

# Florida Center for Reading Research

## Sound Partners

### What is Sound Partners?

*Sound Partners* is a supplementary tutoring program that emphasizes phonemic and alphabetic skills, phonemic decoding skills, and assisted oral reading practice with decodable texts. Researchers designed *Sound Partners* specifically for first graders at-risk for reading failure but it may also be used with second and third grade students experiencing difficulty with letter sounds and decoding skills. The goal of *Sound Partners* is to accelerate students' ability to read grade level text so they may fully participate in classroom reading instruction. A supervisor who may be a reading coach, a reading teacher, or a special education teacher oversees the implementation and ongoing tutoring of *Sound Partners*. These trained tutors deliver one-on-one instruction 4-5 days a week for 30 minutes.

The *Sound Partners* program contains a detailed scope and sequence that represents the sequential order of each lesson's components and clearly delineates the systematic instruction. The explicitness of the scope and sequence highlights each lesson's major objectives and reveals how lessons gradually unfold by beginning with easier skills and progressing to more difficult skills. Each *Sound Partners* lesson consists of 7-10 brief activities that vary and change over the course of instruction and include the following components: letter sound knowledge, phoneme segmentation, word reading, sight words, spelling practice, sentence reading, fluency, and book reading. The phonics-based skills activities are designed for immediate application during book reading. As lessons progress, the amount of time spent on skills instruction decreases while book reading increases.

The *Sound Partners* program materials are clearly written, well-organized, and easy to use. They include a Lesson Book, a Tutor Handbook, an Implementation Manual, sound cards, and decodable readers. During a lesson, the tutor and student sit side by side with the Lesson Book, where each page contains the tutor's script on one side of the page with the student information in large print next to it. The tutor's script is concise, related to the lesson's objectives, and requires a minimal amount of space. The Implementation Manual, to be used by the person who oversees the tutors, contains a description of the lesson components, pertinent information pertaining to the implementation of the lessons, the training and observation of tutors, as well as a summary of the research base for the *Sound Partners* program. The Tutor's Handbook consists of detailed information on all of the lesson components, correction procedures, Mastery Tests after each 10 lessons, sound cards, a pronunciation guide, and other useful tools. Tutors may access an auditory guide to sound pronunciations for letters and letter combinations with the following link: <http://www.wri.edu.org/partners/lettersounds.mp3>. The Implementation Manual provides a variety of recommendations on student identification for and student placement into the program as well as how to identify tutors for teaching.



## How is Sound Partners aligned with Current Research?

*Sound Partners* is a phonics-based tutoring program that includes dimensions of phonemic awareness, fluency and comprehension. Vocabulary instruction is not specifically addressed, but tutors are asked to address vocabulary incidentally, as the need arises. One of the program's goals is for students to achieve automaticity with the subskills of reading in order to facilitate phonemic decoding.

The instructional design of *Sound Partners* includes many features that are helpful for struggling readers. Instruction is explicit and systematic with consistent instructional routines that include teacher modeling and multiple opportunities for practice. To address student mastery, cycles of review are built into lessons; additionally, the tutor is trained to give specific corrective feedback and to scaffold difficult tasks. Although there is a prescribed order of skills in the program, the tutor is given many examples of how to further individualize lessons according to student need, such as giving extra practice, re-teaching certain key skills, students rereading the sentence after error correction, and adjusting the pacing of lessons.

Phonics instruction involves teaching and providing practice with the letter sound relationships of individual letters, consonant digraphs, blends, vowel teams, and a small number of prefixes and suffixes. Letter sounds are taught in isolation and in context, and key words are associated with each sound. If a student has difficulty with the sound /ea/, a tutor might use the following example to scaffold instruction: ea, leaf, /ea/ (letter names, key word, and letter sound). Students also receive practice with common word endings such as -s, -ed, -ing, and -y. Once a foundation of letter sound relationships has been built, students learn an explicit process for decoding words with silent e, and they learn the variant spellings and pronunciations of letter sound relationships.

Activities in segmenting, blending, and spelling provide the student practice with previously taught phonic elements. A phonemic awareness activity in segmenting uses Elkonin boxes as a visual cue so that as the student says each sound in a word, sh/e points to a box. During word reading, the student learns to segment and blend the individual sounds of words and then read a sentence composed of those words. If the student has difficulty with specific letter sounds, the tutor may ask the student to identify the initial, final, and medial sounds of some of the words. Students practice spelling by writing letter sounds, words, and sight words. Sight word practice focuses on words which do not follow regular spelling patterns: the tutor says the word, the student reads the word, points to each letter, spells the word, and reads the word again. In later lessons, students learn a chunking strategy to read multisyllable words and words with prefixes and suffixes.

The final part of each *Sound Partners* lesson consists of oral story reading using the decodable Bob Books where students have the opportunity to apply previously taught skills and to develop fluency. Stories are read multiple times, and tutors are encouraged to ask comprehension questions targeting prior knowledge, prediction, story retell, and the story's most important ideas.

