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The Role of External Support Providers in Improving K–3 Reading Outcomes in New York City

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years, an entirely new industry of "intermediary organizations" and "support providers" has emerged to help schools and districts improve (Hatch, 2002; Honig, 2004; Rowan, 2002) K-3 reading outcomes in New York City. These support providers include those that focus on creating new schools or turning around old ones (for example organizations such as Success for All and Expeditionary Learning) as well as others that work directly with students, teachers, or both to improve instruction and outcomes in particular subject areas like reading (such as

> **A new industry of *intermediary organizations* and *support providers* has emerged to help schools & districts improve K-3 reading outcomes.**

Reading Recovery). Illustrating the growth of this industry, in 2001, the Catalog of School Reform Models listed 63 different organizations focused on school improvement with 48 (76%) established after 1980 and only one in existence before 1960 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001). In 2018, a survey of 13 state websites revealed 151 of these organizations focused primarily on "turning around" low-performing schools Meyers & VanGronigen (2018).

This brief provides a summary of the results of a project designed to help build the collective capacity and increase the impact of programs working to improve K-3 reading outcomes in New York City public elementary schools (the "K-3 reading improvement sector"). The first phase of this project identified all of the programs working in the sector in 2015 and then examined the extent to which a sample of programs have the goals, resources, personnel to improve K-3 reading outcomes across New York City. In 2016-17, the second phase of this project mapped the relationships among a sample of sector programs, the sources they rely on to support their work, and the NYC schools with whom they partner. Making these relationships visible shows to what extent students from different backgrounds and schools get access to valuable information, resources, and expertise, and the extent to which programs are in a position to increase their collective impact through coordination and collaboration.

> [PODCAST]
> Thomas Hatch: Mapping New York City's 'School Improvement Industry'
> https://cprehub.org/research-minutes

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Determining the most appropriate next steps to improve the effectiveness of support providers depends on developing a much better sense of the number, goals, strategies, and connections among those providers currently at work in a given location. To fill this gap, with the support of the New York Community Trust and the Brooke Astor Fund for New York City Education, we launched a three-phase project to assess the collective capacity of the programs working in New York City public elementary schools to improve K-3 reading outcomes. We assessed the collective capacity of this K-3 reading improvement sector by addressing four questions:

1. **How many programs focus on improving reading outcomes at the K–3 level in New York City public elementary schools?**

   **Over 100 programs are working in the K-3 Reading Improvement Sector in NYC**

   - Only those programs that worked directly with teachers and/or students on an ongoing basis in at least one New York City elementary school in 2015 were counted. (Programs that only provide curricula and materials or provide services for students or teachers but do not have an ongoing relationship with at least one school are not included.)
   - Programs included a variety of local/community-based programs, tutoring services, and university affiliates. 52% of the programs provide professional development to teachers; 40% provide services directly to students; and 8%work with both teachers and students.

2. **To what extent do programs have goals, resources, and personnel that can contribute to improved K–3 reading outcomes?**

   The programs in the reading improvement sector focus on a wide-range of reading-related goals, but there is no common focus and limited evidence of effectiveness

   - Almost half of the sample programs (41%) focused on a specific literacy skill, with the largest number concentrating on comprehension (19%). The remaining programs addressed goals like getting students to read at grade level or enabling students to meet reading standards (see Figure 1).
   - The programs working with students were more likely to focus on specific skills or general goals like reading at grade level. Programs working with teachers or working with both teachers and students were more likely to focus on goals like Common Core standards or balanced literacy.
   - 72% of the sample programs reported using assessments for students focused explicitly on reading and another 9% of the programs assess teachers' instruction. However, 19% reported that they did not assessments for either students or teachers.
   - 19% of the programs had publicly available evaluations carried out by independent evaluators; 25% produced their own internal evaluations; 34% carried out internal progress monitoring; and 22% reported they did not carry out an evaluation or internal monitoring of their outcomes.

Figure 1. Reading Goals by Program Type (percentage)

