

Descriptive Study of AmeriCorps Literacy Programs: State and National

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This multi-purpose study of the 1998-1999 AmeriCorps* State and National programs identifying themselves as providing literacy-related services is intended to inform stakeholders about programs' literacy activities and provide information needed to conduct a follow-up outcome-oriented assessment of tutoring programs.

Consequently, this study's objectives included:

- Describing the programmatic structure and range of literacy and tutoring activities being implemented by AmeriCorps programs;
- Identifying programs using effective reading/literacy instructional models likely to improve children's reading abilities;
- Describing the target population receiving services; and
- Furnishing descriptive and demographic information needed to design the future study of the impact of literacy activities on children's reading skills. This subsequent second study, AmeriCorps Tutoring Outcomes Study, was completed in February 2001.

Literacy activities are defined as those intended to foster the development of reading abilities in children or adults. This may occur either directly (e.g., direct instruction via tutoring, classroom instruction, academic mentoring or reading aloud to children) or indirectly (e.g., organizing trips to the library or supporting family literacy activities).

To achieve the study objectives, a survey was sent to 517 directors of AmeriCorps* State and National programs that had reported engaging in educational and literacy services. A total of 481 directors responded, providing the basis for the report. Eighty-three percent of these programs had been operating for five or more years. Most often the programs' sponsoring agencies were community-based organizations (61 percent) or secondarily, educational institutions (29 percent).

Over 10,000 AmeriCorps members and 40,000 member-recruited volunteers provided literacy services. Ninety-three percent of the members and eighty percent of the volunteers were high school graduates, with three-quarters of the members and half the volunteers having some post-secondary education. Approximately 260,000 persons received services ranging in age from toddlers to adults with the majority being concentrated in grades one through six. Nationwide, two-thirds of the recipients were African-American or Hispanic.

The goals of most programs were similar - to improve the student's overall academic achievement, their motivation for reading and their reading and comprehension skills. Almost all the programs provided some training to members and volunteers, typically 16 hours of pre-service and 20 hours of in-service training. Three-quarters of the programs conducted formal evaluations, with those engaged in direct tutoring more likely to conduct formal evaluations than those with no tutoring component.

The descriptive survey collected detailed information about the nature and potential effectiveness of tutoring activities. Findings conclude that:

- Tutors engage in a wide range of activities with their students, encompassing the full range of reading sub-skills (e.g., reading aloud, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, reading fluency, decoding);

- Over half (55 percent) of the tutoring programs report that tutors conduct decoding activities with students (i.e., activities that help beginning readers develop sound-symbol correspondences);
- Most of the tutoring programs incorporate some of the structural and instructional features perceived by educators and researchers as important for positive reading outcomes. These features include: 1) coordinating with classroom instruction; 2) tutoring on more than two occasions during the week; 3) conducting formal evaluations; 4) convening for a total of at least 1.5 hours weekly; 5) providing pre- and in-service training; 6) use of 'brand-name materials'; 7) involving a reading specialist in planning literacy activities; and 8) using a stable one-to-one tutoring model. The features reported most frequently by the programs were:
 - coordination of tutoring activities with the classroom curriculum,
 - adequate intensity of tutoring activities (i.e., meeting at least twice weekly for at least 1.5 hours/week); and
 - training members and volunteer tutors before and during service delivery in two important content areas (i.e., reading and tutoring children; and child development).
- Almost half of the tutoring programs utilized well-known, widely-used instructional models (e.g., Reading Recovery, Reading One-to-One, Success for All);
- Programs sponsored by colleges and universities were slightly more likely to report use of effective tutoring practices, on average, than were programs under other sponsorship;
- Programs utilizing members supported by Federal Work Study (FWS) funds, on average, used more effective tutoring practices than did programs not using members supported by FWS;
- Programs receiving America Reads funds, on average, used more effective tutoring techniques than programs not receiving these funds;
- More fully-implemented programs used more effective tutoring techniques than partially implemented programs.

The findings about tutoring activities suggest that AmeriCorps efforts to encourage programs to develop and implement effective tutoring programs appear to be meeting with success. The use of effective tutoring practices appears to be fairly widespread across programs. The programs' intentions about effective tutoring activities align well with what is known in the research. This is an important preliminary finding about the potential effects of these tutoring programs on children's reading abilities.