



IMPACT AREA:  
EDUCATION  
AND YOUTH

# THIRD GRADE READS

A **CITIES OF SERVICE** BLUEPRINT

**Third Grade Reads** is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office leverages the power of volunteers to help children attain reading level proficiency by the beginning of fourth grade.

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# THIRD GRADE READS

Third Grade Reads is a high-impact service strategy in which the mayor's office leverages the power of volunteers to help children attain reading level proficiency by the beginning of fourth grade.

Through a partnership involving the mayor's office, a local nonprofit organization, and the school district, volunteers tutor the highest-need K-3 students in reading in schools or after school programs. This volunteer-based literacy intervention program is designed to provide struggling readers with more opportunities to read using research-based tutoring methods - helping improve student reading levels and ultimately, increasing their chances of long-term educational success. sustainability objectives and recruit partners that support the city's goals in that area.





# BACKGROUND

National assessments of education progress show that a large majority of our nation's children are failing to meet reading level proficiency by the beginning of fourth grade, especially in urban schools serving a majority of low-income students. Kindergarten through third grade is a crucial period for children because during these years, students develop reading skills that will become the cornerstone of their academic success. After third grade, students depend on their reading skills to master other subject areas. Students who do not reach reading benchmarks by the end of third grade have a more difficult time keeping up with peers both academically and socially, which has serious implications for graduation rates, employment, and the ability to fully participate in a knowledge-based society.<sup>1</sup>

Cities are well positioned to unleash a powerful force that can help students achieve reading proficiency—ordinary citizens willing and able to volunteer their services. While there are a number of interventions that contribute to reading proficiency, such as regular school attendance and summer learning programs, the Third Grade Reads initiative is inspired by successful evidence-based volunteer programs that give students who are reading below grade level more opportunities to build essential literacy skills and improve overall reading proficiency. Through this initiative, committed and well-trained volunteers read with and tutor low-performing K-3 students in high-need schools and after school programs using a curriculum that supports the goals and efforts of the schools.

<sup>1</sup> Lesnick, J., Goerge, R. M., Smithgall, C., Gwynne, J. (2010). Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How is it Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment? A Longitudinal Analysis of Third-Grade Students in Chicago in 1996-1997 and their Educational Outcomes. A Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/vmGCY2>





## REQUIRED ELEMENTS

- 1 Mayor's office partners with a school district and a nonprofit agency focused on education or literacy to identify student needs and define the goals of the local Third Grade Reads program.
- 2 Lead nonprofit partner works with the mayor's office and the school district to develop a high-quality curriculum that aligns with local school curricula and reading instructional strategies, and can be used by volunteers. The lead partner, or another organization, plans trainings to prepare volunteers.
- 3 Screened and selected volunteers receive pre-service and ongoing training and support from literacy experts (e.g., teachers, reading specialists, university education professors, or other trained professionals) and experienced tutors.
- 4 Volunteers provide at least two hours of reading tutoring per child per week (more than one tutor can work with a child) in high-need elementary schools. Best practice basic reading tutoring activities include encouraging students to sound out unfamiliar words, giving students opportunities to write down letters and words after they learn them and using those skills to begin writing sentences, and helping students do independent daily reading of texts that interest them.<sup>2</sup>
- 5 The nonprofit or school partner oversees the curriculum and program structure for tutors.
- 6 Mayor's office works with partners to track and report the impact of the initiative.

<sup>2</sup> From the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children





## REQUIRED METRICS INCLUDE:

- Pre-and post-reading scores of tutored students and their reading grade level
- Teacher feedback on student engagement and skills to capture incremental progress achieved between the pre- and post-reading score assessments (e.g., collected using a brief survey)
- Number of students tutored throughout the school year

## ADDITIONAL OPTIONAL METRICS INCLUDE:

- Number of volunteer tutors
- Volunteer tutor, teacher, and parent or guardian satisfaction