Number of programs (%)
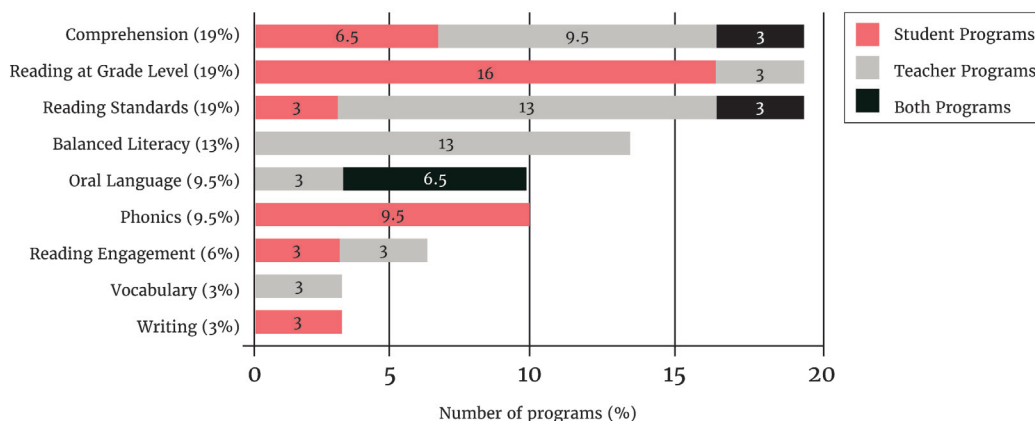
Although these programs are not required to, they either hire personnel with a B.A. or more or provide training for their staff members.

- Every program working with teachers or working with both teachers and students required staff to have either a bachelor's degree or a graduate degree, and all but one of these teacher programs required staff members to have teaching experience.

- All of the programs working directly with students provided training for their staff members and 62% required training specifically related to reading. However, only 23% of the programs working directly with students reported no specific qualifications for staff and four (31%) only required a high school diploma, and only one required teaching experience.

3. Which NYC public elementary schools have access to the resources and support of the Sector?

26 sample programs are connected to 161 different schools across all five boroughs, comprising 16% of all elementary schools in NYC.

The 161 partner schools include 28% of the elementary schools in the Bronx and 26% of the elementary schools in Manhattan, with high concentrations in the northern parts of the borough (see Figure 2).

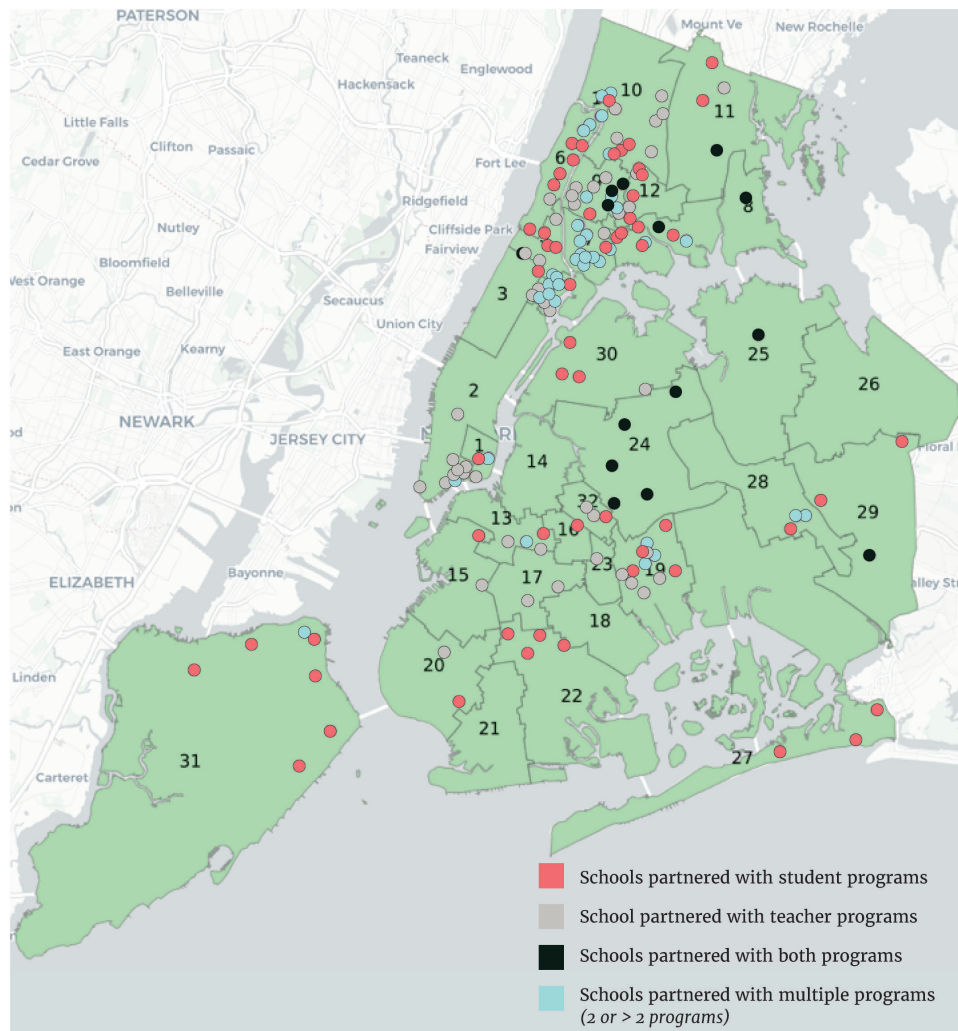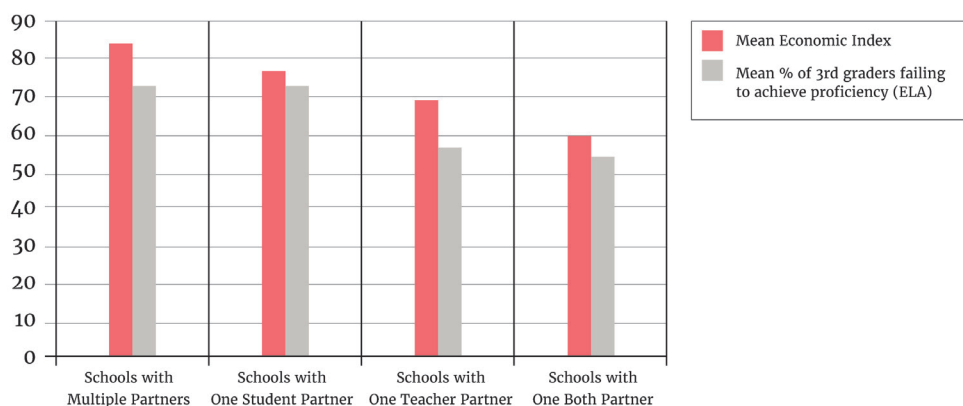Figure 2. Geographic map of partner schools

