Urban community as resource: Evaluation of the mentors in Toledo schools program

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ABSTRACT

We report findings from an evaluation of the Mentors in Toledo Schools program (MITS), which pairs adult community volunteers with elementary school students in need of reading support. Begun in 2012, MITS now operates in five elementary schools in Toledo Public Schools. A quasi-experimental study of 379 students ($n = 128$ mentored, $n = 251$ comparison) tested the effectiveness of MITS, using changes (fall to spring) in students' scores on STAR Reading. Multilevel models demonstrate students who participated in MITS made statistically significant, and educationally meaningful, reading gains compared to students who did not participate. Further, an investigation of the importance of dosage revealed that number of mentoring sessions is related to students' outcomes; students who participated in reading mentoring at least once per week showed the most educationally meaningful improvements. We also report qualitative feedback from adult program participants, including teachers, mentors, and site coordinators, to help contextualize the STAR Reading results. These findings speak to the opportunity for community volunteers to act as low-cost and effective supports for urban elementary school students who are at-risk for reading failure.

1. Introduction

Urban districts in the United States face unique challenges for meeting students' educational needs, in part because family socio-economic status is strongly predictive of children's outcomes (Sirin, 2005). This can take many forms, but one well-documented struggle of economically disadvantaged students is lower proficiency for reading in early grades, with continued difficulty in meeting expectations for reading ability over time (Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, Alexander, & Conway, 1997; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Literacy is one of the most important skills students need to develop in elementary school, whereby students who learn to read well read more, and students who struggle to read fall farther and farther behind their peers; this phenomenon was termed the *Matthew effect* by Stanovich (1986) and has been well documented in the literature on reading outcomes (Fives et al., 2013). In line with this evidence, early interventions are known to be the most effective approach for helping students at-risk of reading failure (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000; Pullan, Lane, & Monaghan, 2004)

Research on mentoring programs designed for early readers suggests that mentoring programs can be successful if they possess the following characteristics: students having prolonged interaction (≥ 1 year) with the same mentor during the school year; program features that foster mentor training, supervision, and school support; quality relationships between the mentor and the students; and having a paid volunteer coordinator in place (MENTOR, 2006). Additionally, matching and training for mentors is associated with program success (Struchen & Porta, 1997). The MITS program includes each of these characteristics, and is therefore well-positioned to improve students' literacy outcomes.

1.1. Why is reading achievement so important?

Reading is understood as critical for success in society; reading proficiency is necessary for academic achievement across content areas, and a key factor for positive outcomes beyond schooling (Retelsdorf, Koller, & Moller, 2014; Schoor, 2016). Moreover, reading ability is positively associated with success in higher education, and higher education is the principal path out of poverty for low-income students (Akyüz & Samsa, 2009). The National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) consistently reveals that minority and low-income students are less likely to read proficiently (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). The most recent estimates available indicate that approximately 40 million adults in the United States are unable to perform the most basic literacy tasks (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

1.2. How can mentoring help students?

Mentoring is a productive way of addressing various needs in education (Ryan, Whittaker, & Pinckney, 2002), and can help children maximize their potential (Carmola, 1995; Getzloe, 1997; Ryan et al., 2002). Mentoring offers extra support for students' success, over and above supports of family (Getzloe, 1997). There is evidence that one-to-one mentoring can be especially helpful for children, because it can provide emotional support and stability via relationship with a caring adult (Ryan et al., 2002).

In addition to the emotional and social benefits of mentoring, one-to-one mentoring can be effective for helping students improve their reading outcomes (Fives et al., 2013). Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta (1999) reported the effectiveness of a community-volunteer reading intervention that paired adults over age 50 with early-grades elementary school students who were reading below grade-level expectations. Students met with their volunteer mentors once each week, and the program demonstrated positive effects for students' reading achievement. Although the Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta study sample was small ($N = 44$), the findings are based on a randomized trial of the mentoring program, so offer compelling confirmatory evidence for the program's effects. With regard to United States urban settings in particular, Lee et al. (2012) tested Experience Corps with a large sample of elementary students ($N = 881$) and report statistically significant positive outcomes for students' reading abilities. Further, in their review of 21 randomized trials of reading programs utilizing volunteer mentors, Ritter, Denny, Albin, Barnett, and Blankenship (2006) demonstrated that these programs can offer solid benefits to students (average effect size of 0.30) irrespective of whether the mentors were college students, community volunteers, or parents.

