



Evaluation Brief

August 2005

Department of Shared Accountability

Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network

Background

Research has consistently shown that well-designed and well-developed tutoring programs that use volunteers, cross-age groups, and other nonprofessionals as tutors can be effective in improving students' reading skills (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody, 2000). The Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading network has been instituted in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to provide tutoring for students in Grade 2 who are at risk of reading failure. The program utilizes volunteer tutors who are members of the community, parents, and students who meet weekly to work on improving reading fluency and comprehension.

Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network

The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), in partnership with the RFI Foundation, Comcast Cable, and the Montgomery County Government implemented the Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network during 2004–2005 in 56 targeted elementary schools to boost the reading proficiency scores of second graders. The program is funded in part by a \$270,000 contribution by Debby and Joshua Rales of the RFI Foundation, in honor of Joshua Rales' late mother, Ruth, and a contribution valued at \$1,000,000 over three years by Comcast Cable.

The Reading Network uses the scientifically research-based *Reading Together* program, which focuses on improving students' vocabulary, background knowledge, reading fluency, and comprehension. Through a grant from the Montgomery County Government to the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), community volunteers are recruited by three nonprofit organizations: Interages Inc., George B. Thomas, Sr. Learning Academy Inc., and Passion for Learning Inc. Tutors include volunteers from the community, fifth grade students, and parents, and other family members.

The school-based coordinators assigned to this project are all full-time staff members, most of whom are reading specialists. They trained, mentored, and coached tutors on the *Reading Together* program. The program was successfully implemented in 51 elementary schools that included 46 focus schools and 5 non-focus schools. A total of 332 volunteers from the community supported the program in 36 schools.

Principals of the 56 schools received information explaining the program in July 2004. By September 2004, most of these schools had assigned a school-based coordinator to be responsible for implementing the program at the local school level. These school-based coordinators attended a training session early in October, identified students, and were ready to implement the program by November.

Volunteer Recruitment

Many schools recruited their own volunteers or decided to implement the family or cross-age tutoring models. The three organizations responsible for volunteer recruitment successfully recruited 268 volunteers (Table 1). An additional 138 volunteers were recruited by the schools, 131 parents or family members volunteered, and 149 fifth grade students served as cross-age tutors.

The efforts of the skilled recruiters ensured participation of high caliber volunteers who represent the diversity of Montgomery County. The volunteer pool consisted of students who are in middle school, high school, and college as well as adults from the business sector, faith organizations, and retired citizens. Cumulative totals for each of the non-profit organizations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Number of Volunteers Recruited
by Organization

Organization	Volunteers Recruited
Interages	82
Passion for Learning	126
George B. Thomas	60
Total	268

Challenges During 2004–2005

As with any new initiative, there have been challenges in implementing the program.

Many schools began their programs in November or early December, although the volunteer recruiters were not yet available due to delays in DHHS contract approval. During this time, the schools relied on parents, other community volunteers, and

fifth grade students to provide tutoring services. Once volunteers were recruited, screened, and assigned to schools (January to March), it was difficult to integrate all of their requests (i.e., time constraints and specific schools) with programs that were already under way and effectively engaging students.

Methodology

During the 2004–2005 school year, data were collected for Grade 2 student participants. Scores from fall 2004 and spring 2005 MCPS local assessment test, Assessment Program–Primary Reading, were used for the analysis of student performance. A total of 220 students who received a minimum of 25 hours of tutoring assistance and had a complete data record of the second grade MCPS local assessment from the fall 2004 and spring 2005 administration were included in the analysis (Table 2). Students who attended 25 or more hours of tutoring received at least 83% of the possible tutoring opportunities.

Table 2
Number of Grade 2 Students Who Received
25 or More Hours of Tutoring

Hours of Tutoring	<i>N</i>
25	11
26	13
27	28
28	43
29	14
30	111
Total	220

Slightly more than half of the students were female (52.7%) and slightly less male (47.3%). African American students constituted 35.0% of the participants, Asian American 11.4%, Hispanic 26.8%, and White students 25.9%. Slightly more than

one third of students (36.4%) received Free and Reduced-price Meals System (FARMS) services. Less than one fifth (18.6%) of the participants received limited English proficiency (LEP) services, and slightly more than one in ten (11.4%) received special education services (Table 3).