Figure 3. School Partners Mean % Economic Index and % Failing to Reach Proficiency

Overall, the programs are partnering with relatively high levels of need in terms both performance and poverty (as measured by the percentages of students who fail to achieve proficiency on New York State's 3rd grade ELA exam and by the percentage of students with a high "Economic Index" based on: a) the percentages of students in temporary housing; b) eligible for Health Reimbursement Arrangements; and c) eligible for free lunch). Nonetheless, these data also suggest that schools with higher levels of need are partnering with different numbers and kinds of program. Schools that partner with multiple programs or with student programs have higher levels of need than schools that partner with teacher programs and programs serving both students and teachers (see Figure 3).

4. **To what extent are programs positioned to increase their collective impact in the future?**

To get a sense of the extent to which programs in the sector are positioned to share information with one another, to coordinate services, and to increase their collective impact, we explored three questions:

- How are the programs in the sector connected to one another?
- Where do the programs get their funding?
- What sources do they turn to for expertise?

To address these questions we conducted interviews and a social network survey with a sample of sector programs in 2016-17. We found:

Just over half of thirty sample programs (57%) describe themselves as being in collaboration ("working informally") or partnership ("working together formally") with at least one other sample program (see Figure 4).

- 43% of the sample programs also report being in at least monthly contact with another program (monthly contact is generally considered "frequent contact" and serves as the standard for regular exchanges of information, resources, and expertise).
- 33% of the sample programs are working in partnership with multiple programs.
- Most of the frequently connected programs and those in collaborations/partnerships work directly with students or with students and teachers.
- The programs cited most frequently as collaborators or partners tend to participate in collaborative groups underwritten by local funders.
- Although a cluster of sample programs were regularly connected, over half of the sample programs were not in regular contact with other sample programs, and one third reported no frequent contacts, collaborations, or partnerships with other sector programs.

Figure 4. Network of program relationships reported among sample programs
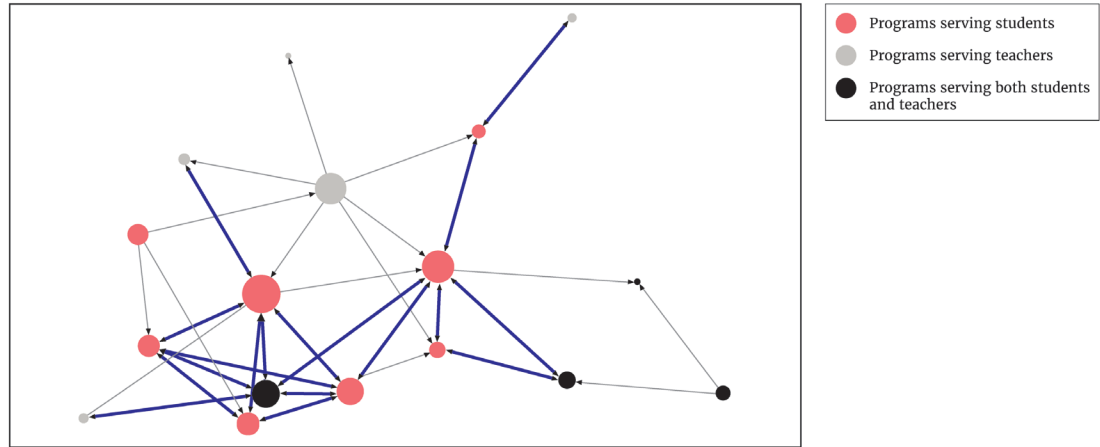

