

# Improving Elementary Literacy: The Power of Evidence-Based Investments by AmeriCorps

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Reading is the foundation of all learning. [Third grade](#) marks a critical transition point when children move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Students who read proficiently by third grade are four times [more likely](#) to graduate from high school than those who do not. Yet for many students, this crucial milestone remains out of reach.

In 2014, the Corporation for National and Community Service (now known as AmeriCorps<sup>1</sup>) made a transformative decision: to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in its grantmaking by asking applicants to describe the evidence (e.g., via evaluation reports, performance data or logic models) that supports the programs they propose for funding (see Appendix for more information). This shift toward [evidence-based grantmaking](#) has led to measurable improvements across the country in areas ranging from student literacy to home health visiting programs.

## Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence

In 2013, Results for America (RFA) released its first [Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence](#) which encouraged federal agencies to prioritize investments in evidence-based programs. AmeriCorps quickly embraced this approach by introducing scoring criteria based on the evidence of effectiveness in activities or programs proposed in its FY15 State and National grant program applications. RFA subsequently recognized AmeriCorps as a leader in evidence-driven grantmaking in its [2014 Federal Standard](#). AmeriCorps has continued to refine how it builds and uses evidence and data, earning recognition in every edition of the Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence since then.

<sup>1</sup> In September 2020, the Corporation for National and Community Service (or CNCS) was [renamed](#) AmeriCorps. For consistency and to make this document easier to follow, we use the name AmeriCorps throughout.

The success of AmeriCorps’ evidence-based grantmaking approach is exemplified by its investments in the [Reading Corps](#) literacy intervention program. Initially a promising local initiative in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, Reading Corps (K-3)<sup>2</sup> has grown into a national success story, thanks to AmeriCorps’ strategic support of evidence-based programs. Since its launch in 2003, Reading Corps has reached over 372,000 students in 13 states and Washington, D.C., with more than 200,000 of those students served since AmeriCorps adopted its evidence-based funding approach in 2014.

# ADVANCING LITERACY THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

## Reading Corps Overview

Tutoring, particularly when delivered intensively and with personalized support, is one of the most effective interventions for improving reading outcomes. Reading Corps provides schools with trained AmeriCorps tutors who deliver targeted literacy support to ensure students are reading at grade level by third grade. The program’s design aligns with [ten key components or conditions](#) that research has identified as crucial for success, as detailed in the table below.

Design Principle <sup>a</sup>	Design Principle Description	Reading Corps Alignment	
Focus	Effective at all grade levels, with the strongest impact for K-2 students.	✓	Delivered to students in grades K-3.
Prioritization	Ensures lower-performing students receive support, with careful attention to minimizing stigma and fostering inclusion.	✓	Delivered to students who score below target on reading assessments; other students (e.g., English language learners) may receive support on a case-by-case basis.
Frequency	30 to 60 min per session, 3 or more sessions per week (or shorter sessions held more frequently)	✓	20-minute daily sessions (ranges from 3 to 5 days per week)
Group Size	One-on-one or small groups with up to 4 students.	✓	One-on-one or small group instructions with up to 3 students.
Personnel	Tutors of all backgrounds can succeed with adequate training and support.	✓	Tutors of all backgrounds receive training, literacy coaching, and ongoing support.
Relationships	Consistent tutor over time to build strong connections.	✓	Tutors maintain consistent relationships with students, matched for at least one school year.
Measurement	Regular use of data and ongoing assessments to tailor instruction.	✓	Uses data-driven approach using weekly progress assessments to tailor instruction.
Curriculum	High-quality instructional materials aligned with classroom content.	✓	Uses high-quality instructional materials aligned with classroom content, focusing on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.
Scheduling	Delivered during the school day to maximize accessibility and consistency.	✓	Delivered consistently during the school day to integrate with the school’s existing schedule.
Delivery Mode	Primarily in-person, with emerging evidence supporting distance learning.	✓	Primarily in-person, though virtual formats available.

<sup>a</sup>See: [Design Principles for Accelerating Student Learning With High-Impact Tutoring -EdResearch for Action](#)

<sup>2</sup> The numbers presented in this document focus exclusively on K-3 students served by Reading Corps. [Early Learning Corps](#), a related AmeriCorps program, supports even younger students in preparing for Kindergarten.

