Tutoring Young Students in Reading and Math

By Matt Weyer

According to the 2015 Nation’s Report Card, only 36 percent of third graders are reading at a proficient level or higher. This means nearly two out of three students are not reading proficiently. To further complicate matters, 82 percent of African-Americans and 79 percent of Latino third-graders were not reading at a proficient level.

Mathematics scores are generally low as well. In 2015, only 40 percent of fourth graders and 33 percent of eighth graders nationally scored proficient in math, slightly lower than 2013 scores. Mathematics proficiency, as early as kindergarten, has been demonstrated to be an even stronger predictor of future academic achievement than early reading proficiency.

Some states looking to elevate young students’ proficiency have turned to tutoring programs offered by AmeriCorps. Established in 1993 as part of the Corporation for National and Community Service, AmeriCorps is a federal program that connects Americans of all ages and backgrounds with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation.

Reading Tutoring (age 3–grade three). Research demonstrates that children not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate high school on time. Students living in poverty and not reading proficiently by the end of third grade were six times less likely to graduate high school than proficient readers.

Reading Corps, an AmeriCorps program, connects tutors with young students to improve literacy skills. The Reading Corps program began in Minnesota in 2003, serving 250 students during its inaugural year. As of 2016, the program has expanded to 12 states, plus Washington, D.C., and now serves nearly 40,000 students annually, and is one of the largest tutoring programs in the nation. States must enact legislation to fund the matching costs required by Reading Corps. In most programs, state and philanthropic partnerships are formed to provide the matching funds.

Reading Corps tutors provide daily, individualized instruction that is evidence-based and data-driven. These literacy interventions and skills practices are targeted for all students in prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms who have been identified through assessments. Tutors administer these assessments to predict and align with state third-grade reading proficiency levels. They help identify which students will benefit from the Reading Corps tutoring model and build the instructional capacity of schools. An independent evaluation showed that students receiving AmeriCorps reading tutoring significantly outperformed those who did not, as did dual language learners, students of color and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.
Mathematics Tutoring (grades four-eight). Low mathematics achievement poses a significant concern for the country’s future economic and global competitiveness as jobs are becoming increasingly technical and requiring more science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills. Minnesota’s mathematics tutoring program, Math Corps, is the only one of its kind under AmeriCorps and successfully serves students in fourth through eighth grades.

State Action
State lawmakers, aware of the importance of ensuring that all students are reading at grade level by the end of third grade, have been enacting legislation that focuses on third-grade reading ability. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia require some form of retention for students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade on the state-designated language arts assessment and eight states allow, but do not require, retention.

Fourteen states allow for “good cause” exemptions to retention, including alternative assessments, student portfolios (e.g., literacy projects and other demonstrations of ability), participating in an intervention and/or parent, teacher or principal recommendation. English language learners are generally exempted from retention if they have been enrolled in the district for three years or less in most states.

Federal Action
With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in late 2015, states now have multiple options for creating and funding tutoring programs such as Reading Corps and Math Corps. Three percent of Title I funding is devoted to direct student services such as tutoring. In addition, Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) is a competitive grant program that aims to improve literacy outcomes. Fifteen percent of appropriated LEARN funds must support children from birth through kindergarten, with an additional 40 percent supporting K-5 students. Finally, the Innovative Approaches to Literacy Program permits funding for early literacy services.

NCSL Contact and Resources
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Early Learning and Support webpage
Pre-Kindergarten-3rd Grade Literacy
Pre-Kindergarten-3rd Grade Mathematics
Education Bill Tracking Database

Additional Resources
Reading Corps
Minnesota Math Corps

Ensuring Reading Proficiency by the End of Third Grade

Requires retention for students who are not proficient
Allows but does not require retention
Legislation pending
* South Carolina will require retention with good cause exemptions beginning in the 2017-2018 school year. Nevada will do the same beginning July 1, 2019.

Source: NCSL, 2016