

Tutor program in Albuquerque could set the pace for rest of NM

By Rick Nathanson /Journal Staff Writer

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An Albuquerque Reads tutor shares an enthusiastic moment with one of her kindergarten students at Whittier Elementary School in this file photo provided by the program. Albuquerque Reads operates during the school years in three local schools. (Courtesy of Albuquerque Reads)



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One longtime, local tutoring program for struggling students at three Albuquerque schools could serve as a template for other schools and districts in New Mexico – assuming enough tutors could be recruited.

Now in its 18th year of operation, Albuquerque Reads is a project of the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and works in conjunction with Albuquerque Public Schools to provide one-on-one tutoring to kindergartners and first graders.

The program, which has stayed relatively small by design and capacity since its inception, currently targets three elementary schools – Bel-Air, Whittier and Atrisco – all identified by APS as high-priority Title 1 schools with high numbers of low-income children who are at risk of reading failure, program director Margarita Rodriguez-Corriere said.



Margarita Rodriguez-Corriere

Working in tandem with classroom teachers, Albuquerque Reads has more than 300 volunteer tutors trained by certified teachers. Each volunteer provides 90 minutes a week of literacy instruction to one child. The program serves an average of 250 children a year, each of whom gets one-on-one in-classroom instruction in reading and writing skills.

Successful track record

The program’s reading improvement rate has been steady and impressive in its ability to bring struggling students to grade level.

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According to APS evaluations and national assessments, Rodriguez-Corriere said, at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, an average of only 24% of the kindergartners and first graders at these schools were reading at grade level, while 45% of students were considered “seriously below grade level,” meaning 1.5 to three years behind.



Scott Darnell

By early March, as schools were forced to close because of the pandemic, the average number of students reading at or close to grade level had jumped to 42%, she said.

Many of the tutors are retired teachers, as well as retired and active duty members of the military, college students and working professionals, “so there is an inter-generational component to this program,” said Scott Darnell, who oversees the Chamber of Commerce’s programs and policies.

“These kids want and need to have positive adult role models in their lives,” he said. “The key is instruction that is one-on-one, frequent, and with consistent interaction between a caring adult role model and a child.”

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Building home libraries

In addition, every student participant in the program over the course of a year receives about 20 free books to take home and build a home library, “and having books at home is a strong indicator and determinant of reading proficiency,” Rodriguez-Corriere said.

Darnell said he has had discussions with APS officials about expanding the program, but not to other schools. Instead, the goal in the near future is to expand the program in the existing schools into second grade and then the all-important third grade.

Educators say that a child needs to learn to read by third grade, so that he or she can read to learn by fourth grade. According to New Mexico Voices for Children, three out of four fourth graders in New Mexico, about 76%, are not reading at grade level, and the inability to read at the appropriate level by fourth grade is a predictor that the child is four times more likely to drop out of high school.

“By expanding the program within the three existing Title 1 schools, we can ensure our ability to maximize and maintain the gains of the kids at those schools, as well as maintain fidelity to the model, which is that every child gets significant amounts of one-on-one tutoring,” Darnell said. “Ultimately, the challenge with expansion is primarily related to the ability to find enough volunteer tutors to serve in the program.”

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A transferable program

The Albuquerque Reads program is available and its organizers willing to train others should another group wish to set up such a system in other districts or schools around the state.

“They could simply take our curriculum and programming and apply it,” Darnell said. “It’s definitely transferable and scalable and we would certainly be able to share it.”

Madelyn Serna Mármol, associate superintendent of Equity, Instruction, Innovation and Support for APS, confirmed that the district is interested in having Albuquerque Reads expand the program to additional grades in the three schools where it is currently operating.

But even though the program has been successful and “the template is workable” for expansion to other schools in the district, she said, the limiting obstacle is the same one encountered by the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce – trying to recruit and train enough tutors.

“Any opportunity for us to work with the Chamber of Commerce and the community is great, and APS is grateful to them and all the volunteers who come in to help our students and support our schools,” Mármol said. “It’s a wonderful thing.”

Albuquerque Reads has an annual budget of \$72,000, which comes from an allocation provided by the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce and from private donations.

For further information about Albuquerque Reads, call 505-843-7323, or go online to abqreads.com.

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