

A New Chapter for Engaging Volunteers at Reading Partners

ideas **42**



Motivating literacy tutors to complete volunteer onboarding

Reading Partners is a non-profit organization that trains volunteer tutors to help students gain the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and in life. In recent years, a significant number of volunteers for its New York program have begun—but failed to complete—the organization’s onboarding process. ideas42’s NYC Behavioral Design Center teamed up with Reading Partners New York to uncover the behavioral barriers volunteers face when completing their training and onboarding, and offered recommendations to motivate volunteers to take the steps necessary to prepare them for tutoring.

Background

The ability to read is a foundational skill that many of us take for granted. Students lacking strong literacy and language skills often struggle to succeed in school and beyond. And yet, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, **only about one-quarter of New York City’s fourth graders can read proficiently.** Many of these young readers need one-on-one instruction. But, due to budget and staffing constraints, schools are increasingly unable to provide this level of support.

Since 2011, **Reading Partners New York (RPNY)** has been working with students, their families, schools, and communities to provide students with individualized literacy support. The organization currently works with 15 New York City public schools to provide hundreds of students in kindergarten through fourth grade two tutoring sessions a week. Its approximately 550 active tutors, comprising both volunteers and AmeriCorp members, conduct nearly 10,000 hours of instruction every academic year. To meet the ever-increasing need for individual reading tutoring, these numbers are growing annually.

Being a Reading Partner entails a significant commitment, both throughout the program and upfront, before they’ve even met a student. Reading Partners volunteers are asked to commit to working with their student for one full academic year. To be matched with a student, prospective Reading Partners volunteers must first attend an orientation session; complete an online background check, which includes getting their fingerprints taken at the NYC Department of Education’s office in Brooklyn; and submit various paperwork. In total, these onboarding activities can take between two and four weeks to complete.

Highlights

- ▶ Many young students lack the reading instruction they need to thrive.
- ▶ Thousands of adults in New York say they want to help, but only a fraction follow through, often because onboarding to volunteer programs lacks clarity and presents unexpected friction.
- ▶ Communicating upfront the expectations—and social importance—of being a reading tutor can help more volunteers connect with the students who need them.

Despite thousands of adults expressing interest in volunteering, only a fraction takes all the necessary steps. What's more, this drop-off rate has soared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, when the organization shifted to virtual tutoring and onboarding. In the 2021–22 academic year, **only one in five prospective volunteers completed their tutor onboarding.**

To increase the number of volunteers who complete this process and match with students, RPNY asked ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to provide insights about the behavioral barriers inhibiting onboarding and to propose solutions.

Identifying behavioral barriers to completion

We worked with RPNY to understand what motivates people to volunteer with the organization, as well as what can discourage them from finishing onboarding. We began by reviewing the communications that prospective tutors received from the organization's Community Engagement team. We learned that, even before being paired with a student, volunteers received copious text—dozens of detailed emails and instruction sheets intended to guide them through the onboarding process.

We then conducted an analysis of RPNY's volunteer engagement data. This data analysis revealed two significant drop-off points: (1) failing to attend an orientation session and (2) failing to complete the background check. To better understand volunteers' reasons for, and expectations around, volunteering, we sent a survey to 600 prospective and current volunteers. While the survey was sent to those who both attended and failed to attend the tutor orientation, only those who attended a tutor orientation session responded to our survey. Of these respondents, only 55% completed the full orientation process. Therefore, we decided to focus on helping Reading Partners increase the proportion of volunteers who complete onboarding steps after the virtual orientation session.

We used the quantitative data and survey comments to inform our qualitative research. Over the course of six weeks, we conducted a dozen interviews with current and lapsed volunteers through a series of 45-minute phone and video conversations. In our interviews, we asked participants about their expectations for and experience with the onboarding process, as well as the communications and level of support provided by Reading Partners staff. These interviews confirmed that volunteers hold the organization in high regard and recognize the value it provides to its students. Additionally, volunteers say the communications and materials provided by Reading Partners staff explain the onboarding process and help them plan for upcoming steps. Lastly, we attended an online Tutor Orientation session and completed many steps of the onboarding process ourselves to experience them first-hand.

Our research revealed several important behavioral barriers that can lead prospective volunteers to procrastinate or ultimately decide not to volunteer with Reading Partners.

1. **Prosocial motivations**

Among our survey respondents, 89% said they chose to volunteer with Reading Partners to help children and to give back to their communities.

2. **Lack of personalization and appreciation**

“It’s impersonal. There was never a sense of ‘We’re glad you’re here.’”

3. **The Tutor Orientation’s quick-paced technology instruction discourages less tech-savvy volunteers**

“The technology stuff, it was poorly explained ... it was mind-boggling.”

These sentiments were more vigorously felt by those with little to no experience using these tools, but even those who had experience using the technology in other contexts stated that this material was difficult to follow. Survey respondents also indicated that the onboarding process is “overly complex” and “onerous,” technology components of training were overwhelming, and that more information and hands-on guidance would be helpful.

4. **Inaccurate mental models about tutoring**

“It started to sound more involved than I had anticipated.”

Interview comments suggested that the density and fast-paced nature of the orientation session may lead many prospective tutors to wonder if, or expect that, the Reading Partners tutoring experience itself will be complex and demanding. As a result, they may question whether they are suited to be a tutor and whether this is the volunteer experience they desire.

5. **Ambiguity aversion**

“It looked open ended ... confusing.”

