

AmeriCorps
Tutoring Outcomes
Study

Prepared by:



Abt Associates Inc.

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by

Abt Associates Inc.

55 Wheeler Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Created in 1993, the *Corporation for National Service* engages more than 1.5 million Americans annually in improving communities through service. The Corporation supports service at national, state, and local levels through:

- AmeriCorps, whose members serve with local and national organizations to meet community needs while earning education awards to help finance college or training;
- Learn and Serve America, which helps link community service and learning objectives for youth from kindergarten through college as well as youth in community-based organizations; and
- The National Senior Service Corps (Senior Corps), the network of programs that helps Americans age 55 and older use their skills and experience in service opportunities that address the needs of their communities. Senior Corps includes the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), Foster Grandparent Program, and Senior Companion Program.

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Executive Summary

This executive summary highlights the findings from the *AmeriCorps Tutoring Outcomes Study* about the effects of the AmeriCorps tutoring program. The summary begins with a description of AmeriCorps, followed by a brief discussion of the study design. The remainder of the summary presents descriptive information about the tutoring programs, tutors and students; the effects of the program on student reading achievement and classroom behavior; and the relationship between program components and student gains in reading.

AmeriCorps

The AmeriCorps program is the largest initiative of the Corporation for National Service (the Corporation), a public corporation established by the National Service Trust Act of 1993. The Corporation's mission is to provide opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to engage in service that addresses the nation's unmet needs in education, public safety, the environment, and other areas.

Education-related activities have been a priority for the Corporation since its inception. Most recently, the Corporation has directed substantial resources toward addressing the national issue of children's reading performance. This focus supports a national mandate as articulated in the America Reads initiative: *to help ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of the third grade*. Toward that goal, the Corporation has encouraged its programs to provide literacy services to young readers. A typical AmeriCorps tutoring program in reading places members in schools and after-school programs to provide tutoring to elementary students. During the 1999-2000 academic year, over 330 AmeriCorps programs nationwide provided tutorial assistance in reading to more than 100,000 students in grades one, two and three.

Study Design

To inform program staff, Congress, and other stakeholders about the effects of AmeriCorps tutoring programs, the Corporation contracted with Abt Associates to conduct the *AmeriCorps Tutoring Outcomes Study*.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following broad research questions:

- What is the effect of participation in AmeriCorps' tutoring programs on children's reading proficiencies and other classroom behaviors?
- Which components of the reading tutoring programs, considered to be effective practices, are associated with improved student outcomes in reading and classroom behavior? Do

students in programs implementing more practices identified by research as effective, show greater gains in reading than students in the other AmeriCorps tutoring programs?

Measures

The study collected four types of information to address these research questions:

- **Reading Performance.** Field staff tested students on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised. Scores from four subtests were combined to yield two key components of reading achievement: *reading comprehension*, based on passage comprehension and reading vocabulary subtests; and *reading skills*, based on word attack and letter-word identification subtests. In addition, teachers reported their view of changes in students' reading performance and attitudes in the classroom.
- **Classroom Behavior.** Teachers rated students using two short, standardized ratings scales: the Behavioral Academic Self-Esteem (BASE) and the cooperation sub-scale from the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS).
- **Tutor Experiences.** Tutors completed a brief questionnaire and an activity log to describe their experience and training as well as the nature of tutoring sessions.
- **Program Characteristics.** AmeriCorps program directors completed a brief questionnaire about their tutoring program.

Data Collection Schedule and Sample

The pretest took place in the late fall 1999/early winter 2000; the post-test occurred in spring 2000. Field staff collected information from 869 first, second and third grade students who received tutoring from a nationally representative sample of 68 AmeriCorps programs operating in schools and after-school programs.

Analytic Approach

Analysis of program effects examined student gains from pretest to post-test (post-test scores minus pretest scores). For the standardized measures, these gains were compared to scores reported by the test publisher to see whether students receiving tutoring gained more or less than expected for students in their grade level. To examine the relationship of student gains to program characteristics, a statistical technique called hierarchical linear modeling was used to incorporate student-level and program-level information.

