

# Inspiring Arizona's Youth to Help Solve the Literacy Crisis

Sophie Etchart 16 May 2017

Arizona has a literacy crisis: students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school than their counterparts. Yet, 72 percent of the state's third graders cannot read at grade level, and 85 percent of these struggling third graders are from low-income families. This means in their lifetime they are significantly more likely to struggle with unemployment, engage in crime, have higher rates of divorce, and suffer serious, costly medical conditions. We cannot let this be the fate of 72 percent of our children.

Research shows that third grade is a pivotal year in the academic career of all young people. After third grade, students are no longer taught how to read in the classroom. Instead, they are taught how to apply their reading skills to master other subjects. Three-quarters of students who are poor readers in third grade are likely to remain poor readers in high school, have more social and behavioral issues, and are more likely to drop out of high school (Anne E. Casey Foundation). Due to Arizona's recent implementation of the 2014 "Move on When

Reading" law, third graders who fall below state standards will no longer be promoted to fourth grade.

At Read Better Be Better (RBBB), we know that literacy is a stepping stone to academic and life-long success. RBBB's mission is to help children improve literacy skills and become better learners. We create change by helping children master reading comprehension in three ways: improving concentration, encouraging an active enjoyment of reading, and developing a deeper understanding of what is being read. RBBB is a simple model with smart details. We train eighth grade volunteers to implement a simple, but highly structured after-school program for third graders. The older students commit to working one-on-one with the younger students for a full semester, modeling and fostering active engagement with a variety of texts. The program also includes constructive play activities specifically chosen to help students focus their attention and improve concentration. These vital cognitive skills are directly linked to the improvement of reading proficiency. By empowering youth to help solve Arizona's literacy crisis, RBBB benefits two groups of children at significant developmental milestones, and in turn, our literacy program is changing the life trajectory of struggling students.



Here's how we do it: at the start of each semester, RBBB's Program Manager delivers an educational and motivational presentation to middle-grade students at each school. The presentation informs students about Arizona's literacy crisis and inspires them to get involved. Students submit job applications, and teachers and staff help RBBB identify the best candidates for the program. These students receive thorough training to equip them to be effective "Bigs" in the RBBB program. At the same time, third grade teachers identify students who are struggling with reading comprehension and would most benefit from participation in RBBB. These third graders become RBBB's "Littles".

Once all participants are identified and trained, the Bigs and Littles attend two ninety-minute after-school sessions each week. The Site Leader, a RBBB staff person, greets

students with a handshake and takes attendance, while students enjoy a healthy snack -- for some, the only healthy food they may have that day. Littles add their name to the behavior chart on the wall, which Bigs adjust throughout the session to reflect each student's effort, allowing for recognition of excelling students. The Littles decide which book they would like to read, fostering a sense of autonomy.

For the first forty-five minutes, Bigs work one-on-one with Littles, following a preset lesson plan focused on literacy skills. After this, the Littles who have excelled according to the behavior chart choose a group activity from the following program components, proven to improve focus, self-esteem, and empathy: Be A Better Thinker (e.g., board games), Be a Better Mover (e.g., yoga), or Be A Better Reader (e.g., extended comprehension activities). This program is evidence-based and proven to improve participants' reading comprehension, confidence, and enjoyment of school. 99 percent of participants report they would attend the program again next year, if they could. Upon completion of the program, Bigs and Littles are recognized for their accomplishments at a graduation ceremony.

An independent evaluation funded by Valley of the Sun United Way found that RBBB's program has significant impact on third grade participants' self-perception as readers in terms of their observational comparison skills, social feedback skills, and physiological state. The

program improves third graders' general perception of themselves as readers and of their own academic progress. Importantly, the evaluation found significant improvement on third grade state standardized tests scores, including the AIMSweb and Dibels tests.

The evaluation also found that using eighth grade students to facilitate the program offers further differentiated impact. These older students significantly improve their own literacy skills, as seen in improved standardized test scores, and the program strongly increases their feelings of social and personal responsibility. Research shows that service learning positively affects student achievement and engagement. Older students were evaluated at the beginning and end of each semester along five markers of social and personal responsibility: attitudes regarding social welfare and duty, competency to take responsibility, efficacy regarding responsibility, and performance of responsible acts. Participants showed improvement in all five categories. Not only does this stem the tide of dropouts, but it creates a generation of youth who are academically prepared for success in college and who possess a strong sense of civic responsibility.

The literacy crisis in Arizona is relevant to all of us, and is one of the most pressing social justice issues affecting our state today. RBBB's solution is simple, smart and scalable. Since we piloted our program in the Spring 2015 with two partner schools, we have grown from serving

sixty-four students that first semester to six hundred and thirty-four students in the Spring 2017 semester across thirteen partner schools. Our processes allow for an affordable and easy roll-out; each semester, we will continue to expand the program by one school district, recruiting and engaging additional passionate site staff each time, with a goal of reaching 6,800 students annually by 2021.

Arizona's literacy crisis disproportionately affects students from low-income families. The long-term effects of illiteracy, such as high rates of unemployment, create an intergenerational cycle of poverty. Therefore, RBBB targets students at schools in low-income neighborhoods. Currently, RBBB programs are offered at all elementary schools across the Avondale, Tolleson and Osborn Elementary School Districts. In Fall 2017, RBBB is set to expand to seven additional schools in the Washington Elementary District.

Each RBBB site costs fourteen thousand, five hundred dollars annually to implement. These costs include wages for direct program staff such as Site Leaders, District Leaders, and the Program Manager; supplies such as pencils, snacks, and books; printing and copying; and program evaluations completed at the start and end of each semester. Individual donations, grants, and tax credits are RBBB's main sources of funding. RBBB also works with each district partner to fundraise, operating on a sliding revenue scale: after the pilot year, we ask for a

ten percent opt-in per year, increasing ten percent each year until the fifth year. To date, one hundred percent of our partner schools have allocated funds to RBBB before the ten percent opt-in even starts, to ensure that our program is reaching the students in their school who need it most. The need is overwhelming, but by empowering Arizona's youth, we can solve this crisis together.