

# Narratives

## Executive Summary

The Literacy Lab's Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program proposes to have 9 AmeriCorps members who will provide low-income pre-K children with daily literacy intervention in high-need Washington, DC pre-K classrooms. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for significantly increasing the Kindergarten preparedness of 93 pre-K children. This program will focus on the CNCS focus area of Education. The CNCS investment of \$51,570 in Segal Education Awards will be leveraged with an investment by The Literacy Lab of \$301,739.

## Rationale and Approach/Program Design

### 1. PROBLEM/NEED

90% of a person's brain develops by age 5 (Jernigan and Tallal, 1990; Reiss et al., 1996; Schaefer et al., 1990). These few short, early years present a window of opportunity to build a strong foundation for a lifetime of educational and economic success -- or put a child at risk for the lifelong negative consequences associated with low literacy levels. The Literacy Lab's Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program will address the need for high-quality early childhood education to improve school readiness and reading levels for children in the District of Columbia by placing 14 full-time members to serve as literacy tutors in high-need Head Start pre-Kindergarten classes in Title I schools. Each member will be placed in one Head Start pre-Kindergarten classroom for the entire school year and will deliver daily, evidence-based whole group, small group, and one-on-one literacy instruction to children. This additional capacity in the classroom will help ensure that each child receives what he or she needs to be prepared for Kindergarten and beyond.

The Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program targets low-income children who are at risk for reading failure and reside in Washington, DC. The District of Columbia has a large literacy gap which leads to an opportunity gap for many children. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, DC is ranked last (51st out of 51 states) for having the widest gap in reading scores between high- and low-income 4th graders. Nearly 60% of DC third graders failed the 2012 DC-CAS reading test, and by the end of fourth grade 77% of students read below grade level (NAEP, 2013). By the end of eighth grade, this figure reaches 81% (NAEP, 2013).

This literacy achievement gap begins very early and reflects a disparity in exposure to language-rich environments between children in low-income households and their middle- to high-income peers. Around one in three DC children lives in poverty, meaning they are more likely to lack access to

## Narratives

language-rich environments and opportunities to foster the early linguistic development essential to their future academic success (KidsCount Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation). Children from wealthier families have heard 30 million more words than children from low-income families by age three (Early Warning, Annie E. Casey Foundation).

This literacy achievement gap affects students for the rest of their lives. Children who do not read on grade level by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time and are more likely to be incarcerated, to live in poverty, to struggle with poor health, and to become the parents of children who also struggle to read (The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy, World Literacy Foundation, 2012).

The key to reversing these trends is high-quality preschool education, which research has shown to effectively prepare children to succeed in school long-term ("The Evidence Base on Preschool Education," Society for Research in Child Development, 2013). The Pre-K DC Reading Corps program will serve fourteen Head Start classrooms in seven DCPS elementary schools, including six "priority" schools (those scoring in the bottom 5% city-wide). Five of our school sites are located in Wards 7 and 8, which have the city's highest rates of children living in poverty: 40% and 51% respectively. Wards 7 and 8 also had 50% and 49% adult illiteracy rates, according to the most recent State of Adult Literacy Report. The average 3rd grade reading proficiency rate at our seven proposed school sites is only 24%, meaning that these schools have a critical need for additional evidence-based early childhood literacy interventions to support their youngest students in building a strong foundation of early literacy skills.

## 2. THEORY OF CHANGE AND LOGIC MODEL

The Literacy Lab's Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program is a replication of the evidence-based Minnesota Reading Corps, the nation's largest state AmeriCorps program, and is designed to address the previously described literacy gap. The Reading Corps model is being replicated in the District of Columbia by The Literacy Lab, a DC-based non-profit that is an official national replication partner of the Minnesota Reading Corps.

Pre-K DC Reading Corps members' roles and responsibilities follow the methods and systems that have been researched and honed over the past 10 years by the Minnesota Reading Corps. Pre-K DC Reading Corps members will serve as reading tutors in high-need pre-kindergarten classes providing

## **Narratives**

one-on-one, small group, and whole class literacy tutoring to Pre-K children five days per week with service hours of 8AM-4PM. Tutors will work in conjunction with the teaching and support staff at their schools and will not supplant existing positions.