# EXECUTING THE PLAN

## PLANNING THE PROGRAM

The mayor's office convenes a meeting of stakeholders six to nine months in advance of the intended program launch to determine: 1) the goals of the program; 2) the schools or students with the greatest need for the program; and 3) a partner organization to execute the program.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders to bring to the table include:

- District administrators, reading specialists, principals, and teachers from the public school system or after school program directors and staff<sup>3</sup>
- Staff from community organizations and nonprofits that have the capacity to manage the program (especially those already working in the schools)
- Parents and guardians of K-3 students
- Education specialists from higher education institutions
- Local foundations and businesses concerned with education

Some key considerations in selecting program partners are:

- All program partners, including the city, nonprofit partner, and school district, must have shared goals. Similarly, all program partners should align on which student population is in greatest need and can most benefit from this individualized support; this will allow the city to produce the largest impact.
- It is important to have a well-connected program partner that has a strong reputation in the community to help with the credibility, recruitment, and funding of the initiative. This partner should also have staff committed to the literacy initiative mission, a willingness to adapt the program to changing external pressures, and the capacity for volunteer recruitment and support.
- In addition to having a good program manager, to ensure effective training and volunteer support, the initiative should include a staff member or person closely associated with the program who has a literacy background.

<sup>3</sup> For example, if the city wants to launch the program in September at the start of the school year, it should begin this planning process in late winter or early spring.





Once the program goals, partner organization(s), and potential host schools are identified, the mayor's office and partner organization(s) should sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the school district and selected host schools outlining the roles of each partner. These roles should include:

#### Mayor's office:

- Provide leadership for the initiative
- Meet regularly (e.g., monthly) with partner organization(s) to assist with program troubleshooting
- Convene regular (e.g., quarterly) stakeholder meetings to analyze impact

#### Partner organization(s):

- In collaboration with schools and experts, develop a reading tutoring curriculum that aligns with school curricula and reading pedagogy (see Resources section for examples of widely available curricula)
- Recruit, train, and supervise volunteers
- Coordinate pre/post assessment of students' reading levels
- Track metrics of engagement (e.g., student and volunteer participation levels, program activities)
- Work with school district to track and report the required impact metrics

#### School district and host schools or after school programs:

- Provide consistent staff support at both the school and district level to ensure the development and implementation of an impactful curriculum
- Identify appropriate students for tutors to work with (the highest-need students likely need to work with an expert such as a reading specialist, but most other students will benefit from a volunteer-based program)
- Conduct pre/post assessment of student reading scores and reading levels (see the Resources section for examples of high-quality measurement tools)
- Facilitate permission from and involvement of parents and guardians
- Secure teacher and administrator support for program
- Provide space and additional curriculum and training resources, as needed







Once a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with all partners, the planning process should start as soon as possible to allow time to build teacher buy-in, select the target students, obtain parent/guardian permission slips, and select and adapt the curriculum before the program can begin. To ensure a timely program launch, the following timeline is recommended:

#### Four to five months before launch (e.g., April - May):

- Participating teachers and students identified
- Student participation list developed
- Parents and guardians contacted
- Volunteer recruitment begins

#### Two to three months before launch (e.g., June - August):

- Tutoring curriculum finalized and customized
- Volunteer recruitment completed
- Training curriculum finalized

#### Month of the launch (e.g., September):

- Volunteer training begins
- Pre-assessment of current reading levels begins
- Stakeholders reconvene to discuss pre-assessment results and implications
- Student participation list finalized
- Parents and guardians are convened to explain structure and goals of Third Grade Reads and how they can help (see the Engaging Volunteers section below)
- Permission slips for students to participate in the program are signed and returned

#### During implementation (e.g., October - May):

- Tutoring takes place (see the Engaging Volunteers section below)
- Program assessed and partnership considered for renewal for the following year (e.g., in April/May)
- Student selection begins for following year (if the program will continue)





