

What is the community challenge?

Reading at grade level by the end of grade 3 has been linked to success in school, productive work, healthy life choices, and reduced incarceration. Grade 4 students who can't read at grade level are four times less likely to graduate from high school. In 2009, more than 80% of students from low-income families (and more than 60% of students nationwide) did not hit that grade-level mark by grade 4, putting them at risk of dropping out of high school and leaving the door open for continued challenges (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

What is the promising solution?

The AARP Foundation Experience Corps program aims to address this challenge by matching senior volunteers in the community (age 50 or older) with students who are struggling to read in grade K-3 classrooms. Volunteers provide literacy tutoring through two primary strategies: (1) sustained tutoring in a one-on-one or small group setting, and (2) whole-class literacy assistance. Volunteers provided strategy 1, sustained small group tutoring, in three AARP Foundation Experience Corps local programs: (1) Generations Inc. (Boston, MA); (2) Read to Succeed Buffalo (Buffalo, NY); and (3) United Way Central Georgia (Bibb County/Macon, GA). The sustained small group tutoring strategy involves tutoring in small groups of up to four students. Students meet with a volunteer tutor two to five times per week for approximately 30 minutes, depending on age and need. The group remains together for a sustained period throughout the school year (or the course of the afterschool program). AARP Foundation recommends that the tutor and small group should meet for at least 35 sessions per school year. Some classrooms also received strategy 2, whole-class literacy assistance.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of AARP Foundation's Experience Corps' sustained small group tutoring program by Abt Associates began in 2015 and finished reporting in 2020. This evaluation was designed to determine whether the Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring strategy improves children's literacy achievement and social-emotional learning outcomes. Following a two-year implementation evaluation during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years, Abt Associates conducted an impact evaluation during the 2018-19 school year. The main research question was *How did students who received Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring compare to the control group on literacy achievement and social-emotional learning outcomes?* Using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, students in the study were assigned either to a treatment group (receiving Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring) or to a control group (not receiving Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring). Altogether, 850 students in kindergarten through grade 3, from 238 classrooms in 21 schools from four school districts, were included in the analytic sample. Randomization did not include whole-class literacy assistance assignment.

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring

Subgrantee: Generations Inc., Read to Succeed Buffalo, United Way Central Georgia

Focus Area(s): Youth Development

Focus Population(s): K-3rd grade students

Community(ies) Served: Boston, MA; Buffalo, NY; Bibb County/Macon, GA

What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of CNCS' Social Innovation Fund, the AARP Foundation engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate the Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring program. The impact evaluation showed the following:

- Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring, as implemented in this study, did not have a statistically significant impact on student literacy or social-emotional skills, when compared to the control group.
- There was substantial variation between local programs in small group tutoring delivery and the content delivered.
 - Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring was most effective in Macon where tutors were observed to adhere most closely to the recommended session structure.
- Students who received tutoring began the school year with substantially lower achievement levels than the control group; however, they experienced upward trajectories in reading achievement scores comparable to the control group students' trajectories.
- Exploratory analyses revealed a statistically significant relationship between dosage and outcomes: students who spent more time in sustained small group tutoring had significantly stronger literacy outcomes.
- Students in classrooms that received Experience Corps literacy assistance in addition to Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring had significantly lower gains on one literacy outcome than students who received Experience Corps sustained small group tutoring alone.

Notes on the evaluation

The AARP Foundation Experience Corps model evolved over the term of this evaluation. One key change to the model that took place in the summer of 2018 was the focused attention on fluency skills practice under the close monitoring and guidance from the tutor. One of the three participating local programs adopted the new model and provided focused attention on fluency skills practice under the close monitoring and guidance from the tutor. The other participating programs continued to implement sustained tutoring using earlier models. Therefore, this study does not provide a test of the refined AARP Foundation Experience Corps model.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Randomized controlled trial (RCT) impact evaluation

Study Population: Elementary School Students [kindergarten – 3rd grade]

(Independent) Evaluator(s): Abt Associates

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Preliminary

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

How is the AARP Foundation using the evaluation findings to improve?

In response to these findings, the AARP Foundation has taken a number of affirmative steps: (1) In fall 2020, Experience Corps will be delivered using a one-on-one tutoring strategy only; (2) The AARP Foundation no longer supports literacy assistance; and (3) The AARP Foundation has redoubled efforts to encourage adoption of its new structured session guidelines. Both Buffalo and Boston have committed to adopt the new structured session guidelines starting in fall 2020.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit nationalservice.gov/research.