Effective and affordable early reading interventions are needed for urban districts serving students from low-income homes. In framing the program and outcomes presented here, we would like to adopt a perspective of *community as resource,* as opposed to *community as deficit,* and highlight the fact that one-to-one tutoring programs pairing community volunteers with students offer a cost-effective option for urban districts working to serve at-risk students (Morrow-Howell, Jonson-Reid, McCrary, Lee, & Spitznagel, 2009; Vadasy, Sanders, & Abbott, 2008). Specifically, we chose to frame our evaluation work in an asset based community development framework, which involves employing a perspective whereby the focus is on community assets and resources available to solve local problems (Beaulieu, 2002). This approach aims to drive sustainable community development via the use of a strengths-based approach and the highlighting community assets, rather than a focus solely on outside resources for solving problems (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

2. Program specifics

MITS was initiated in 2012 as a social action project by a suburban religious institution, Temple Shomer Emunim. A volunteer coordinator established the program with the support of Partners in Education, a local education support agency. The program operated in a single school during the first year, and expanded to include five elementary schools during years four and five. We sought to understand whether elementary school students who participated in the MITS program demonstrated higher reading performance compared to students in the same schools who did not participate in the MITS program. To that end, this report details program evaluation findings based on a quasi-experimental study for year five (2016–2017) of the MITS program.

The MITS program operates based on the collaboration and coordination of classroom teachers, site coordinators, and volunteer mentors at each school. Teachers mostly recommend students in their class to be included in the program based on an observed need in one or more areas of language arts (i.e., reading, writing). In the 2015–16 school year, however, teachers from one participating school recommended high-achieving students to the program so the teachers could spend time in the classroom working with struggling students. This practice continued to some degree during the 2016-17 school year as well, with two teachers from the same school utilizing the mentoring offered via MITS to allow for high-performing readers to receive MITS services so that classroom teachers could spend more time with struggling readers. Although the program aims to help struggling readers, to date MITS has worked to support site-level and teacher-level decisions around student eligibility for participation in mentoring activities.

Teachers provide student-specific reading tasks—aligned with the classroom curriculum—for mentors to complete with students during the mentoring sessions. The volunteer coordinators recruit and assign mentors to work with students, and ensure that mentors are prepared to facilitate the tasks assigned for the students by their teachers. Mentoring sessions are conducted Monday through Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11:30 AM, except during school holidays and special events.

Mentoring information (e.g., location, time, student name, tasks) is recorded in a database, which tracks meeting times, student behavior with the mentors, the teaching materials reviewed with each student, and allows for written comments to the teacher regarding student performance and behavior. Mentors document the tasks that were accomplished, and evaluate the student's participation during the session using five categories: Behavior Issue, Indifferent, Somewhat Distracted, Somewhat Attentive, and Very Attentive. The mentor feedback is shared with teachers and building principals on a daily basis, so the information can be used to guide future instruction.

Critical components of this program are the structural organization maintained by the database, the consistency and frequency of the tutoring, the use of site-based coordinators for scheduling and feedback, mentors' use of teacher-provided lessons and activities, and the quality of the communication between teachers and mentors about students' work. Since teachers select the work for students to do with the tutors, and teachers receive regular feedback on individual student's actual activity, teachers can tailor mentoring activities to the changing needs of the students over time.

3. Evaluation

Mentors in Toledo Schools operated from October 2016 to May 2017 in five elementary schools in Toledo Public Schools (TPS). TPS demographics for school year 2017–18: 23,096 total enrollment, with 15,409 students in elementary schools. Additionally, 86.4% of TPS students in school year 2017–18 were identified as economically disadvantaged. Table 1 summarizes several key outputs of the mentoring program from the past three years. More first and second grade students participated in the MITS program than students in other grades, which is consistent with the focus the program has had since its inception. McKinley Elementary reached the most grade levels—in addition to the

Table 1
Program Mentoring Activities 2014–15 through 2016–17.

