



# NIOST

National Institute on  
Out-of-School Time

## Afterschool and Out-of-School Time Rebound Subgrants: Reading Rally Initiative

Summary of Findings  
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## Overview

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021, Public Law 117-2, was enacted on March 11, 2021. The ARP provided additional funding for school districts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Education portion of ARP is known as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III or ARP ESSER) Fund. The purpose of the ESSER III fund was to support the safe reopening and sustaining safe operations of schools while meeting students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) offered a competitive grant titled "The Afterschool & Out-of-School Time Rebound Subgrants (ASOST-R Subgrant)" to fund several regional or statewide non-profit entities with the ability to subgrant and provide wraparound support to afterschool and out-of-school time (ASOST) programs. The overall goal of the grant was to help ASOST programs rebound and strengthen the quality of services, counteracting the impacts of COVID-19 and thereby improve learning and social-emotional outcomes. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College served as a partner to DESE, providing professional development, technical assistance, and research support.

During Year 3, in partnership with seven ASOST-R subgrantee programs, NIOST launched the Reading Rally Initiative, a paired reading program in which older youth in grades 3-6 (Readers) read with younger youth in grades K-2 (Buddies). This initiative was intended to provide an opportunity for youth to build relationships with each other, engage in literacy skill building, and generate interest and excitement about reading.

In January 2024, NIOST delivered forty books (Accelerated Reader Level 2.0 – 4.9) to each of the seven sites and provided training to the volunteer older Readers, offering tips and guidance for partner reading. Training included suggested methods of engagement and tips for paired reading. Each week, programs set aside 30-60 minutes of program time for pairs to meet and read together throughout the spring semester. Programs were encouraged to provide a separate, quiet space for readers where each pair could choose a comfortable spot to read together. Some programs added extension and follow-up activities related to book content. While participants were consistent from week to week, three of the seven programs reported changing Buddies frequently, while the other programs kept specific pairings through the duration of the program.

## Research

Research suggests that partner reading creates an environment for academic learning in which children are engaged and motivated to be successful (Pilonieta et al., 2020). According to Pilonieta et al. (2020) partner reading gives more opportunities for reading, grows fluency with monitoring practices, and creates an environment where children have an opportunity to participate in and contribute to literacy tasks successfully. Spontaneous thoughts and predictions in the partnered reading settings were much more prevalent compared to when the teacher read aloud to the whole class and children were nearly silent. Within the partner reading setting, Pilonieta et al. (2020) found that conversations between partners flowed more naturally. Other research has demonstrated that children who engage in dialogic partner reading often make “invitations that provoke thoughtful responses (e.g., authentic questions, asking for clarifications and explanations); extended contributions that may include justifications and explanations; critical engagement with ideas [that challenge and build on one another]; links and connections; [and] attempts to reach consensus by resolving discrepancies” (Vrikki et al., 2019). This finding supports Vygotsky’s (1932) social learning perspective and the idea that knowledge is shaped and developed through social interactions.

Partner reading has been shown to foster a space for children to be inquisitive, leading to improved vocabulary learning and knowledge (Silva & Cain, 2019). The side-by-side nature of partner reading can promote the use of questions when reading aloud. Silva and Cain (2019) explain that questions allow children to take turns in conversation and practice extended discourse, bring attention to critical pieces of what makes a good story, shape reasoning and an understanding of structural elements in the story, and narrow focus into the story by minimizing cognitive demands. Questions are a particularly integral element in language production.

An investigation of children's experiences reading aloud using interactive books showed that reading buddy activities can offer a space to practice social and emotional learning skills and collaboration (Wang et al., 2019). Partner reading allowed children who were more confident readers to offer help to their partners who were still developing skills. In the paired reading approach, children may have felt more comfortable asking one another for help versus being in a larger group where they would be more likely to remain quiet (Wang et al., 2019).

## Methods

To gain greater understanding of the impact of the Reading Rally Initiative on its participants, NIOST researchers conducted focus groups with Readers across four of the seven sites. The average size of the focus groups was four youth. Researchers obtained parent permission for participation in the focus groups and each group lasted approximately 30 minutes. Focus group questions pertained to two main topics:

1. What were the Readers experiences with the Reading Rally program?
2. What challenges did the Readers encounter throughout their reading sessions with the Buddies?

## Findings

Overall, Readers reported positively on their participation in the Reading Rally Initiative. Benefits reported by Readers included building reading and language skills for Buddies as well as themselves. Readers found opportunities to practice leadership skills as well as problem-solving strategies in their efforts to keep the younger Buddies engaged. Forming personal connections with their reading Buddy was a favorite aspect of the Reading Rally reported by Readers in each of the four focus groups.



### *Reading and Language Skills*

When talking about their experience and positive benefits of the program, Readers across all four focus groups commented that participation in Reading Rally offered helpful reading and language practice for both Buddies and Readers. The Readers reported allowing Buddies to read sections of the book out loud, which was helpful practice and introduced new words. One Reader reported: "I liked Reading Rally because it taught the little kids some reading. I let them sound out stuff. They would read the easier words...and it was fun."