Pre-K DC Reading Corps tutors provide embedded and explicit language and literacy support to all students in their class throughout the daily routines, including: Arrival, Sign-in, Large Group, Choice Time, Meal Time, Small Group, and Transitions. Members will be trained to conduct benchmark assessments of all students and use the assessment results to track growth. Members will collaborate with an Internal Coach (school-based site supervisor) to determine which interventions to implement based on the unique needs of each child. The interventions that members provide are structured and scripted and focus on repeated read aloud, oral language, visual discrimination, and phonological awareness. Each member will tutor approximately 20 children in these interventions over the course of each school year.

This intervention is likely to lead to the proposed outcomes because research has shown that providing a literacy-rich early childhood environment combined with frequent one-on-one reading intervention for targeted students aligned with core classroom instruction is an effective way to increase school readiness and set children up to be on grade level in reading in elementary school. DC Reading Corps Pre-K members will produce significant contributions by providing the skilled people power necessary to meet children's individual literacy needs and bolster high-need schools in a time of shrinking budgets and growing class sizes. When children enter pre-Kindergarten with low exposure to language and text, they require one-on-one and small group attention to catch up and become ready for Kindergarten. Early childhood teachers can have as many as 25 children in their classes and do not have the time to reach every child with one-on-one attention. Members fill this gap and address low early literacy skills by providing children with consistent, structured early literacy interventions that have a strong research and evidence base.

### **3. EVIDENCE BASE**

The Pre-K DC Reading Corps intervention program has "moderate" evidence to support its efficacy because it has had one Quasi-Experimental Design study. CNCS commissioned a Quasi-Experimental Design outcome evaluation study of the pre-K Reading Corps program in 2013. The study was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago during the 2013-14 school year using a matched

## Narratives

comparison site model with 26 program sites and 26 non-program sites. The study, which was released by CNCS in March 2015, found the following:

- Reading Corps pre-K participants were found to be Kindergarten ready in 5 of 5 early literacy areas. Students at non-program sites were found to be Kindergarten ready in only 1 of 5 early literacy areas.
- "Statistically significant" effect sizes were found in all 5 early literacy areas.
- The program was found to be equally effective for all students regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, dual language learner status, economic status, or school type.
- The program is highly replicable, provides comprehensive initial and ongoing training, and leads to more intentional teaching.
- The program was found to affect the entire classroom instructional culture.

In addition to the Quasi-Experimental Design study, Dr. David Parker, the Minnesota Reading Corps Research Department's lead researcher, also conducted a program evaluation on The Literacy Lab's Virginia Reading Corps pre-K program in the 2013-14 school year. The evaluation, dated October 2014, investigated the program's outcomes (which align with those proposed for the DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program) and found the following:

- The program's 12 full-time pre-K Reading Corps members provided service to 255 children (ED 20), 190 of whom completed the program (ED 21).
- 89% of 4- and 5-year old participants showed significant gains in at least 4 out of 5 early literacy areas from fall to spring benchmark assessment, indicating increased literacy skills and school readiness (ED 24).

#### 4. MEMBER TRAINING

DC Reading Corps Pre-K members will be prepared for their service through the following three orientation and training components:

1) Five-day pre-service training (August 10-14, 2015): Part 1: AmeriCorps Orientation (Days 1-2): Topics covered include AmeriCorps 101, national service, disability inclusion, program expectations and requirements, and prohibited activities. Materials include an AmeriCorps Handbook, sample timesheets, and an AmeriCorps org chart. Members sign their contracts during this portion of training, which will be provided by Literacy Lab staff and the Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program

## Narratives

Manager. Part 2: DC Reading Corps Pre-K Training (Days 3-5) Topics to include: 1) The Reading Corps Mission, 2) Schools and Communities, 3) Reading Fundamentals, 4) Assessments and Data, and 5) Intervention Training and Practice. Materials include: Intervention binders, research articles, video clips, sample assessment materials. This portion of training will be provided by Reading Corps-certified Master Coaches and national trainers from the Reading Corps National Team.