Metric	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	% Change
Participating Classrooms	20	32	31	− 3%
Mentoring Sessions	5,211	9,384	10,386	+ 11%
Students Mentored	256	340	373	+ 10%
Mentors	95	159	174	+ 9%
Average Sessions per Student	20	28	28	+ 0%
Average Sessions per Mentor	55	59	59	+ 0%

K to 2 mentoring offered in other schools, McKinley also offered mentoring in grades 3 and 5 (one student). See Fig. 1 for details.

3.1. Data sources

3.1.1. Perception questionnaires

Program quality was evaluated by examining the perceptions of participating teachers, mentors, and site coordinators. Online questionnaires were used for this purpose, and were administered at the end of the 2016–17 school year. Different questionnaires were administered to each group (teachers, mentors, and site coordinators) in order to capture their unique experiences during the program. The questionnaires included items about the program in general, as well as aspects of the program specific to each group. For example, all three groups were asked to provide examples of both positive and negative experiences during the project, as well as offer suggestions for improvement. However, only teachers were asked to comment on the benefits of the mentoring program in their classroom since they are best positioned to provide such information.

3.1.2. STAR assessment

The STAR Reading Assessment is focused on four major skills, which can be broken down into eleven domains. The assessment is a computer-adaptive test, which continually adjusts the difficulty of a child's test by choosing each test question based on the child's previous response. If the child answers a question correctly, the difficulty level of the next item is increased. If the child misses a question, the difficulty level is decreased. On average, students complete the Reading Assessment in 15 min. The results of the assessment are used to monitor students' literacy skills.[1] The test publisher reports internal consistency for the STAR Reading Assessment at 0.97 and test-retest reliability of 0.90.[2] Table 2 includes the topics and domains measured by the assessment.

4. Analysis & results

The quantitative analyses are based on the analytic sample described in Table 3, which is limited to those students who had complete data for all variables in the model(s) described. Students in the comparison group are those students who were in the same elementary schools as mentored students but did not participate in the MITS program.

In order to better understand the outcomes associated with the MITS program, a multilevel model was fit using the MIXED procedure in SPSS, with random effects for homeroom/teacher. The evaluation team decided to employ multilevel modeling primarily for conceptual reasons. Specifically, the use of multilevel models allows for preexisting differences between different classrooms and schools (i.e., we do not expect students from different classrooms and schools to have the same STAR Reading scores at baseline). The outcome measure used was the change in STAR Reading score from fall 2016 to spring 2017. This reading change score was calculated simply as spring 2017 minus fall 2016, using the standardized score from the STAR Reading data provided by Toledo Public Schools. Predictors in the first model run were Condition (i.e., mentored students vs. non-mentored students), Grade, and School. Results from this first model were very encouraging, and provide support for continued investment of resources in MITS. Table 4 provides details for this first model.

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[1] Characteristics of the STAR Reading Assessment were taken from the "Parents Guide to STAR Assessments," found at http://www.renaissance.com/Resources/Parents.

[2] Characteristics of the STAR Reading Assessment were taken from the "The Research Foundation for STAR Assessments," found at http://doc.renlearn.com/kmnet/r001480701gcfbb9.pdf.
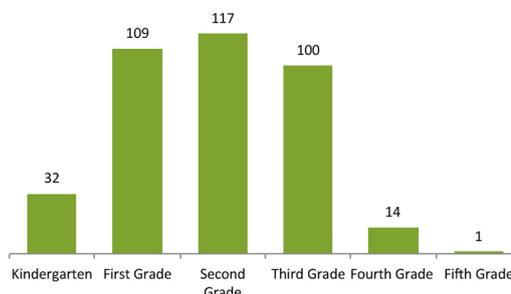

Fig. 1. Number of Students Mentored in Each Grade During 2016-17.

Table 2

Topics and Domains included in the STAR Reading Assessment.