First launched in Minnesota in 2003, the program supports struggling learners from kindergarten through third grade in elementary schools and early learning centers.<sup>3</sup> Reading Corps [serves students](#) who score below the grade-level target on nationally-normed benchmark reading assessments but need additional practice rather than intensive intervention. On a case-by-case basis, the program may also support students receiving other services, such as English language services, with decisions made collaboratively between Reading Corps coaches and school staff.

The program's tutoring model is intensive and systematic. AmeriCorps tutors work with children one-on-one and in small groups, providing 20-minute sessions daily during the school day for K-3 students. These tutors implement evidence-based interventions in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

Data drives every stage of the program. Tutors use research-based assessments to identify struggling readers and monitor student progress through weekly performance measurements. Each tutor works with an onsite coach — typically a literacy specialist or teacher — and receives support from literacy experts who visit several times throughout the year. These experts help tutors and internal coaches analyze student data to determine the most effective interventions for each child and ensure everything stays on track.

“Reading Corps has played a tremendous role in our boys’ educational journey. In the last year they have flourished in their reading ability. They come home excited to show us their new skills. He has gone from not wanting to read at home, to sitting with us at night and asking to read, just one more book. Reading Corps has helped our boys build upon their reading ability while also finding a passion to read.”

— Brittany Bente, Minnesota Parent

## Proven Results of Reading Corps

In 2014, AmeriCorps released the [results](#) of a randomized control trial, one of the most rigorous methods of evaluating impact that compares students who receive an intervention to similar students who do not, allowing researchers to isolate the program's impact. The evaluation demonstrated that kindergarten students in Reading Corps produced twice as many correct letter sounds by the end of the first semester compared to their peers. A 2018 [evaluation](#) in Minnesota and Wisconsin found that Reading Corps was effective at improving students' early reading skills — in fact, gains over the course of one semester were equivalent to those that would be expected over the course of a full academic year. Kindergarten and first grade students — regardless of gender, minority group status, dual language learner status, or free or reduced-price lunch eligibility — who received Reading Corps tutoring significantly outperformed

<sup>3</sup> ServeMinnesota launched Reading Corps under the name Minnesota Reading Corps with 25 AmeriCorps members helping 250 targeted preschoolers read at grade level by the third grade. The program is now administered by Ampact, a national nonprofit that specializes in scaling high-quality, evidence-based AmeriCorps programs.

students who did not receive tutoring. These improvements in foundational skills directly support the program’s ultimate goal: ensuring students meet third grade reading proficiency, which research shows is a critical milestone for success in education, employment and life outcomes.

## Scaling Reading Corps Nationwide

AmeriCorps recognized and supported Reading Corps’ efforts to build and use evidence of effectiveness by increasing its grants to the program, which has driven significant growth in the program’s reach and the number of students served, particularly over the last six years:

- During the 2013-2014 school year, Reading Corps served 22,091 K-3 students.
- By the 2018-2019 school year, it was serving 26,485 K-3 students.
- By the 2023-2024 school year, Reading Corps had expanded to serve 40,969 K-3 students.

Over the six-year period from FY 2019 to FY 2024, Reading Corps expanded its reach by 85%, deploying 9,555 trained AmeriCorps tutors to provide intensive, evidence-based literacy support to students in 13 states and Washington, D.C.

As Reading Corps expanded its reach, [independent evaluations](#) confirmed the value of high-impact tutoring based in the science of reading. For example, an [evaluation in North Dakota](#) (published in 2019) showed Reading Corps’ impact among second and third grade students was equivalent to an additional half to three-quarters of a year’s worth of academic instructional time — similar to the 2018 findings from Minnesota and Wisconsin. In [Colorado, an evaluation](#) (published in 2023) demonstrated significant positive impacts across most grades, with particularly strong effects for English Language Learners. These ongoing evaluations across multiple states demonstrate Reading Corps’ commitment to building evidence and understanding program impact, while continuously refining the model to best serve students.

These results translate into significant economic benefits. [A 2020 analysis of Minnesota’s implementation](#) found the return on investment for the Reading Corps’ kindergarten program ranges from \$5.47 to \$6.99, meaning that for every dollar invested, the program generates benefits worth at least five times its costs. These benefits include, for example, improved employment and earnings outcomes for both program participants and AmeriCorps members who serve as tutors. These findings highlight the substantial long-term impact of investing in early literacy support.

“I just knew — this is the direction I’m going to go. ... I have all of these tangible experiences where I got to know a kid, build a great relationship, and saw the payoff of that. Reading Corps was a great way to start my career.”