Table 3
Number and Percentage of Students Receiving 25 or More Hours of Tutoring and Assessment Data by Demographics

Student Group	25 or more Hours (n=220)		29 or More Hours (n=125)	
	N	%	N	%
Male	104	47.3	61	48.8
Female	116	52.7	64	51.2
African American	77	35.0	43	34.4
Asian American	25	11.4	12	9.6
Hispanic	59	26.8	41	32.8
White	57	25.9	27	21.6
FARMS	80	36.4	38	30.4
Spec. Ed.	25	11.4	15	12.0
LEP	41	18.6	18	14.4

Student Performance

Only one of the 220 students met the grade level benchmark in fall 2004. By spring 2005, 60.0% of all students who received 29 or more hours of tutoring met the grade level benchmark. Additionally, 59.1% of students who received 25 or more hours met grade level benchmark (Table 4).

Table 4
Number and Percentage of Grade 2 Students Who Met Benchmark

Met Benchmark	25 or More Hours (n=220)		29 or more Hours (n=125)	
	N	%	N	%
Fall 2004	1	0.5	0	0
Spring 2005	130	59.1	75	60.0

Volunteer Perceptions

Survey responses were captured from the volunteer, cross-age, and parent¹ tutors. Overall, a very high percentage of tutors who participated in the Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network had positive experiences pertaining to their involvement in the tutoring program (ranging from 87% to 97% of respondents). Most of the respondents in each of the three population groups indicated that the reading skills of their children improved (ranging from 82% of volunteers to 95% of cross-age tutors).

Moreover, the majority of these tutors expressed their satisfaction with the following aspects of the tutoring program: volunteer recruitment, training, school environment, instructional features, and the availability of school personnel. Finally, a very high percentage of survey respondents from all three groups reported that they would recommend or strongly recommend participation in this tutoring program to a friend or a relative (ranging from 86% to 95%). (Attachment A includes a short summary of survey results organized in

¹ Surveys were distributed to volunteers, parents, and fifth grade students (cross-age) tutors. The survey response rate was 68% for cross age-tutors (n=102), 40% for volunteer tutors (n=120), and 24% for parent tutors (n=29).

three sections, addressing the findings for each of the study populations.)

Program Refinements for 2005–2006

- New program fliers were printed and are being distributed.
- A Web site (montgomeryschoolsmd.org/readingnetwork) was established.
- The Division of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) staff has contacted current volunteers to determine their availability and assignments for the fall.
- Ms. Peggy Graham, retired kindergarten teacher, is the new project specialist and is working collaboratively with DFPC staff, the schools, and other partners to help coordinate the program.
- The Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network telephone line (301-279-3890) is answered and monitored by DFPC staff. To ensure equity among contracted volunteer recruiters, all calls are logged in and prospective volunteers are assigned to the contracted recruiters on a rotating basis.
- Public service announcements to recruit volunteers will again be aired on 40 Comcast Cable channels in July, August, and September.
- Circulars advertising the program will be distributed by Comcast in August and September.
- Volunteers will be invited to attend one of the numerous scheduled systemwide volunteer trainings.
- Several organizations and businesses (e.g.; National Council for Greater Washington Jewish Literacy Council, Hadassah, Montgomery County Volunteer Center) have contacted the DFPC and are interested in supporting the program. Volunteer training will be co-ordinated with business groups and organizations and held on site.

- Volunteer tutors will receive a Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network identification tag and a tote bag for books and materials.

Recommendations

- Continue ongoing collaboration with contractor volunteer recruiters to ensure volunteers are screened, processed, and assigned to schools by November.
- Continue to collaborate with the Department of Shared Accountability on the program evaluation.
- Collaborate with the Office of Information and Organizational Systems to improve the data collection process for both tutors and tutees.
- Improve follow-up communication with school-based coordinators to ensure contact has been made with all registered volunteers.

References

- Elbaum, B., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. & Moody, S. (2000). How effective are one-to-one tutoring programs in reading for elementary students at risk for reading failure? A meta-analysis of the intervention research. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(4), 605–619.