Foundational Skills	Reading: Literature	Reading Information Text	Language
● Phonics and Word Recognition ● Fluency	● Key Ideas and Details ● Craft and Structure ● Integration of Knowledge and Ideas ● Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	● Key Ideas and Details ● Craft and Structure ● Integration of Knowledge and Ideas ● Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	● Vocabulary ● Acquisition and Use

Table 3

Number of Students Included in the STAR Reading Outcome Analytic Sample (By Grade and Condition).

Grade	Mentored Students	Non-mentored Students	Total
First	–	12	12
Second	30	69	99
Third	86	161	247
Fourth	12	9	21
Total	128	251	379

Note: The analytic sample was 51.7% male (Tx) and 52% male (Comparison).

Table 4

Multilevel Model Predicting STAR Reading Change Score Outcomes Using Students' Condition Status.

	Coefficient	SE	p	Effect size
Within classroom				
Grade	−18.340	9.525	.065	–
Condition	18.761	11.658	.108	0.21
Between classrooms				
School[a]	–	–	–	–
Intercept	162.409	26.676	**.000**	–

Note. Student $N = 379$; School $N = 5$. Only the effect size for Condition is presented, which is calculated as Cohen's d. Boldface font indicates $p < .05$.
[a] School indicates the vector of $n–1$ schools. Effects for school are not presented for visual simplicity.

Results from the model presented above indicate that the MITS program is important for students' reading outcomes. Specifically, the expected effect size for students in the mentoring program is very close to what the What Works Clearinghouse[3] suggests is substantively important for educational outcomes, regardless of p-value. According to the WWC, effect sizes for educational interventions of 0.25 or higher

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[3] Institute of Education Sciences (2013). *What Works Clearinghouse procedures and standards (Version 3.0)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Table 5
Multilevel Model Predicting STAR Reading Change Score Outcomes Using Number of Times Mentored.

	Coefficient	*SE*	*p*	Effect size
Within classroom				
Grade	−16.821	9.502	.089	—
Times Mentored	0.529	0.265	**.047**	0.006
Between Classrooms				
School[a]	–	–	–	–
Intercept	158.457	26.613	**.000**	–

Note. Student *N* = 379; School *N* = 5. Only the effect size for Times Mentored is presented, which is calculated as Cohen's *d*. Boldface font indicates *p* < .05.

[a] School indicates the vector of *n*–1 schools. Effects for school are not presented for visual simplicity.

should be considered substantively important, and educationally meaningful, irrespective of p-value. For the STAR Reading Change outcome, this is calculated as: coefficient for Condition/standard deviation of the outcome variable = Effect Size (Cohen's *d*). Specifically, (18.761/89.654) = 0.21 effect size. That the MITS program is generating results so close to what the WWC deems educationally meaningful is impressive, and warrants both continued program support and further investigation of program outcomes.

Because (a) the initial results for changes in STAR Reading outcomes were so encouraging, and (b) we saw variation in the number of mentoring sessions students participated in throughout the school year, we decided to investigate whether dosage is predictive of STAR Reading outcomes. The same model presented above was fit, with Times Mentored used as a predictor. Model results are presented below in Table 5.

These results indicate that number of times mentored is a positive, statistically significant, predictor of STAR Reading Change score. For the STAR Reading Change outcome, this is calculated as: coefficient for Times Mentored/standard deviation of the Reading Change Score = Effect Size (Cohen's *d*). Specifically, (0.529/89.654) = 0.006 Effect Size (Cohen's *d*). This represents the predicted effect for one mentoring session. When we explore what this effect is predicted to be across more sessions, the Table 6 emerges.

It is worth noting that the average number of mentoring sessions was 28, and attending a mentoring session every other week would result in 18 mentoring sessions for any individual student. Given that more than 10,000 individual mentoring sessions were provided during the 2016–2017 school year, setting a goal of one mentoring session per week, or 36 sessions, for struggling students may be a reasonable objective. This goal would be expected to yield an educationally meaningful, and substantively important, effect for STAR Reading change scores. Visually, this relationship can be represented in Fig. 2.