Little time during the orientation is spent preparing volunteers for the interpersonal aspects of tutoring, such as navigating behavioral challenges. For volunteers without prior experience teaching or volunteering with kids, this lack of information may leave them feeling unprepared for interactions with students. Further, one survey respondent stated, “It’d be helpful to set expectations that it might take several months to complete the onboarding process.”

Redesign and other recommendations

Based on our research and discussions with Reading Partners New York’s leaders, we redesigned the presentation deck for Tutor Orientation sessions. The revised deck prioritizes fostering volunteer confidence by immediately reinforcing key instruction points through demonstration, providing opportunities for hands-on practice, highlighting the additional supports available to those who need more help, and sharing the experiences of current volunteers (Figures 1 and 2). Finally, the redesigned training script includes many expressions of appreciation for volunteers’ willingness to dedicate their time to volunteer with Reading Partners, and highlights the impact that tutors have on the lives on their students (Figure 3).



Figure 1: Technology Set-Up Introductory Slides

The technology training component of the redesigned orientation session acknowledges that this material may be difficult to comprehend but highlights the resources and opportunities available for additional support.

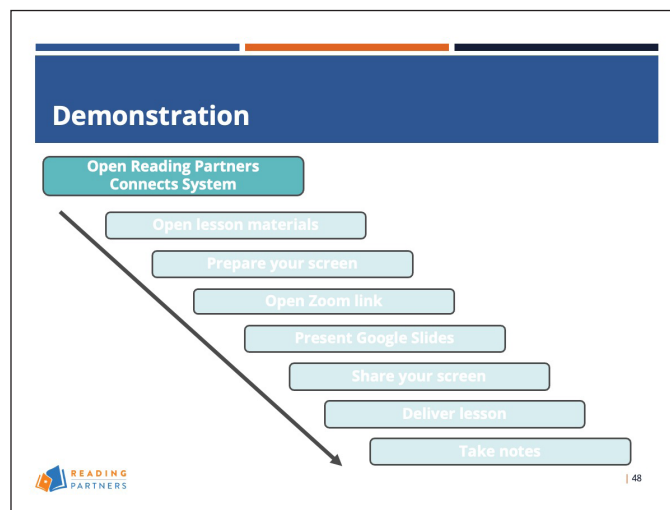


Figure 2: Example of Technology Demonstration Slides

The redesigned orientation training includes a roadmap of the concepts to be covered, a set of orally delivered instructional slides, and a pre-recorded demonstration video.



Figure 3: Volunteer Impact and Appreciation Slides

The redesigned orientation training includes explicit statements of appreciation, testimonials from students, and facts and figures highlighting the impact that volunteers have on the lives of their students.

In addition to the redesigned training, we provided a series of specific, behaviorally informed recommendations for Reading Partners to apply to its future volunteer communications and outreach efforts, including:

- ▶ **Make the need for volunteers salient.** We recommended updating the website to eliminate references to a waiting list and indicate that volunteers are needed.
- ▶ **Describe expectations clearly.** As reinforced by our interview findings, some people only realize the structure and time commitments of tutoring, or the steps required to complete onboarding, at the Tutor Orientation training. Because most volunteers sign up on the Reading Partners website, we recommended that the organization include all information a volunteer may need to decide whether this opportunity is a fit for them. While this may discourage some people from signing up, reducing the number of “false start” signups will save program staff hours of time and effort currently spent following up with these prospects.
- ▶ **Design for limited attention.** Reading Partners volunteers are busy and struggle with email overload. Thus, Reading Partners emails should be formatted to (1) quickly capture attention, (2) allow for skimming, and (3) draw attention specifically to key information and actions.
- ▶ **Reduce hassles.** The Reading Partners volunteer onboarding process requires time and effort to complete. While many of these steps cannot be eliminated, there are opportunities for Reading Partners to reduce hassles that can help make the overall process less cumbersome. Examples include shortening the tutor orientation session and reconceptualizing the technology training to be more customized to volunteers’ needs.
- ▶ **Highlight the impact.** To reinforce the importance of volunteering and encourage more people to complete onboarding, we recommended that Reading Partners share the stories of students, teachers, and school administrators who have benefitted from the program, since people respond

more strongly to stories than to facts alone. In addition, we recommended that the organization find and share quotes from volunteers, illustrating how volunteers themselves have benefitted from this opportunity.

- ▶ **Foster a community around volunteering.** Although lack of social connection was not mentioned by the Reading Partners volunteers we spoke with and surveyed, we know that [social norms](#) and [feelings of group belonging](#) strongly influence human behavior. Therefore, we recommended that the organization staff brainstorm ways to create more opportunities for prospective volunteers to connect and interact. Ideas include assigning “onboarding buddies” and hosting volunteer mixers.

Takeaways and what’s next

Reading Partners New York staff used the redesigned tutor orientation session deck with their 2022 summer cohort of volunteers. Going forward, they will continue to survey volunteers and monitor onboarding completion metrics to determine how to further streamline and refine individual steps. The organization leaders also expect to apply several strategies we recommended to enhance the organization’s website and digital communications.

By implementing behaviorally informed strategies to better address volunteer needs and highlight the value of their service, we expect Reading Partners to increase the number of prospective volunteers who commit to the program. This work is especially important as our public schools continue to adapt to the pandemic’s disruptions, and for the Reading Partners tutors who provide an invaluable source of educational support to the thousands of children they serve.