Readers recounted helping Buddies with words they got stuck on when reading. Readers described using a variety of methods for helping the Buddies with vocabulary such as using context clues to guess word meanings or practicing writing sentences with the new words, in addition to just generally defining them. One Reader noted that some of their methods imitated strategies used by teachers in their own classrooms. Readers also expressed that reading aloud to the younger Buddies helped their own reading skills and to sound out difficult words on their own.

[Buddies would] ask questions on what [certain words] mean. It's kind of hard to explain it if it's a hard word. My teacher tells me to write and say the sentence with the definition. So I try to explain it [that way].

-Focus Group Participant

"I enjoyed it a lot because it helped me with my fluency practice...because if I'm reading out loud, [when] I get stuck on a word...my dad or mom [normally] have to help me. So it helped me read smoother, so I liked it a lot."

-Focus Group Participant



### ***Engaging Younger Readers***

Readers in each of the focus groups reported one primary challenge: keeping Buddies engaged throughout the reading sessions. Readers became adept at using multiple strategies they were trained on when encountering these challenges such as: (a) allowing Buddies to choose which books to read; (b) inviting Buddies to predict a book's storyline based on the cover/illustrations; (c) asking Buddies open-ended questions throughout the reading of the story; (d) giving Buddies breaks to move around; (e) rewarding engagement with special toys or manipulatives to hold; (f) moving reading locations to comfortable areas free of distractions; and (g) facilitating, with staff help, post-reading activities that related in theme or content to the books. Readers also connected their positive reading experiences to changing Buddy perceptions of reading, and sometimes their own, as an activity choice.

"Before I would pick a book with my partner, I'd be like 'Are you sure you want to read this book?' Because the first time I ask they might say yes, but the second time, they might flip through and say they aren't that interested. So I'd give them a few chances and if they always say yes, then I'd know it's a good book."

-Focus Group Participant

"[Sometimes] I wouldn't show [the Buddies] the pictures, I would just read the words and I would give them a piece of paper and a pencil and I would [invite] them to draw out what they thought the picture was."

-Focus Group Participant



“I like when we start reading. They get right into it and the funny books they laugh at and it's fun for them. It gets them reading more because you are showing them its sometimes fun.”

“I like how they get to see the book and all the imagination and writing the author did. We are trying to persuade them to like reading, because not everyone in the room likes reading. I didn't like reading before and now I love reading.”



### ***Forming Personal Connections***

Making connections with younger children was one of the favorite elements of Reading Rally indicated by the Readers. One reader reported: “I really enjoyed getting to connect with the kids more and reading to them.” Readers commented on the supportive and comfortable relationships they shared with Buddies with one Reader saying: “When we are reading to them they can show off their real expressions. Sometimes they feel scared doing that with a teacher.” Readers noted that Buddies appeared more engaged when they found a book to be comical. Across all the focus groups, the most popular book reported was *Creepy Crayon* by Aaron Reynolds, which follows the story of a young rabbit who partners with a crayon to improve in school. Readers across multiple focus groups preferred “funny books” because they enjoyed making the Buddies laugh. One Reader summarized: “It's fun to read to the kids because they laugh and that makes them happy.” This also impacted how some Readers carried out their reading time activities, with one Reader in a focus group reporting, “We want to make the books funny so they have fun and laugh. We would do the first book serious and then the second book funny. And it was fun for me because I got to connect with the little kids and they connected with me.”

### **Discussion**

The Reading Rally program paired older children with younger reading partners which created structured time for partner read-alouds and reading-related activities. This initiative allowed the Readers to independently lead and innovate activities with the goal of fostering excitement and engagement in reading for their younger partners. The organizing approach of the Reading Rally Initiative was based on the established benefits of partner reading as noted in reading research, both for the older Readers and the younger Buddies. Encountering unknown vocabulary provided learning benefits for both Readers and Buddies. During the focus groups, Readers cited improvements in language and reading skills for themselves and their Buddies.

Reading Rally offered a unique opportunity for children serving as Readers to also practice leadership and problem-solving skills. Readers were creative in managing younger children's engagement and occasional behavior challenges, and took advantage of the freedom these roles gave them to create and personalize reading experiences and activities for their Buddies. The paired reading approach also served as a benefit because it organized structured collaboration between children of different ages, pushing the children to find ways to connect and communicate. Readers across the focus groups highlighted their appreciation for the connections they had made through Reading Rally; not only in meeting new children and encouraging them to read, but also in learning how to communicate effectively and build personal connections.

It is noteworthy that Readers found their reading time with Buddies often filled with laughter and enjoyment. As demonstrated in paired reading research, the tone and environment of the peer connection can optimize spontaneous thoughts and extend discussion and contributions. All of these skills are critically important, in general, for the development of young children towards successful school and career pathways.

## References

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