Results for America would like to thank Mary Hyde, Director of Research and Evaluation, and Jennifer Bastress Tahmasebi, Deputy Director of AmeriCorps, at the Corporation for National and Community Service for their commitment to investing in the use of data and evidence to improve outcomes from children, as well as the following individuals for their assistance in developing this case study: Audrey Suker, CEO, ServeMinnesota; and Sadie O’Connor, Managing Director, Reading and Math, Inc.

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