Professional development for *Sound Partners* varies depending upon the resources of a school's staff. For schools with reading coaches or reading specialists, the program's Implementation Manual sufficiently outlines the tutor coordinator's role. Two additional types of training are provided for a fee by the program's developers: a 6-hour training for tutors, or a full-day training for trainers. This training is also offered through Educational Resources, Inc. Numerous research studies of *Sound Partners* indicate that the program's effectiveness is contingent upon the use of trained tutors and fidelity of implementation.

## Research Support for Sound Partners

The *Sound Partners* program was developed as a means to supplement instruction for first graders struggling with beginning reading skills. Researchers designed, field tested, and evaluated the program from 1993-1997. Since 1998, the program has been tested in several studies, each examining which instructional components are most effective when implemented by trained paraprofessionals. The *Sound Partners* research has been supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, and all of the studies have been published in peer reviewed journals. One evaluation of *Sound Partners* was conducted by independent investigators using an earlier version of the program. Additionally, the *Sound Partners* program is included in two meta-analyses of research on early interventions. This report summarizes the studies that examined the efficacy of the present version of the *Sound Partners* program.

A longitudinal, quasi-experimental study was conducted in a large urban school district in the Pacific Northwest (Vadasy, Sanders, Peyton, & Jenkins, 2002). The study examined two questions. 1) Was there added benefit to continuing tutoring into



second grade for at-risk students who had received supplemental phonics tutoring in first grade? 2) Did students who were not identified for tutoring until the beginning of second grade earn higher reading scores than similarly identified students who were not tutored? This study included three treatment groups and one control group: *Sound Partners Only* (n=13) students received tutoring in first grade only; *Sound Partners* and *Thinking Partners* (n=26) students received *Sound Partners* in first grade and *Thinking Partners* in second grade; *Thinking Partners* (n=10) students received tutoring in second grade only; the control group (n=16) received only classroom reading instruction in first and second grade. The *Sound Partners* program is described earlier in this report. *Thinking Partners* (Vadasy, Valencia, & Jenkins, 1999) is an assisted reading and comprehension strategy program. Tutoring sessions occurred for 30 minutes, 4 days a week for 35 weeks. Of the 12 public elementary schools participating in the study, six schools provided control students only, four schools provided only treatment students, and two schools provided both treatment and control students. Pretests included a variety of measures such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-R (PPVT-R) (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) and the Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R) (Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984) Reading and Spelling Subtests. Posttests for first grade were the same but did not include the PPVT-R. Posttests at the end of second grade were identical with the addition of a fluency measure from the Informal Reading Inventory (Burns & Roe, 1999). Four reading passages, two expository and two narrative, decodable and nondecodable (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, & Rogers, 1999; Oakhill, 1984) were chosen to measure inferential skills. Each passage included 5-7 inferential and literal questions. Statistical analyses using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAS) indicated that both first grade treatment students receiving tutoring in *Sound Partners* obtained near-grade level reading skills and maintained most of the gains through second grade. The two groups did differ significantly however, on two posttests. *Sound Partners Only* students were significantly higher than *Sound Partners* and *Thinking Partners* on the WRMT-R Word Identification and the Word Attack subtests. No benefits were found for the addition of the second grade *Thinking Partners* instruction to the first grade *Sound Partners* instruction, and students receiving second grade comprehension skills training only had no advantage compared to control students. Our confidence in these results is weakened by the lack of random assignment, the

fact that control students were not included in the first grade *Sound Partners* comparison, and by the selection bias imposed by the participating schools.

Another study examined growth of reading skills and the relative benefit of tutoring with decodable texts compared to less decodable texts for at-risk first grade students receiving phonics-based tutoring (Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders, & Vadasy, 2004). Students from 23 classrooms in 11 urban public schools were identified as at-risk for reading failure and scored at or below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R, Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984). Students were randomly assigned to one of two treatments: *Sound Partners* tutoring with more decodable texts (n=39) and *Sound Partners* tutoring with less decodable texts (n=40). While control students (n=20) were from similar classrooms within the district and did not differ significantly on demographic information, they were not part of random assignment due to preferences imposed by the participating schools. Although the control group performed higher on pretests, on average, none of the pretest differences were statistically significant. Tutoring occurred 4 days a week for 30 minutes per day over a 25 week period in addition to regular classroom reading instruction; the control students received regular classroom instruction only. Pertaining to the study's text comparison, the more decodable texts contained a majority of words that could be read based on letter sound relations and word features taught in the phonics lessons. The less decodable texts contained fewer words that were decodable from previous phonics instruction.