2) Ongoing Training: Ongoing trainings will be held monthly. Topics will include: Student Data Management, Data-based Decision Making, Cultural Competency, Working with Challenging Behaviors, Active Citizenship, and Life after AmeriCorps. The Master Coach and DC Reading Corps Pre-K staff will deliver ongoing trainings.

3) Individualized On-Site Coaching: The Master Coach, a literacy expert consultant supporting the members, will provide individualized on-site modeling of intervention techniques, assessment, and instructional planning at school sites.

Prohibited activities and other key regulations will be reviewed with members and volunteers at their pre-service orientation and will be reinforced in member communication throughout the year. Members will be required to sign a contract before they begin their year of service; this contract outlines prohibited activities and AmeriCorps policies. The Program Manager will monitor for prohibited activities during scheduled site visits (3x/year/site) and member timesheet audits (monthly).

### 5. MEMBER SUPERVISION

Members will receive three levels of supervision and coaching: 1) Each member will be assigned an Internal Coach, a site-based school employee who will supervise and support members' daily activities on site. Internal Coaches are required to observe and provide written feedback to each member twice a month. Internal Coaches help members ensure that tutoring is aligned with classroom instruction. 2) Members are given further supervision regarding student progress, assessment, and literacy instruction from a program-wide Master Coach (consultant), an expert in literacy and assessment. The Master Coach will visit each site monthly to conduct member observations, provide written feedback, and participate in student progress graph review meetings to support data-based decision making. 3) The Program Manager supports and supervises members in terms of AmeriCorps

## **Narratives**

requirements and reporting. The Program Manager will monitor performance data, maintain member files and other documentation required by CNCS, support sites in handling member disciplinary issues, and visit sites regularly to ensure that members are meeting program goals and requirements.

School principals select an Internal Coach from among their school staff. Principals must designate 5% of this person's time for each member placed at the school. School district partners have committed to designate Internal Coaches at all partner sites. Internal coaches receive 50 hours of training per year in the Reading Corps model and in AmeriCorps supervision during an initial 3-day training in August and monthly support at their site provided by the Master Coach. The Master Coach will be trained to become a certified Reading Corps trainer prior to the program launch. The Program Manager will be trained by The Literacy Lab's National Program Director in a week-long Program Management Institute in June 2015.

The Reading Corps model's strong supervisory structure helps members build new skills and experience success, leading to greater program enrollment and retention.

### **6. MEMBER EXPERIENCE**

With the structured curriculum and training provided by The Literacy Lab, members will develop a strong skill set in early literacy intervention, early childhood education, and use of data. The Literacy Lab will hold a "Life After AmeriCorps" professional development session that will help members connect their service with career opportunities. In The Literacy Lab's other AmeriCorps programs, this has included bringing in a panel of education employers to speak with members. We also provide members with structured opportunities for reflection through a "Professional Learning Group" (PLG) system whereby members are assigned to a small group at the beginning of the program year. PLGs meet monthly to reflect on service and to connect socially outside of the more formal programmatic meetings and trainings. The Program Director provides suggested activities, and members are encouraged to learn from one another during PLG meetings. The PLG system helps build esprit de corps and also gives members a chance to connect their service to the community at large by planning for Days of Service. The program will also hold a mid-year retreat where members reflect on their service to date and set personal goals for how they will remain engaged in service after their AmeriCorps commitment is over.

## **Narratives**

The Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program will recruit members from the communities where it will operate by targeting local colleges and universities and by partnering with local organizations with deep community connections such as the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative, DC LISC, and the five DC Family Support Collaboratives (Columbia Heights/Shaw, East River, Edgewood/Brookland, Far Southeast, and Georgia Avenue).