Figure 5. Network of relationships between sample programs and charitable foundations, corporations, government agencies, and non-profit organizations
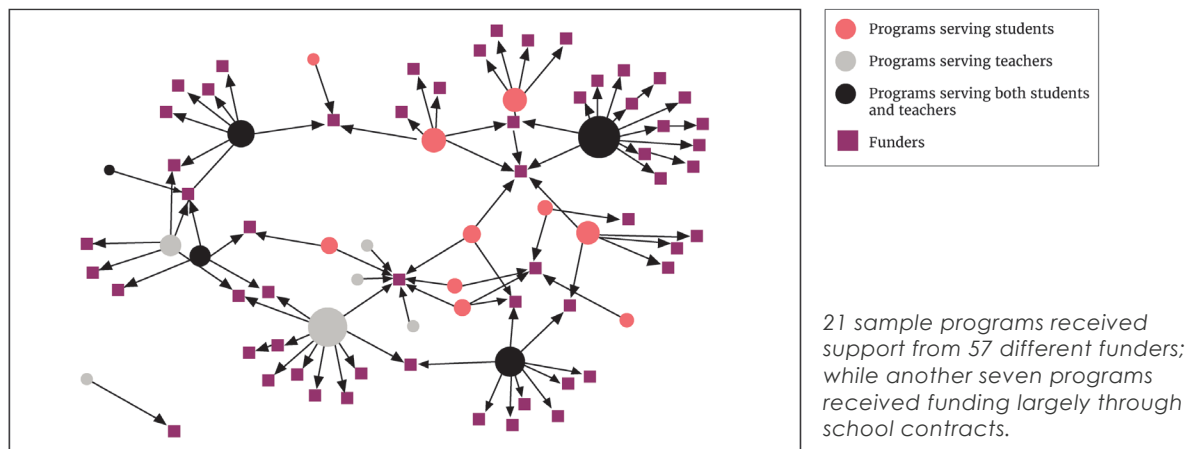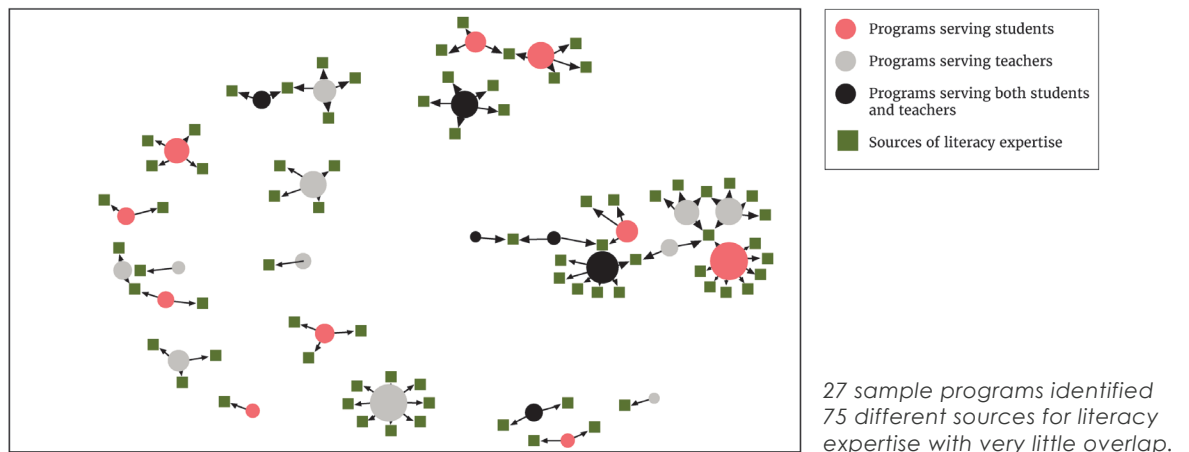

21 sample programs received support from 57 different funders; while another seven programs received funding largely through school contracts.

Figure 6. Network of relationships between sample programs and sources of literacy expertise

27 sample programs identified 75 different sources for literacy expertise with very little overlap.

