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AMERICA READS CAN SUCCEED

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College presidents have been asked to allocate half of all their new work study slots to college students to become America Reads tutors. The goal is to give 100,000 college work study students the opportunity to help children learn to read. Funds are to be released in time for students to begin tutoring in Fall, 1997.

President Clinton's proposal, America Reads, is an exciting idea. Large numbers of children who are living in poverty are further handicapped by poor literacy skills. Bringing Americorps Literacy Volunteers, university students, retirees and others from the community to tutor children seems to be an answer to a critical need. But questions are being raised about the feasibility of the plan. Will the volunteers simply read to children? Will they teach the children? Who will train the tutors? Who will train their supervisors? Will parents be involved? Will the volunteers' activities be related to the curriculum? What materials will be used? How costly are the materials? And the bottom line question: will the children be able to read and write by third grade?

Manzo and Sack (1997) interviewed several

reading authorities on the prospects for success of America Reads. Their responses agree with research on tutoring effectiveness over many years. **Tutoring in reading is highly effective when the tutors are trained and supervised.**

For the most part media attention has been given to only a few privately operated programs and a few federal literacy-related programs. However, several reading professors in universities and community volunteer organizations have developed effective literacy programs that fit the America Reads model. These programs need to be examined not only because of their quality, but because they are cost effective and can be replicated throughout the nation.

The SUCCEED program, operated in cooperation with Michigan State University, Capital Area Literacy Coalition and five school districts, for several years has been successfully increasing the literacy skills and love of reading and writing of children living in low-income neighborhoods. About 150 university students per semester take the SUCCEED (reading and tutor children for two hours a week, one on one. About half the university students enroll in a field and laboratories course for credit; the others volunteer. They are joined by other community volunteers in the schools, usually just after or just before the school day begins. Americorps Literacy VISTAS assist in the program.

The average reading grade level gain of the children is 2 years over a 1 year period. Many gain

2 years or more in one semester. In addition, children's writing, attitude, interests and classroom behaviors are examined and summarized. Family reading and participation are part of the program. In instances of parents in jail, having substance abuse problems or other difficulties, extended family members participate. (Werpshaw, 1997).

The SUCCEED program originated in 1984, when my colleague, Dr. Lonnie McIntyre, and I took 50 undergraduate and graduate students from our classes to tutor in an inner city school, one hour a week, after school. Because we were with the children for only one hour, our students were asked to plan an interesting reading or writing activity the children could do on their own between tutoring sessions. At the end of the year we post-tested the children, analyzed our observations and declared the experiment a success. Not until a year and half later did we statistically analyze our data and realize how successful the program really was. The only reason we ran the data was that we had been asked to contribute research to the **Journal of Children and Youth, Fall, 1986**.

In 1990, I was asked to implement the program in another Lansing school. In this setting I pursued a hunch I had about the program's previous success and I asked the reading specialist who was supportive, but not involved with the program, if she would ask the teachers for their written observations about children from their classrooms who were program participants. Teachers were

nearly unanimous in noting that children were volunteering more in class, seemed more confident, and asked to read aloud (the books they had written with their tutors). I concluded that while the children were learning from their tutors, they were also better able to learn from their teachers. (Bader & Henderson, 1992).

My next concern was whether SUCCEED could be implemented by volunteers who were not connected with the university or the Literacy Coalition. A group called the Ministry of Hope in Port Huron, Michigan, had been tutoring inner city children and requested the SUCCEED program. Tutors were guided through the basic program in one session. N. Colby and H. Rutherford (August 1, 1996) wrote to say that 90% of their children had gained one or two grade levels in reading after three months.

Another question was answered regarding volunteers' ability to assess children's reading proficiency with the **Bader Reading and Language Inventory** when Project Read in Redwood City, California, reported that they 'had verified their volunteers' assessments with elementary school reading specialists over a seven year period and had always been within a half year of agreement (Endaya, 1996). This also verified the research conducted by Dr. McIntyre and my own experience.

Over the last seven years the SUCCEED program has been improved with more support

materials for tutors, site supervisors and teachers. Evaluation procedures have been made more explicit and efficient. E-mail is used for trouble shooting in addition to follow-up workshops and informal assistance at the sites. The demand for the program exceeds our resources.

My own experiences with the SUCCEED program and reports from colleagues lead me to believe that President Clinton's proposal can and does work. A substantial increase in Americorps Literacy VISTAS, increased university and community college support and funding for volunteer literacy organizations will produce a huge number of literacy volunteers across the nation that will have America's children reading. In the SUCCEED program materials are, for the most part, donated, used children's books. Our Americorps VISTAS have collected and distributed over 65,000 children's books. The children are helped to read the books they choose, and they can take them home and keep them. They write their own books and engage in reading and writing activities that are purposeful. The alphabet letters they use to build words are made from computer fonts, printed and chopped into squares. We use some small slates, 3" by 5" cards and we buy a few special materials for children with learning difficulties, but nothing is very expensive. Our site supervisors are provided with learner centered instructional guides to meet specific skill needs along with thematic instruction ideas to build on children's interests. These

instructions are brief and clear.

We collect reflection papers from the tutors. One of the best responses from a child to his tutor was: "Until I met you, I didn't know I was smart." It is no wonder that many of our university tutors have changed their majors to education. The rewards of helping children are very satisfying. The education majors say that the experience has clarified reading and writing processes so that they feel better prepared for classroom teaching.

The time has come for all of us to work together and share our expertise and our programs to make America Reads a success. We have the knowledge. Do we have the will to help hundreds of thousands of children, living in poverty, learn to read and write so that they can have a better life for themselves and their children?

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