5. Perceptions of the program

Program quality was evaluated by examining the perceptions of participating teachers, mentors, and site coordinators. Online surveys were used for this purpose, and were administered at the end of the

Table 6
Predicted Effect for Each Mentoring Session.

Number of Times Mentored	Times Mentored*ES for One Session	Predicted Effect Size	Effect Size Magnitude
1	(1*0.006)	0.006	Small
18	(18*0.006)	0.106	Small
36	(36*0.006)	**0.213**	Small
72	(72*0.006)	**0.425**	Medium

Note: The average for Number of Times Mentored = 10.32. Boldface font indicates an effect size that either approximates or exceeds the threshold set by the WWC as educationally meaningful, regardless of p-value.

2016-17 school year. Different surveys were administered to each group (teachers, mentors, and site coordinators) in order to capture their unique experiences during the program. The surveys included questions about the program in general, as well as aspects of the program specific to each group. For example, all three groups were asked to provide examples of both positive and negative experiences during the project, as well as offer suggestions for improvement. However, only teachers were asked to comment on the benefits of the mentoring program in their classroom since they are best positioned to provide such information. The following sections summarize the results of these perception surveys. Teachers', mentors' and site coordinators' general perceptions of the program are reported separately, while their perceptions about teacher lesson plans, feedback and communication are reported together in order to provide a more complete picture of the program.

5.1. Teachers' general perceptions

A total of 24 educators – 21 teachers and 3 administrators—from the five participating schools completed the survey. Most schools were represented by multiple teachers from at least two different grades. Also, five educators (21%) reported 2016–17 as their first year participating in the mentoring program, and nearly 50% (10) educators reported 2016–17 as their second year participating in the mentoring program.

Educators' general perceptions of the program were positive. Almost all of the teachers who completed the survey agreed with all five statements about the "general quality" of the mentoring program. The statements are listed in the table below, along with the percentage of teachers who agreed with each statement. Of the 24 educators who were asked to complete the survey, 20 did so. Responses below are percentages of those teachers who completed the survey (Table 7).

In describing the positive experiences had by teachers or students during the program, teachers often commented on how much students enjoyed going to the sessions. Teachers emphasized the one-on-one attention the students received during the sessions, and how students felt "special" because of it. A few teachers even mentioned that students felt disappointed when they could not go. A few vivid examples of teachers' responses:

"I had a girl that barely could read any of her kindergarten words when she started first grade. She is leaving me being able to read a lot of our vocabulary words in the curriculum, the various Dolch word lists, and her love of reading has grown over the year."

"This has been a God Send for this young lady! Thank You Mentors!!!"

"The relationships my students established with the mentors was invaluable."

"I love to see the bond some of students have made with the mentors. They feel more confident when reading in the class and are more excited about learning."

Only two of the educators who completed the survey reported any negative experiences during the program, and both were related to logistical concerns instead of program quality or impact on students. One teacher reported that on occasions when a mentor may be ill and/or unable to attend the mentoring session, their student(s) would feel sad.

5.2. Mentors' general perceptions

A total of 110 mentors (63% of n = 174) representing all five schools completed the survey. Many of the mentors (25%) were participating in the program for the first time in 2016–17, while 22% were participating for the second or third year. Notably, 17% of the mentors who answered the survey were participating for their fourth or fifth
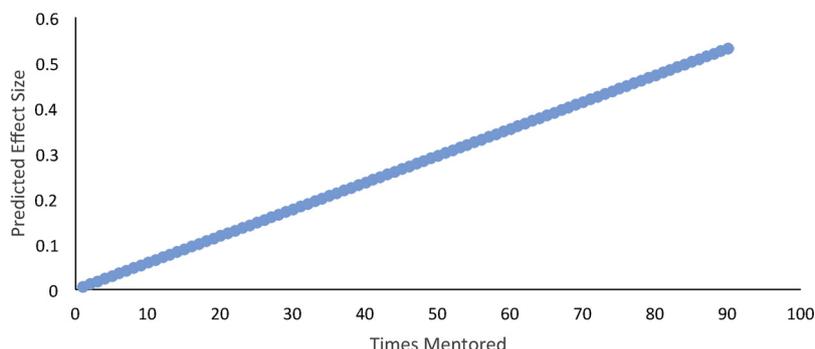
Fig. 2. Number of Times Mentored is Positively Related to Effect Size.