### **7. COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTIFICATION**

The Literacy Lab's Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program will ensure that members are aware of their identity as AmeriCorps members in the following ways: members will be trained in AmeriCorps 101 and how to talk about their service during summer institute, members will participate in an opening ceremony where they will take the AmeriCorps pledge, and all members will be given 5 pieces of gear with the AmeriCorps logo as well as an AmeriCorps lanyard. Members are required to wear the AmeriCorps lanyard at all times and the AmeriCorps-branded gear at least 3 days per week. Each site will be given an AmeriCorps site sign to post prominently to identify the site's affiliation with AmeriCorps, a highly visible statement to the community.

## **Organizational Capability**

### **1. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING**

The mission of The Literacy Lab is to provide low-income children with individualized reading instruction in order to increase their literacy levels, leading to improved academic success and greater opportunities in life. The Literacy Lab was founded in 2009 by Teach for America and AmeriCorps alumna Ashley Johnson based on the community needs that she saw daily in her DC Public Schools classroom. Since 2009, The Literacy Lab has provided intensive reading intervention to over 3,000 children.

The Literacy Lab has strong connections with DC Public Schools that it has built over the last six years. DCPS' Office of Specialized Instruction, which manages Early Childhood Education, has identified the Pre-K DC Reading Corps program as a key piece of its strategy to improve early literacy skills. Over the past year, The Literacy Lab has held meetings and site visits with Dr. Nathaniel Beers, Chief of the Office of Specialized Instruction, Monica Liang-Aguirre, Deputy Chief of Early Childhood Education, and Lori Chabay, Director of Early Childhood Curriculum and Instruction. The Literacy

## Narratives

Lab has worked with this team to jointly select placement schools and to align the Reading Corps with DCPS' early childhood priorities. As a result of this collaboration and with DCPS' belief in the power of the model, DCPS has made a financial commitment to support the Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program.

The Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program will be managed by a Program Director (Sarah-Rose Dorton, an AmeriCorps alumna). This Program Director will spend 50% of her time managing the 14 members requested through this grant. The Literacy Lab will provide management, training, and support to the Pre-K DC Reading Corps Program. This support will include finance, accounting, and grants management and oversight.

The Literacy Lab is an official national replication partner of the Minnesota Reading Corps, which adds additional capacity for the DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program. The Literacy Lab's program management team has implemented the Reading Corps Pre-K program for two years in Virginia.

The Literacy Lab has significant experience with federal grants management. The organization has received five separate AmeriCorps grants since 2012. The Literacy Lab has also received a 21st Century Learning Center Grant through the Department of Education. A site visit to the program in 2015 reported no findings and called the program "a model for other organizations". The Literacy Lab's FY 2014 A-133 Audit of federal funds had no findings and offered an unqualified opinion, the highest possible rating.

In terms of grants management, The Literacy Lab has been designated a low-risk grantee by Serve DC and had no findings from a CNCS financial monitoring visit in June 2014. The organization has extensive experience using various reporting systems including Salesforce, eGrants, OnCorps, and the Payment Management System and has a perfect record of on-time reporting for progress reports, interim financial reports, and Federal Financial Reports. The Literacy Lab works with a team of accountants at Raffa P.C., a firm specializing in non-profit accounting, to track all grant-related finances through a fund-based system. These accountants do a monthly close of the organization's books, which provides an additional independent layer of controls.

The Pre-K DC Reading Corps program is the result of a months-long process of community

## Narratives

engagement and collaboration on the local level. In addition to collaborating with DC Public School's Office of Specialized Instruction, the organization is also partnering with the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative to provide the program in the neighborhood's elementary school. Literacy Lab staff members have also engaged with Elizabeth Groginsky, the Assistant Superintendent of Early Learning at the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE). Additionally, The Literacy Lab participates in the DC Early Childhood Education Network and has discussed the DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program with many providers. The feedback we have received is that there is a great need and demand for data-driven, research-based early literacy intervention and people to implement interventions across the District.

### 2. COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Literacy Lab's DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program will prevent compliance issues in the following ways: 1) Site agreement: all sites will be required sign a site agreement which will clearly outline the rules and regulations, including prohibited activities. 2) Member contract: all members will be trained on and required to sign a contract before they can begin their year of service. This contract clearly outlines the term of service, responsibilities of the position, prohibited activities (listed explicitly), grievance procedures, non-displacement policy, equal opportunity employment and non-discrimination statement, inclusive environment statement, and drug-free work place. 3) Ongoing training: all staff members will be trained in prohibited activities (including providing real-world examples of when prohibited activities might arise), applicable OMB circulars, and the Code of Federal Regulations.