21 sample programs received support from 57 different funders (see Figure 5); while another 7 programs received funding largely through school contracts

27 sample programs identified 75 different sources for literacy expertise with very little overlap (see Figure 6)

- No source was mentioned by more than four programs

- The most common source was the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE)

- Three programs did not identify any sources of literacy expertise

18 programs named 31 sources for professional development expertise

- 12 programs did not identify any sources of professional development expertise

- Of the 12 programs that did not name a professional development source, five were teacher programs, three were student programs, and three were programs serving both teachers and students.

Implications & Next Steps

Taken together, these results show that sector programs have goals, services, and personnel that could help to improve K-3 reading outcomes in New York City. The fact that 26 sample programs work in 161 of all public elementary schools in New York City shows that the programs in the sector may already work in a majority of New York City public elementary schools and could serve as a conduit for sharing resources and expertise throughout the City. However, the goals of the programs vary considerably; student and teacher programs differ in terms of their goals and personnel, and only a few programs have had formal outside evaluations completed. Further, different kinds of schools may be getting access to different kinds of support and resources. In particular, many of the highest poverty schools partner with multiple programs, which provides access to more resources and personnel, but may also contribute to fragmentation and problems of coordination.

In addition to the variety of goals, the differences among the student and teacher programs, and the differences in access among partner schools, the collective impact of the sector also suffers from the evidence that many programs are engaged in related but largely independent work. Furthermore, the programs in the sector are informed by a wide range of sources of funding and expertise that are themselves likely to be only loosely connected. The unconnected programs and the disparate sources of funding and expertise mean that most of these programs have to demonstrate their effectiveness while working independently of other programs. The fact that only three of the teacher programs reported frequent contact with other sample programs and that five teacher programs did not name a source of professional development expertise also indicates that these programs may be operating even more independently than the student programs within the sector. Nonetheless, there are several clusters of programs that are frequently connected and working in collaborations or partnerships. These clusters could serve as a powerful force for focus and collaboration in reading improvement across the city.

Given these results, no single strategy will be sufficient to build the collective capacity of the sector moving forward. Instead, different approaches are needed to take advantage of the different strengths of the programs working with students and those working with teachers and to promote greater collective impact on reading outcomes across the City.

1. **Create an inventory and "map" that shows all the programs working in the sector and the schools with which they partner**

   Instituting a bi-annual inventory of all the sector programs and "mapping" their partner schools could highlight gaps in services and identify underserved schools and neighborhoods. Schools and programs could also use this information to make more strategic choices about who to work with and to facilitate coordination when schools have multiple program partners.

2. **Identify common needs, assessments, and tools to promote coherence across the sector**

    The NYC Department of Education or an alliance of sector programs could establish common areas of focus or standards to help ensure the quality and consistency of work. Programs could continue to address different goals and needs but the shared understanding would facilitate alignment and consistency. In addition to articulating key local needs or goals related to elementary reading, productive developments would include standards for the "dosage" or extent of services support providers should offer; sharing of common reading assessments; identification of core practices for reading instruction; and creation of workshops for program personnel to support their use of common assessments and effective practices.

3. **Foster strategic alliances among programs working with students and programs working with teachers**

    Productive collaborations among student and teacher programs could both deepen their work and expand their reach. "Matching" support from afterschool programs for students and in-school programs for teachers and/or students would be particularly effective, and the adoption of complementary goals and common assessments could help to magnify effects. Identifying the obstacles and opportunities for collaborations among a small number of complementary programs could also help to provide a foundation for more coordinated work in the future.

4. **Build broader coalitions for neighborhood impact**

    Schools can benefit from the support of sector programs, but many different people and institutions can help to create opportunities for students to learn to read that support collective impact in different communities and neighborhoods. In New York City, for example, East New York Reads (in Brooklyn) and the Neighborhood Literacy Initiative (in South Jamaica, Queens), already bring together some sector programs with local community organizations and institutions like the Brooklyn and Queens Public Libraries.

5. **Create a local "hub" to share information and expertise**

    Education leaders, policymakers, and funders need to balance efforts to promote coordination in the sector with the recognition that imposing narrow goals and evaluation measures can reduce the flexibility needed to meet the local needs of schools. Creating a "hub" organization and/or an annual forum for educators, community members, funders, and researchers, could foster that balance by facilitating connections, sharing information about reading research, and supporting reflection on progress and sector development.

Conclusion

Strategies like these begin with the recognition that investments need to be made in building the capacity of both external support providers and schools. They promote coordination and coherence in the sector while striving to avoid the excessive regulation that can reduce flexibility and adaptability. In the process, these strategies establish a middle way between producing more bureaucratic requirements and letting "1000 flowers bloom."

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Support