Study participants were assessed post-intervention and then followed up at one year intervals, through the end of third grade (Vadasy, Sanders, & Abbott, in press). Grade 1 posttests included a variety of early reading measures, including the Word Attack, Word ID, and Passage Comprehension subtests from the WRMT-R, (Woodcock, 1987); the Reading and Spelling subtests from the WRAT-R; and the Gray Oral Reading Test-Third Edition (GORT-3 Form B, Wiederholt & Bryant, 1992) to measure oral reading fluency. Multivariate analyses of variance or covariance (MANOVA or MANCOVA) indicated that posttest scores were significantly higher for the combined treatment groups compared to the control group, with the following effect sizes: .76 for decoding (average of three measures), .66 for word reading (average of four measures), .81 for comprehension, .51 for oral reading fluency (average of four measures), and .62 for spelling (average of two measures). There were no significant differences in the oral reading fluency scores of the less decodable text in favor of the two treatment groups compared to the control group. None of statistical analyses revealed significant differences for the two treatment groups in the comparison of more decodable with less decodable texts. One limitation to this study is that students were not randomly assigned to the control group; however, they appeared equivalent to the experimental group on pretest measures.

In the follow-up study (Vadasy, Sanders, & Abbott, in press), the remaining students from the two first grade treatment groups were combined to form one sample (n=57). A subgroup of 11 of these students (Less Responsive) received additional supplemental phonics tutoring in second grade, based upon teacher recommendation and the fact that these students had progressed more slowly through the first grade phonics intervention. The additional tutoring followed the same format as the *Sound Partners* description in the first part of this report. At the end of third grade, the growth model-implied scores for students averaged at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on decoding and oral reading fluency, near the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile on word reading and comprehension, and near the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile on spelling. While students maintained benefits beyond the first grade intervention, growth slowed in these skills particularly

in third grade. A limitation of this part of the study is that the progress of students in the control group was not followed.

A quasi-experimental study was conducted in 12 urban, demographically similar schools in a large, urban, northwestern school district (Vadasy, Sanders, Peyton, 2005). The study examined the effectiveness of phonics-based tutoring and the added effects of oral reading practice with phonics-based tutoring. Students who scored at or below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the WRAT-R Reading subtest (Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984) participated in this study. The groups consisted of a word study group (n=19), reading practice group (n=19), and a control group (n=19). All groups received classroom reading instruction which was literature-based. Both treatment groups received 30 minutes of tutoring, four days a week with an average of 44 hours of instruction while the control group received classroom instruction only. This study used a matched group design and groups did not differ on pretest measures for both treatment-control and treatment-treatment comparisons. For pretesting, a variety of early reading measures were used including the PPVT-III (Dunn, & Dunn 1997) and the Word Attack and Word Identification subtests from the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised/Normative Update (WRMT-R/NU) (Woodcock, 1987/1998). Posttests included all measures used for pretesting with additional measures that included the Phonemic Decoding and Sight Word Subtests of the Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE; Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1999); the Passage Comprehension subtest of the WRMT-R/NU; and passage reading fluency which was measured by using three grade-level passages, two of which were decodable and a third text was considered less decodable. Multivariate statistical analyses indicated significant main effects for treatment students compared with control students on all posttest skill sets except reading efficiency. Analyses of individual measures indicated significant treatment effects for all measures except passage reading fluency rate. Effect sizes ranged from .43 to 1.33 and averaged .91 across all measures. The reading practice group significantly outperformed the word practice group only on reading fluency (rate,  $p \leq .05$ , and accuracy,  $p \leq .05$ ), which underscores the added benefit of repeated oral reading practice integrated with word work.

In summary, the instructional design and content of the *Sound Partners* program are supported by a strong research base. Several research studies with the *Sound Partners* program have been implemented and show effectiveness for its use as a supplement to regular classroom instruction.

## Strengths & Weaknesses

### Strengths of *Sound Partners*:

- The *Sound Partners* program is research informed and is developed specifically for nonprofessional tutors.
- Tutors are trained and supervised.
- *Sound Partners* is explicit, systematic, and provides ample practice opportunities.
- The short and varied activities may maximize tutor and student engagement.
- The Implementation Manual and the Tutor Handbook are clear and succinct, and provide detailed information on teaching, scaffolding, situations that may arise during teaching, a tutor self-check quiz, as well as what needs to be in place in schools for tutoring to be effective.

### Weaknesses of *Sound Partners*:

- None were noted

## Which Florida districts have schools that implement Sound Partners?

Citrus	352-726-1931	Levy	352-486-5231
Collier	239-377-0212	Liberty	850-643-2275
Duval	904-390-2115	Orange	407-317-3202
Escambia	850-469-6130	Pasco	813-794-2651
Gulf	850-229-8256	St. Johns	904-819-7502
Leon	850-487-7147	Volusia	386-734-7190

## For More Information

<http://store.cambiumlearning.com/ProgramPage.aspx?parentId=019005282&functionID=009000008&site=sw>

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Lead Reviewer: Michelle Wahl, M. S.  
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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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