The Literacy Lab will use the Internal Control Checklist from National Service Resources to detect any fiscal non-compliance at the end of the first and third quarters each year. To detect for non-compliance regarding prohibited activities, the Program Manager will flag questionable situations, conduct member and site supervisor interviews, and ask open-ended questions of members and site supervisors.

The Literacy Lab holds itself accountable by formally evaluating all staff members two times per year and by integrating AmeriCorps compliance and performance measures into all Program Managers' goals. The organization also holds itself accountable by providing the report of the Internal Controls Checklist to its Board of Directors two times per year as well as by undergoing an annual audit and

## Narratives

sharing the results with grantors. The Literacy Lab will hold sites accountable by conducting an annual site compliance checklist and then meeting with the school administrator and Internal Coach to review the report. The Literacy Lab will transfer members to alternate sites if repeated instances of noncompliance occur. The site agreement is explicit and outlines the procedure for transferring a member to a new site if a site is not following the agreement.

The DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program will use the following structures to ensure compliance with AmeriCorps rules and regulations, particularly those related to prohibited activities, and to ensure fidelity in program implementation: 1) Programmatic Level: The Program Manager will conduct a minimum of three site visits per school per year to meet with Internal Coaches and members to monitor service activities on-site, including monitoring for prohibited activities, using a standardized AmeriCorps Site Compliance Checklist. The Program Manager will also conduct internal audits of member files (2x/year) and member timesheets (monthly) to monitor for prohibited and allowable activities. 2) Site Level: Internal Coaches will monitor members' activities on a daily basis and will ensure that prohibited activities are not taking place. Internal coaches will observe members' sessions two times per month and will report in writing to the member and Program Manager using a standardized fidelity checklist. 3) Student Level: The Master Coach will observe members with students at least once per month and meet with each member monthly to review and discuss student progress. 4) Data Level: The Reading Corps uses a custom-built database called EdSpring where all student and assessment data is tracked. Program staff monitors data in EdSpring to ensure member accountability.

3. PAST PERFORMANCE: N/A- We have not received funding for this project in the past 3 years.

### **Budget/Cost Effectiveness**

The Literacy Lab will invest \$301,739 in this project to ensure that its 14 members are fully supported, the model is followed with fidelity, and that all regulations are followed. The Literacy Lab has obtained cash resources from private funders and through school district contracts to carry out the proposed program effectively. The Literacy Lab has financial commitments totaling \$301,739 from DC Public Schools (local funds), the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative (private funds), the Andrew and Julie Klingenstein Family Fund (private funds), and the Horning Family Fund (private funds) that will be used to cover all operating costs for this program. The funding that we have raised will provide \$21,553 per member for the following major expenses: 50% of one full-time Program Manager, one

## Narratives

Master Coach (consultant) to support members, member training and ongoing professional development, living allowances for 14 full-time members at \$15,400 per member, health insurance for members, other necessary support costs such as FICA, criminal history checks, participation in trainings and conferences, and overhead expenses such as accounting, grants management, and liability insurance. We understand that we need to be prepared to take on any and all costs associated with the operations of this program to carry out the project as proposed, and as a partner with other current AmeriCorps grants, we have a good understanding of what those costs are. The Literacy Lab is requesting 14 Segal Education Awards for the DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program but has secured all other necessary funding.

The program design is cost effective because it delivers a quadruple bottom line result: 1) Helping low-income students in high-need schools achieve school readiness; 2) Providing members with valuable career skills while deepening their connection to their communities and national service; 3) Building school and community capacity; and 4) Reducing the need for costly remedial intervention when children who are not school ready enter the K-12 system. Furthermore, as a replication of the Minnesota Reading Corps, a nationally-recognized AmeriCorps program, the DC Reading Corps Pre-K Program achieves cost efficiencies and economies of scale by sharing costs on the data warehouse, assessment systems, evaluations, and trainings. Finally, since The Literacy Lab has raised all funds needed to operate the program, this is a way for the Corporation for National and Community Service to create more service opportunities in a cost-effective way for the agency.

