
Effects on Achievement and Best Designs of Volunteer Tutoring Programs Not Yet Known

THE *AMERICA READS CHALLENGE* MAKES A NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO THE GOAL THAT EVERY CHILD WILL READ INDEPENDENTLY AND WELL BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE. THE PRIMARY MEANS OF ACHIEVING THIS GOAL IS TO RECRUIT ONE MILLION VOLUNTEERS TO TUTOR CHILDREN IN READING IN SCHOOLS AND IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS. THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION HAS PROPOSED AN ESTIMATED \$2.75 BILLION TO FUND THE EFFORT. THE FUNDING, AND THE DETAILS OF THE PROGRAM, ARE CURRENTLY BEING EXAMINED IN CONGRESS.

This is an ambitious and important challenge for America's children, says CRESPAR researcher Barbara Wasik, but several issues regarding volunteers and the role that they play in tutoring need to be carefully addressed if the program is to improve the reading performance of young children.

The most important factor in the success of the *America Reads Challenge* is how these volunteers can be effectively used to tutor children in reading. All over America, school administrators, principals, and community activists are scrambling to identify and/or develop volunteer tutoring programs that can be used in their schools and communities. Unfortunately, there are few guidelines for selecting or developing these programs. Before millions of volunteers begin their tutoring efforts, it is important to systematically examine the role they can play and the kind of training they will need to be effective in their volunteer role.

Literally hundreds of grassroots tutoring programs have been developed and are being used in schools and communities, according to Wasik. There is great variation among these programs. Some have written materials for the tutors to follow; other programs rely mostly on oral dissemination of information. Some have student materials; most do not.

Also, since many of these programs were developed to fulfill a specific need in a particular school, little attention has been paid to evaluating or disseminating the programs. What has occurred is that many programs are being implemented across school districts with little evidence of their effectiveness.

Effectiveness of Volunteer Tutoring

Wasik conducted a comprehensive review of the evidence presented by 16 volunteer tutoring programs to evaluate their effectiveness for increasing student reading achievement. These 16 programs either had some kind of evaluation research behind them or were those noted by America Reads as being examples of volunteer tutoring programs.

But good program evaluations were rare, Wasik found.

First, the 16 programs were all she could find among the hundreds being used that met either of the above criteria.

Second, five of the programs offered as examples had no evaluations available.

Third, nine of the programs that were evaluated either lacked comparison groups or had other serious problems with their evaluation methods, making it impossible to determine if any gains found for students were really due to the program or to other factors.

In the end, Wasik found only two programs — the Howard Street Tutoring Program and the School Volunteer Development Project — that had scientifically sound evaluation data on the effects of volunteer tutors on children's reading outcomes. Both of these evaluations found positive effects on children's reading, but both used sample sizes of only 50 children, and the School Volunteer Development Project was terminated during the 1980s.

Making Volunteer Tutoring Effective

Wasik stresses that there is no evidence to suggest that volunteer tutoring cannot be effective. "But there is insufficient evidence that the programs improve children's reading achievement, and less evidence concerning what forms of volunteer tutoring programs are most likely to work."

A slew of questions remain to be answered about the most appropriate designs for volunteer tutoring programs.

Should tutors be paid? Do tutors' own education and background matter? How much training do tutors require? Who should do the training? How much monitoring and supervision is enough? Are specific student materials essential? If so, what kinds of materials would be appropriate and effective? How important are diagnosis and prescription, and who should do it? Should tutoring activities be closely connected to the classroom instruction or separate from it? Should they take place during school hours or after school? Are there particular types of students most and least likely to benefit from tutoring by volunteers?

These questions need to be answered and credible evaluations of the effects of volunteer tutoring need to be conducted, Wasik concludes. "If money is allocated to make America Reads a reality, a specific amount...needs to be set aside to develop replicable models and to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in rigorous research designs....We need to understand if volunteers can make a significant contribution to our children's literacy development." ■