Major Findings

Tutoring Programs and Activities

- ***Students' reading levels at pretest were generally in the low average to average range.*** Across all grades, approximately 20 percent of students scored in the low average range and 57 to 64 percent were average on reading comprehension. On reading skills, approximately 30 percent of students scored in the low average range and about half were average.
- ***Most AmeriCorps tutors were female (85 percent) and ranged in age from 17 to 80, with the average age of 27.*** Nearly half of the tutors were between 20 and 25 years of age. Most of the tutors have completed some college (82 percent) but only about one-third had a college degree.
- ***The majority of AmeriCorps tutoring programs implemented tutoring practices that the research has found to be effective in helping struggling students learn to read.*** More than 70 percent of programs were moderately or fully implemented, conducted formal evaluations, coordinated tutoring activities with classroom reading instruction, and provided training to tutors both before and during the course of tutoring.

Program Effects on Students' Reading Skills

- ***Tutored students at all grade levels improved their reading performance from pretest to post-test more than the gain expected for the typical child at their grade level.*** Reading comprehension and reading skills started out below grade-level; by year-end, students closed the gap and were reading at or near the grade-level expectation.
- ***The magnitude of reading gains was the same for students of different ethnic/racial backgrounds.*** White students and non-White students showed the same level of gains.
- ***Boys in first and second grade showed greater gains than girls on some subtests.*** Among first graders, boys made greater gains than girls in reading comprehension; among second graders, boys had greater gains than girls on reading skills.
- ***According to the ratings of classroom teachers, most students at all three grades improved their reading skills,*** at least to some degree over the course of the year as a result of the AmeriCorps tutoring. However, these ratings had fairly low correlations with the standardized tests of student reading performance.

Program Effects on Students' Classroom Behavior

- ***Only boys in first and third grades showed significant gains on the BASE.*** Girls made no measurable gain from pretest to post-test. However, at pretest, girls at all grade levels received scores that were average to above average for elementary age students. Boys at all grades scored slightly below average at pretest; those in the first and third grade achieved significantly higher post-test scores (gains of 5 to 7 points).
- ***On the cooperation subscale of the SSRS, most students stayed at the same level from pretest to post-test.*** The majority of students were rated average or above average at pretest. However, of those students rated below average at pretest, 40 percent improved their skills to the average or above average level at post-test.

Program Factors Affecting Student Reading Achievement

- ***Four effective practices were significantly related to gains in students' reading skills:***
 - 1) tutors met with students at least three times a week; 2) programs conducted formal evaluations; 3) tutors were trained both prior to and during the tutoring program; and 4) programs were moderately or fully implemented. For example:
 - Students in programs where they met with their tutors at least three times per week increased their *reading skills* scores between pretest and post-test by 2.1 points *more than their peers in programs that met less frequently.*
 - Students in programs where tutors received training both during and prior to tutoring obtained gains of 2.3 points *more on the reading test than students in programs where tutors did not have such training.*
 - ***Students in programs implementing these four effective practices showed larger gains*** in reading skills (5.4 points) than their counterparts in programs that had three of these elements (2.5 points).
 - ***Students in programs implementing none of the four effective practices showed no significant gains*** in reading skills from pretest to post-test.
 - ***Only one effective tutoring practice was associated with significant gains in reading comprehension but not in the expected direction.*** Students in programs where tutors coordinated activities with classroom reading instruction were less likely to show gains in reading comprehension than students in programs where tutors did not engage in coordinating activities. This unexpected finding suggests that tutors who did not coordinate with classroom instruction may be qualitatively different from those tutors that did (e.g., less experienced), since their students had smaller gains in reading comprehension.

Summary

On standardized tests of reading, students tutored by AmeriCorps members improved their reading performance from pretest to post-test *more than the gain expected for the typical child at their grade level*. This finding holds for students at all grade levels tested. The gains were statistically significant and large enough to indicate meaningful improvements in reading performance. However, the fact that several effective tutoring practices were related to student gains increases our confidence in attributing the results to the AmeriCorps program.

Program staff anticipated that the special attention students received through tutoring would have positive effects on their classroom behavior. However, there were only modest effects in this area. In general, teachers rated most students in the normal or expected range at pretest.