### After the first year of implementation (e.g., June):

- Post-assessment completed
- Volunteer appreciation

## DEVELOPING THE CURRICULUM

To ensure that all participating students receive quality and impactful tutoring, the mayor's office and lead partner should align on a standardized tutoring curriculum that fits the school district's overall strategy to boost reading achievement. This curriculum should guide all volunteer-student interactions and provide the basis of all support the tutors provide to students. While there are several tutoring curriculums available, according to the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, reading instruction should emphasize determining meaning from printed materials through reading, the phonological and morphological structure of words (the sounds and sub-units of language that constitute words), the orthographic (writing) system, the relationship between spelling and sounds, and provide students numerous chances to practice reading and writing. Tutors should spend at least two hours a week with students across multiple sessions. (For examples of tested, research-based curricula, see the Resources section.)

## ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers should be individuals who are literate in English, able to follow a regular schedule that enables them to spend at least two hours a week across multiple sessions with students during program hours, and comfortable working with children. Tutors may come from organizations such as faith-based congregations, civic organizations, higher education institutions or secondary schools, senior service programs, parents and guardians of children in the school, or the local community. All tutors, regardless of source, should receive background checks prior to contact with students, in line with local and state laws and regulations.

Volunteers must complete pre-service training and commit to participating in ongoing support. Volunteers should be scheduled to provide one-on-one tutoring for two sessions of one hour each per week throughout the academic year. Ideally the same tutor should work with a child twice a week, but if tutors are unable to volunteer more than one day a week, they can work with multiple children during that day with a different tutor working with these children a second day. Tutors should follow the curriculum selected for the initiative and direct questions and concerns to a designated individual (such as a teacher, program partner staff person, or reading expert).





**Volunteer orientation and training:** Tutors should receive a minimum of eight hours of pre-service training and twelve hours of ongoing training. This training should cover logistics, expectations, and information regarding how to implement the selected curriculum. Each tutor should receive a volunteer manual.

**Tutoring:** After volunteers have been properly screened, background checked, and trained, they are ready to interact with students. Students in need of tutoring should be placed in a special setting, separate from their peers, to facilitate one-on-one interaction with their assigned tutor during the school day or before or after school. In accordance with the developed curriculum, volunteers provide at least two hours of reading tutoring per child per week (more than one tutor can work with a child) in high-need elementary schools.

**Best practice, basic reading tutoring activities include:**

- Encouraging students to sound out unfamiliar words,
- Giving students opportunities to write down letters and words after they learn them,
- Using those skills to begin writing sentences, and
- Helping students do independent daily reading of texts that interest them.

**Ongoing volunteer supervision and support:** Volunteers should have clarity about who to contact for matters related to their participation and tutoring. Communication should be encouraged. Volunteers should also have access to a simple system that helps them track their hours with each student; for example, by logging them online or at the tutoring site. Ongoing support and feedback should be provided to volunteer tutors, as this is critical to program success and volunteer commitment and motivation. This support should include periodic opportunities for additional volunteer training of at least 12 hours per year.

Examples of possible training topics include advice on managing students' behavior, how to effectively customize curriculums to meet student needs, and how to build trust with students. These topics should help make tutors more comfortable and effective in their roles, while ensuring that students are receiving the support they need to excel. Tutors should receive information regarding the progress of the students they tutor. Tutors also benefit from opportunities for interaction with other tutors; this will allow them to share strategies and build a strong community.





## ENGAGING PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

To build and sustain support for Third Grade Reads from parents and guardians, they should be convened early in the process and be given regular updates on their child's progress. At the initial convening, the structure and goals of Third Grade Reads should be explained in detail (e.g., students will meet with tutors twice a week for one hour) with particular emphasis on how parents and guardians can help (e.g., parents and guardians will be given practice worksheets or other activities to help facilitate their involvement). As the most impactful results are seen when parents and guardians at home reinforce lessons their children have learned in school, parents and guardians are key resources in helping students read at grade level.