Table 7
Teachers' Perceptions of MITS 2016-17.

Survey Statement	Percentage of Teachers in Agreement (n = 20)
The mentoring program supports the instruction I provide in my classroom.	95%
The mentoring program is beneficial for my students.	95%
The mentoring program is worth the class time my students miss because of the sessions.	95%
I would support having the mentoring program in my school next year.	95%
Other Toledo schools would benefit from the mentoring program.	100%

year with MITS. The mentors participating for the first time learned about the program mostly from a friend or acquaintance, or through Cedar Creek Church. The main reason provided by the veteran mentors for coming back another year was their belief in the program's ability to help the children who participate, and their appreciation for how well the program is organized and delivered. According to the mentors' evaluations, students mostly demonstrated attentive behavior during most of the mentoring sessions. Of the 10,386 total mentoring sessions, mentors recorded "Very Attentive" or "Somewhat Attentive" behavior in 9343 (91%) sessions.

Many mentors provided specific examples of their students' improvement. These comments indicate that mentors valued the students' learning, and took pride in their students' accomplishments. Some examples:

> "One of my students said that the mentoring was one of her favorite things to do. Another made a major breakthrough when he was able to write his paragraph with minimal help. Was final able to turn his concepts into sentences instead of just listing them in his paragraph."

> "One of the boys I worked with this year progresses to fourth grade. He was held back in third last year due to his reading."

> "I believe one of the students had a breakthrough and we really beginning to read for himself instead of just parroting my reading."

Mentors were asked to evaluate their confidence in performing several mentoring tasks. In general, mentors felt very confident to perform most mentoring tasks, especially those related to student learning. Fig. 3 summarizes mentors' survey responses.

5.3. Site coordinators' general perceptions

Eight site coordinators responded to the online survey. The coordinators agreed that the school mentoring schedules were appropriate during the school year, and the program seemed to meet the needs of the school. The one difficulty reported by several site coordinators is that during testing time (i.e., standardized test administrations) it is difficult for teachers to be flexible with their schedules, and the standardized testing schedule can interfere with the mentoring schedule. In general, this did not seem to be a severe problem, but perhaps is one that might be planned for in the future.

It was clear from their description of the positive experiences during the school year that site coordinators thought highly of the mentors and were proud of the growth observed in the participating students. Many also noted the enthusiasm and eagerness demonstrated by participating students. Some of the coordinators wrote:

> "I enjoyed observing the dedication of the mentors & the positive relationships they formed with the students."

> "Some of my favorite moments were seeing the connections between the mentors and students, hearing the laughter coming from the stations, especially when a learning game was being played, recognizing the value of the one-on-one attention that each of these students were receiving that day."

> "I am in awe of and adore the mentors I work with. They love the kids, and the kids love them. I do think there is improvement in the rapport with teachers, and we are very supportive of one another."

Many of the coordinators' negative experiences and suggestions stemmed from situations where mentors were absent, either because of illness or conflicting schedules. The site coordinators reported that when they had to tell a student that their mentor was not there, that was very difficult. Several site coordinators mentioned that it would be useful to have a list of reliable substitute mentors who can be called upon when there are absences.

5.4. Teacher lesson plans

The teacher lesson plans represent an important aspect of the program because they ensure that mentoring activities relate to the content being taught in the teachers' classrooms. Teachers provide mentors with lesson plans each week, and the mentor completes lesson tasks with the student during the mentoring sessions. Almost all of the mentors (98%) reported using the teacher lesson plans during every session. Also, most mentors (n = 61) "mostly" or (n = 45) "completely" followed the lesson plans during the mentoring sessions.

The most common reason for not completely following the teachers' lesson plans was time constraints. Many mentors believed the mentoring sessions were too short to address all of the tasks on the lesson plans. Other mentors reported that they often spent more time on one task if the students seemed to struggle or show greater interest in doing that task. Some mentors suggested that students' lack of attention or distraction also resulted in less than complete coverage of the lesson plan. Regarding these reasons, some of the mentors wrote:

> "Sometimes we don't have time to complete the lesson as the children work at different paces."