### **Evaluation Summary or Plan**

N/A

### **Amendment Justification**

N/A

### **Clarification Summary**

#### **A. PROGRAMMATIC CLARIFICATIONS**

1. Members serving as Pre-K DC Reading Corps tutors only conduct the specific Reading Corps interventions in which they have been trained and tutors do not conduct duties of teachers or paraprofessionals. Each site director or principal must sign a site agreement that outlines the specific

## Narratives

duties of the Pre-K DC Reading Corps tutor. These duties, which are outlined in a member position description, include conducting Reading Corps assessments (separate from what the teacher may do) and conducting whole group, small group, and one-on-one literacy interventions following the scripted Reading Corps curriculum. These interventions are in addition to what the teacher may do and are the sole responsibility of the Pre-K DC Reading Corps tutor, and the interventions do not duplicate what the teacher or assistant would already do because it is a separate curriculum and program. The tutors serve as an additional person in the class whose sole responsibility is to implement the Reading Corps Pre-K model. At the beginning of the year, each tutor creates a daily schedule showing which Reading Corps intervention he or she will be doing at each point during the day and with which students. During nap time and recess, tutors use their time to enter data and to prepare materials for their interventions. This site agreement also specifies that tutors do not count towards class ratio which means that they cannot be left to supervise the class nor can they conduct the duties of the classroom staff members. There are three layers of support to ensure that tutors do not do anything that is outside of the bounds of the site agreement and their member position description and to ensure that the site is aware of the role of the AmeriCorps member and that the member is not duplicating efforts. First, there is the Program Director who monitors time sheet entries and accompanying notes and conducts visits to the site to see the tutor in action. Next, there is the Internal Coach who is a school staff members who is the on-site supervisor of the tutor who monitors their activities on a daily basis. The Internal Coach is trained in the Reading Corps model and is trained in the duties of the Reading Corps members. Finally, there is a Master Coach on The Literacy Lab's staff who ensures that tutors are spending all of their time conducting Reading Corps interventions. Master Coaches support the school sites and the tutors in ensuring that the Pre-K Reading Corps program is implemented with fidelity.

2. We removed the match amount and moved it to "Other Revenue" on the demographics section.

### B. PERFORMANCE MEASURE CLARIFICATION

1. The program will ensure that enrolled children qualify as economically disadvantaged by referencing school data on the percentage of children receiving free or reduced price lunch. Per the Performance Measure instructions, "Economically Disadvantaged" is defined as "eligible for free or reduced lunch or enrolled in a school where the majority of students are eligible for free or reduced

## Narratives

lunch". In the school sites where tutors will be serving, the percentages of children qualifying for free or reduced price lunch are as follows: Aiton ES: 99% FRPL, Amidon-Bowen ES: 99% FRPL, CW Harris ES: 99% FRPL, Thomas ES: 99% FRPL, Turner: 99% FRPL. All of our sites have the vast majority of students receiving free or reduced price lunch (average of school sites for DC Pre-K Reading Corps program is 99% of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch) and as such, the students we serve per ED 20 and 21 meet the definition of "Economically Disadvantaged".

2. ED 21 Completion Metric: Students will be considered to have completed the program if they have scores for at least two out of the three benchmark assessments. These assessments take place with all students in September, January, and May and students must have scores for at least two out of these three windows to be considered to have completed the program and students must be in attendance for the months between the assessments. This means that students must be in the program for at least 5 months to be considered to have completed the program for ED 21. Based on this measure, we expect 176 children to complete the program. This information has also been added to the performance measure portal for ED 21.

Additional Clarification: The Literacy Lab requested a change to 9 MSYs in August due to changes which occurred since notification was later than expected and occurred after the school year had already started.

### Continuation Changes

N/A

### Grant Characteristics