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EDUCATION

Reading Corps program making big impact at Coyote Ridge, other Colorado elementary schools



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Caroline Iusi wasn't sure what she wanted to do with the rest of her life after graduating from college in her home state of Florida.

Teaching had always been a possibility, she said, but she wasn't prepared mentally or financially to go back to school for another year or two to earn the required license.

Then she discovered the Colorado Youth for a Change Reading Corps program.

After a little more than two years as a paid reading interventionist at Coyote Ridge Elementary School in Fort Collins, Iusi is just months away from becoming a licensed classroom teacher.

She's working 1-on-1, or sometimes 1-on-2, with students in kindergarten through third grade who need a little extra help with their reading for half of each school day. She's in the classroom with her mentor teacher for the other half of the day, fulfilling the student-teacher requirements of the Public Education Business Coalition's alternative licensing program.

Iusi is one of six Reading Corps tutors in the Thompson School District and one of 30 statewide pursuing a teaching license at no cost through the pilot program this year, said Mary Zanotti, Colorado Youth for a Change's executive director.

"It's really incredible because I've been in the classroom since August, so I get to see a full school year before I step foot in my own classroom," Iusi said Wednesday during a roundtable discussion of the program with Colorado Youth for a Change, Colorado Lt. Gov. Dianne Primavera and administrators at Coyote Ridge, one of two Thompson School District elementary schools in south Fort Collins. "And just being able to continue to learn with the

same people I've been learning with for the past two years and have the understanding and support from them has been invaluable in this time, because it's a difficult undertaking to be in school, working, going back to school after being done.

"It's a huge, different change of pace for my life."

More: Poudre, Thompson school districts will get their first electric buses through an EPA grant

Reading Corps began in Minnesota in 2003, utilizing AmeriCorps members as literacy tutors. It now operates in 14 states.

Thompson School District has Reading Corps tutors in 11 of its 16 elementary schools this year, and Poudre School District has them in two of its 33 non-charter elementaries, Riffenburgh and Shepardson. There are 66 schools, in 18 districts across the state, participating in Reading Corps this year, Colorado Youth for a Change officials said.

The program has about 100 tutors, and tutors can get started in the program at any time of the year. It was expanded significantly, Zanotti said, during the COVID-19 pandemic with additional funding from federal and state relief programs and is playing a significant role in helping students recover from pandemic-related learning losses. Additional local funding is provided by United Way of Larimer County, she said.

Colorado Youth for a Change also operates Math Corps (fourth and fifth grades), Early Learning Corps (preschool), Core for a Change (high school) and Reengagement (high school dropouts) programs. There were more than 6,000 students in 24 school districts involved in its programs last year, including 2,682 in Reading Corps, according to Colorado Youth for a Change and a news release from the governor's office.

Colorado's AmeriCorps programming is led by Serve Colorado, which is part of the lieutenant governor's office, the governor's office wrote in a news release. A recent third-party evaluation of the Reading Corps program's effectiveness, using data from Thompson, Greeley-Evans and Mesa County Valley school districts, revealed "average student growth equivalent to several months of additional instruction," the release said, noting that growth was even more significant for English-language learners, equating to 16 extra weeks. A cost-benefit analysis found the program to have a "strong return on investment, exceeding \$5 for every \$1 invested."

Reading Corps tutors receive two weeks of intensive training before being assigned to participating schools as well as continued training and feedback from a Colorado Youth for a Change coaching specialist.

Coyote Ridge has utilized Reading Corps since 2015, first with one tutor, then two, and now four, although Iusi is on a half-time schedule as an interventionist now while pursuing her teaching license through the partnership with the Public Education Business Coalition, one of a several alternative teacher licensing programs available in Colorado to those who have already earned a bachelor's degree. The Public Education Business Coalition program requires participants to commit to a minimum of two years of teaching in a high-need area after graduation, Iusi said, "but as of right now, all of elementary education is a high-need area."

Iusi and the other Reading Corps tutors work individually and sometimes with two students at a time who have been found to have reading skills below their grade level through regular assessments of all students. Those students work for 20 minutes a day, five days a week, with the same tutor, developing strong individual relationships, Iusi said. They sound out letters, combinations of letters and words as they read aloud while addressing their unique needs.

More: Poudre School District to hold engagement session Jan. 25 on new curriculum options

A kindergartner she was working with recently "started to dip a little bit in her scores, and so, in conversation with her and while we were working together, I actually figured out she doesn't know any letter names. And so, the reason she's struggling so much is because she's learning the sounds but she's not learning the names. If I hadn't been sitting with her, talking with her 1-on-1, the odds that her teacher would have time to do that in the classroom are so low. That's an opportunity that she now has, and she knows, 'I need to learn it this way, and this is what a name is, and this is what the sound is,' so now she can be a lot more successful."

The assessments are evaluated by Raili Neibauer, Coyote Ridge's instructional coach and interventionist, in conjunction with Principal Deon Davis. Students who show signs of potential learning disabilities are evaluated further by the school's student success team, Neibauer said.

Most of the students the Reading Corps tutors work with just need a little extra, individualized help that a classroom teacher with two dozen or so other students isn't able to provide. Before bringing in the Reading Corps tutors, Davis said, he and Neibauer often had

to pick and choose which students they had identified as needing reading intervention could actually receive it because of limited resources.

Now, the school is able to provide that support to every student who needs it and in multiple layers, Neibauer said. And at virtually no additional cost to the school, Davis said.

“We’re making the group smaller and the instruction more direct, and we’re targeted on their specific needs,” Davis said. “And there’s a lot of kids who, through that, are able to get back (to grade level) and no longer need the intervention.”

Iusi provided a demonstration of a 1-on-1 reading session with one of her students, second grader Addison Gunter, helping her sound out words as needed while reading a passage. Gunter was smiling the entire time and laughing occasionally as she received help from Iusi and then Primavera, whose daughter and executive assistant are both former Reading Corps tutors.

“We’re incredibly proud of the work Colorado AmeriCorps members are leading to invest in the educational growth and development for elementary school students,” Primavera said in the news release. “Studies show that early reading skills are linked with positive outcomes later in life, including pursuing higher education and accessing well-paying jobs. It’s exciting to see AmeriCorps service resulting in better outcomes for Colorado students, and we’re committed to continuing this important work.”

Reporter Kelly Lyell covers education, breaking news, some sports and other topics of interest for the Coloradoan. Contact him at kellylyell@coloradoan.com, twitter.com/KellyLyell or facebook.com/KellyLyell.news.