> "We may run out of time to do the last activity, but over planning is
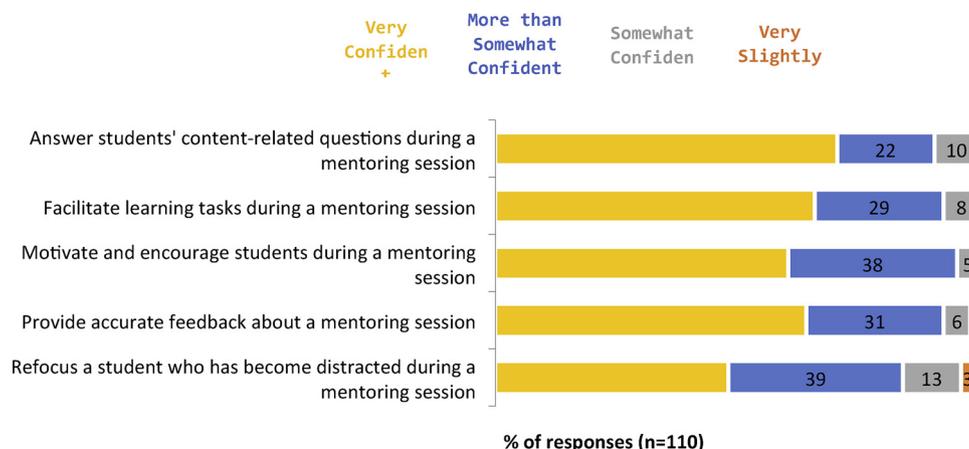
Fig. 3. Mentors' Confidence for Performing Mentoring Tasks.

appreciated."

"If I can see a child is maybe not focused, like in spelling for example, I might skip the spelling and try something else."

"If the student is not responding I try other things."

The majority of mentors (81%) thought the lesson plans were "very helpful" for their sessions. Several mentors suggested that the lesson plans could be made more helpful if teachers prioritize the tasks in order of importance for each student, and also provide appropriate background information about the student (e.g., reading level, strengths, or weaknesses) that may help during the mentoring session.

5.5. Feedback and communication

After each mentoring session, mentors provide feedback to the teachers about their interactions with students. During the 2016–17 school year, most mentors (86%) completed the feedback form electronically. More than half the mentors (75%) believed the feedback form was "very easy" to complete. Very few mentors (1%) thought the forms were difficult to complete, and the primary reason cited for this difficulty was because the computer was not working.

All of the teachers who completed the survey reported reading the mentors' feedback at least "sometimes." Please note: The teachers were evenly split in their responses of reading the feedback "every time it is provided," "almost every time it is provided," and "sometimes." Teachers mostly agreed that the mentors' feedback was sufficient for classroom planning and instruction (i.e., there is no other information the mentor could provide that would be helpful). Teachers and mentors agreed on the sufficiency of the feedback form—mentors believed the feedback form included the information necessary to accurately describe the mentoring session.

Teachers were asked to respond to several statements about their thoughts on using the mentoring feedback. Their responses suggest that teachers believe the feedback is useful in understanding their students' academic and behavioral progress, but less useful in informing discussions with students and classroom instruction. Another important avenue of communication for the program is that between mentors and site coordinators. Mentors were asked about three aspects of this communication, and their responses are included in the table below (Table 8).

5.6. Teachers' reports of student progress

Teachers who completed the survey (*n* = 20) were asked to rate any academic or behavioral changes they observed in the students who participated in the mentoring program. In general, teachers reported moderate to large positive changes in students' literacy skills,

Table 8
Mentors' Perceptions of Site-Coordinators' Communications.

Aspect of communication	% of "Excellent" Ratings (n = 110)
Frequency of communication	81%
Support for physical needs (e.g., supplies, lesson plans)	77%
Support for mentoring needs (e.g., suggestions, advice, training)	68%

engagement in class activities, and classroom behavior. Teachers specifically reported positive growth in the following literacy skills: phonemic awareness (65% of teachers); reading fluency (80% of teachers); reading comprehension (35% of teachers); and sight words, spelling, vocabulary, and writing (30% of teachers).