## FUNDRAISING FOR THIRD GRADE READS

**Third Grade Reads is a compelling funding opportunity for businesses, foundations, and individual donors that have a commitment to youth and education in your city. Once you identify a list of possible funders, you can approach them in person or by phone, email, or letter. In all cases, the mayor's office or nonprofit partner(s) will want to develop a short proposal that describes the opportunity for support and how the funds will be used.**

## ELEMENTS OF A TYPICAL PROPOSAL INCLUDE:

- Description of Third Grade Reads, including personnel/program management, volunteer tutor recruitment, training and recognition, and curriculum/tutoring resources
- Information on how this initiative would positively impact the community (e.g., impact goals and the value of increasing reading level proficiency on long-term student achievement)
- Amount of funding requested, proposed breakdown of grant(s) and how those funds would be used (e.g., paying for supplies or providing a stipend to the lead volunteer tutors)
- Metrics that would be collected to assess progress
- Information on **Cities of Service** (this is especially helpful for national funders)
- Description of how the donor will be recognized (e.g., putting logos on printed materials or your city's service website, verbal thanks in training sessions, etc.)





## RECOGNIZING AND THANKING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer recognition is an effective recruitment and retention tool. Research by the Points of Light Institute reveals that recognition not only motivates volunteers, but it also promotes public awareness in local communities. To recognize the volunteer tutors, students who benefited from the program can give hand-written thank you letters to their tutors expressing their gratitude and memories of the time the pairs spent together. Additionally, to highlight the effectiveness of the Third Grade Reads effort, the mayor may host an appreciation event at City Hall or a local elementary school where both the tutors and students are recognized and presented with certificates signed by the mayor commemorating the students' progress and the volunteer service of the tutors.





# MEASURING IMPACT

Tracking and reporting metrics are essential for the initiative to demonstrate impact and show its value to the community.

## REQUIRED METRICS INCLUDE:

- Pre- and post-reading scores of tutored students and their reading grade level
- Teacher feedback on student engagement and skills to capture incremental progress achieved between the pre- and post-reading score assessments (e.g., collected using a brief survey)
- Number of students tutored throughout the school year

## ADDITIONAL OPTIONAL METRICS INCLUDE:

- Number of volunteer tutors
- Volunteer tutor, teacher, and parent/guardian satisfaction

To track the required metrics, the mayor's office and its partners can arrange with the schools to access the data needed to select students and track progress. If it is difficult to obtain this information in a timely manner, the mayor's office and its partners may want to arrange alternate ways to track metrics and progress (such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills or DIBELS - see the Resources section - and regular volunteer feedback).

Data should be used to make adjustments in the program if it points to practices that lead to superior results. When setting impact goals for the initiative in its first year, start with program goals that are realistic for your program's capacity to recruit, implement, and track outcomes, and then revisit these goals in subsequent years.





# OPTIONAL ELEMENTS

## TARGET SPECIFIC VOLUNTEER GROUPS

A city may wish to target specific volunteer groups to ensure consistent and reliable volunteer tutors.

- Older/retired adults and college students are good sources of volunteers because they typically have schedules that are conducive to tutoring during the school day.
- Volunteers who are members of the community in which they are serving are often the most invested volunteers.
- Volunteers who receive stipends, Federal Work/Study funds, expense reimbursements, or other incentives are held to a higher level of accountability, may be able to commit more time to the program, and are more likely to continue participation in subsequent years.

## EXPAND PROGRAM TO SERVE PRE-K YOUTH

Where cities have the capacity to widen the scope of Third Grade Reads, starting literacy interventions before kindergarten can further increase the long-term effects of this effort. Local partners such as Jumpstart, a national organization with local chapters dedicated to helping preschool children from low-income neighborhoods develop language and literacy skills, can provide helpful expertise in working with this younger population.