— Chris, a fifth grade teacher, [reflecting on his year as a Reading Corps tutor](#) in California

## Reading Corps in Georgia

In just two years since its 2022 launch, [Reading Corps in Georgia](#) has rapidly expanded to serve students in more than 75 schools across the state. Georgia's program has a unique emphasis on [cogenerational tutoring](#) — bringing together AmeriCorps members of all ages to serve as tutors. Tutors serve together at the same school for up to eight hours per day, fostering natural mentorship opportunities and friendships across generations. Early observations suggest older and younger members rely on each other and value their relationships. Building on these promising observations, the program is now surveying tutors who serve in multi-generational teams to better understand how these connections benefit both AmeriCorps members and the students they serve.

## CONCLUSION: THE PATH FORWARD

Strategic investment in evidence-based literacy programs accelerates our progress toward ensuring all students can read by third grade — a moral, social and economic imperative.

AmeriCorps' decision a decade ago to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of its State and National grant program funds paved the way for a national literacy intervention success story. By steering funds toward a proven strategy — both Johns Hopkins University's [Evidence for ESSA clearinghouse](#) and the Institute of Education Sciences [What Works Clearinghouse](#) have identified Reading Corps as having the highest or strongest level of evidence — the agency has helped improve the lives of more than 200,000 students since its decision to adopt an evidence-based funding approach. Today, communities and states nationwide have the opportunity to expand this success by [bringing Reading Corps to their jurisdictions](#) or funding local organizations to implement similar evidence-based interventions. By aligning with the [evidence-based components](#) that define effective literacy programs — such as strong tutor-student relationships, frequent sessions and data-informed instruction — local programs can replicate this success and deliver measurable gains in third grade reading proficiency tailored to their students' needs.<sup>4</sup>

Through its leadership, AmeriCorps 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.”

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<sup>4</sup> For additional guidance on implementing evidence-based high-impact tutoring programs, see the [National School Support Accelerator's Toolkit for Tutoring Programs](#).

## APPENDIX: HOW AMERICORPS GRANTS PRIORITIZE EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

In 2013, Results for America (RFA) released its first Invest in *What Works Federal Standard of Excellence* which encouraged federal agencies to prioritize investments in evidence-based programs. AmeriCorps quickly embraced this approach, and as a result, RFA [highlighted](#) AmeriCorps' groundbreaking decision to prioritize evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of its State and National AmeriCorps grant program funds beginning in 2014. AmeriCorps established a scoring system that awards points based on the evidence of effectiveness for the activities or programs proposed in grant applications.

Starting in FY 2015, AmeriCorps reformed its State and National grant program (\$216 million in FY 2015) 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 proposed activities and programs as having “strong,” “moderate,” “preliminary,” or “pre-preliminary” (no) evidence. (The definitions of these evidence levels are included below.)

AmeriCorps steadily increased its emphasis on evidence, raising the evidence set-aside within its AmeriCorps State and National program to 12 points out of 100 in its FY 2017 grant competition (\$230 million in FY 2017) and FY 2018 grant competition (\$253 million in FY 2018). These strategies helped increase the percentage of AmeriCorps State and National grant dollars allocated to grant applicants with a strong evidence-base from 20% in FY 2016 to 26% in FY 2018 to 55% in FY 2024.

In FY 2019, AmeriCorps further strengthened its commitment to evidence-based grantmaking by: (1) increasing 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) including 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) prioritizing funding for applicants that proposed using one of 13 pre-approved education interventions, including 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.)

By FY 2022 and continuing into FY 2024, AmeriCorps’ State and National grant program allocated as many as 44 out of 100 points to organizations that submitted applications supported by performance and evaluation data (see [FY 2022 grant application](#)). Of these points, up to 24 points could be assigned to applications with theories of change supported by relevant research literature, program performance data, or program evaluation data, and up to 20 could be assigned based on the strength or quality of evidence supporting the proposed program or activity.



Since AmeriCorps began setting aside points to recognize evidence of effectiveness, the percentage of grant dollars allocated to projects with a strong or moderate evidence base has risen. In FY 2016, 34% of competitive AmeriCorps grant funds supported such projects. In FY 2021, the percentage was 68%, and remained strong at 71% in FY 2024. As noted in the [FY 2024 grant application](#), “AmeriCorps values and funds programs at all points along the evidence continuum and expects programs to progress along the evidence continuum over time.”

AmeriCorps defines the four evidence levels for applicants as follows (see [2024 State and National Mandatory Supplemental Information](#)):

- **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 or RCT) or a Quasi-Experimental Design (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 or RCT) or Quasi-Experimental Design (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.

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