6. Lessons learned

The overall findings of the program evaluation for 2016–2017 MITS outcomes are positive. Feedback from teachers, mentors, and site-coordinators, indicates strong participant satisfaction for all program components. Moreover, the STAR reading change results demonstrate that MITS has the potential to provide educationally meaningful improvements in reading outcomes for the students it serves. In an effort to reflect and learn from experience, with the goal of improved program outcomes moving forward, the following lessons learned are worthy of mention.

Several mentors asked for specific training on how best to deal with students who are either misbehaved or uninterested in the mentoring activities. Specifically, the mentors said that if teachers have any strategies that work well in their classrooms with particular students, the mentors might benefit from knowing this information. Along these lines, one negative experience mentioned by several mentors was the distractibility or lack of attention given by some participating students. Two mentors mentioned that they did not feel very confident in their abilities to deal with students who misbehaved or refused to participate; it is worth noting that this happened very rarely, but may be one area for site coordinators to address with mentors so that when students are uncooperative the mentors know what the program expectations are for dealing with these types of occurrences.

Site coordinators indicated a need for more substitute mentors in case of absences. Based on feedback from the site-coordinators, the current lists of substitutes is very helpful, but too short. It may help to ask mentors if they know anyone who would be willing to serve as a substitute mentor. This process might be most likely to work well if site-coordinators work to collect detailed information from substitutes on

their availability by (a) day of the week, and (b) how often they are willing to substitute. In addition, feedback from site coordinators suggests they may benefit from structured opportunities to meet with other site-coordinators and discuss MITS implementation in their school sites. The time to work together and share ideas on how they handle obstacles or challenges when implementing this program may allow site-coordinators to benefit from one another's knowledge and experience.

Based on the expected effect size of 0.006 for one mentoring session, the evaluation team strongly encourages the program to work toward increasing the average number of mentoring sessions per student. Using the WWC threshold of an effect size of 0.25 or higher as educationally meaningful, we would expect students who attend mentoring sessions once per week to approximate this result. For 2016–2017, the average number of sessions was 28. The program would need to increase that average from 28 to 36 in order to achieve an average of one session per week per student. If MITS can work toward having students participate in mentoring each week, this would be expected to result in very strong, positive, program outcomes for reading achievement.

It is important to note that a few teachers reported that they chose to send students who were reading at grade level for mentoring, so they could keep struggling readers in the classrooms and personally work with them in smaller groups. If some teachers continue to use MITS in this way, then we may need to re-envision how we define *the program*. Because MITS is determined to meet specific local needs, it is desirable that teachers work to utilize the program as they deem most beneficial for their students. Perhaps it is the case that we need to view each teacher/classroom that participates in mentoring as *the participant* and analyze the data accordingly moving forward.

7. Conclusion

Much of the literature on urban education positions community as deficit, and the results from this evaluation challenge this perspective. We see these outcomes as evidence of this community's health. In particular, following the definition offered Sonn and Fisher (1998) the support of community volunteer mentors as a resource to improve critical academic skills for at-risk youth in their schools should be recognized as a form of community resilience. That the mentors, teachers, and site coordinators all said relationships built between mentors and students contributed to the program's success bolsters this interpretation of community as valuable resource for reducing risk.

Given the intentional structure of MITS to include the features known to promote successful elementary grades reading mentoring (i.e., teachers' lesson plans, one-to-one mentor/student relationships, sustained mentoring activities, site-based support, and training of mentors), these program findings are not surprising. What is most surprising about this report is that we do not see more of these programs being implemented in urban educational settings across this country. Given that literacy is known to be strongly predictive of so many important outcomes, and low-income, minority youth continue to experience high rates of risk for reading failure, low-cost and effective interventions are a must-have for urban districts. Ideally the work presented here will not only offer support for the continuation of MITS, but also motivate other urban districts and schools to explore community volunteer reading mentors for their elementary school students.

Conflict of interest

None.

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