## THE PLAN IN ACTION

**There are many literacy programs in operation with models that have proven effective in making a significant difference in the reading skills of children before leaving third grade. These programs include:**

- **Reading Partners:** Engages working professionals, parents and guardians, students, and older adults on a completely voluntary basis. The average student in the program improves by 1.75 reading levels per year – helping to close the achievement gap and keeping students from falling further behind their peers.
- **Schools of Hope:** Engages diverse volunteers through a partnership between the United Way, RSVP, and the local school district. Volunteers, under the leadership of AmeriCorps members, tutor students in one-on-one settings in school. That work is then reinforced with students through a variety of reading and literacy activities to be completed by students at home. The program is credited with significantly closing the achievement gap.
- **Book Buddies:** Volunteer tutors work with struggling students from the Charlottesville, Virginia school district in a one-on-one setting inside the classroom twice a week to improve literacy. Eighty-five percent of participants read at grade level by the end of the program.

**Consistent in all of the above-mentioned programs are several factors for success:**

- A significant amount of pre-service and ongoing volunteer training, support, and supervision
- Regular volunteer monitoring, coaching, and reflection
- Volunteer appreciation
- A team approach and significant program presence that helps change the culture of the schools in which they are working
- Flexibility in adapting program components to meet the needs and limitations of partner schools







## LESSONS LEARNED

**Cities that have successfully developed and implemented K-3 literacy program initiatives have identified the following as critical lessons learned:**

- Administrators and teachers must both be supportive of the program goals and model (bringing tutors into the classroom, removing students from class to meet with tutors, or conducting tutoring sessions after school) and capable of providing the space and resources required for program success. Schools are partners, not just recipients.
- It is important to research schools and districts prior to establishing a formal agreement with them to determine whether program goals are achievable given the availability of school/district resources and the existence, if any, of barriers to successful program execution.
- Change is a constant in schools and the program partner and city government must develop a program that can change with the evolving needs and pressures of their education partners.





# RESOURCES

To learn more about any of the programs above, you can contact:

**A Community for Education (ACE)** [www.aceaustin.org](http://www.aceaustin.org)

**America Reads Tutoring Corps at University of Michigan**  
<http://ginsberg.umich.edu/article/america-reads-tutoring-corps>

**Book Buddies** [www.ccs.k12.va.us/programs/book\\_buddies.html](http://www.ccs.k12.va.us/programs/book_buddies.html)

**Experience Corps** [www.experiencecorps.org](http://www.experiencecorps.org)

**Jumpstart** [www.jstart.org](http://www.jstart.org)

**Minnesota Reading Corps** [www.minnesotareadingcorps.org](http://www.minnesotareadingcorps.org)

**Education Northwest** <http://educationnorthwest.org/>

**Reading Partners** [www.readingpartners.org](http://www.readingpartners.org)

**Madison Metropolitan School District Schools of Hope** [www.madison.k12.wi.us/soh](http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/soh)

**Strategies for Children, Early Education for All (EEA)** [www.strategiesforchildren.org](http://www.strategiesforchildren.org)

**Tutoring Partnership for Academic Excellence** [www.sppsfoundation.org/programs/tpae](http://www.sppsfoundation.org/programs/tpae)





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

One effective curriculum option is **Book Buddies: A Tutoring Framework for Struggling Readers**, available at amazon.com: <http://amzn.to/tl06E4>

One tool that is widely used is **DIBELS -Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills**: <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/>

**America Learns** provides an online system for tracking hours and providing ongoing assistance to tutors: - <http://americalearns.net>

**St. Paul Foundation** offers numerous useful resources:  
<http://www.saintpaulfoundation.org/>

**The University of Florida Learning Initiative (UFLI)** has developed a tested, research-based tutoring curriculum for beginning readers.

The full report is available at:  
<http://education.ufl.edu/literacy-initiative/>





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**Cities of Service** is a national nonprofit that designs and supports the implementation of high-impact service strategies that can be widely replicated in cities worldwide. We provide technical assistance, programmatic support, planning resources, and funding opportunities. Cities of Service supports a coalition of nearly 200 cities whose mayors are committed to using citizen volunteers to solve local pressing challenges, from engaging mentors to help decrease high school dropout rates to increasing energy efficiency in buildings. We help coalition cities share solutions, best practices, and lessons learned, as well as spread awareness about their great work.

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