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PRC Volunteer Handbook

BASED ON SMART'S (START MAKING A READER TODAY) VOLUNTEER READER
HANDBOOK

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Philly Reading Coaches Volunteer Handbook

About PRC

PHILLY READING COACHES (PRC) is a program that combines early reading support, access to books, and community volunteers to boost the reading skills of our city's children.

The program works by pairing trained volunteers with young students – kindergarten through 3rd grade, and by providing fun and child-guided reading experiences that help build reading skills and motivation. Each child in the program also receives 25 free books to take home.

History and Mission

Research on national best practices in early literacy and in out-of-school time (OST) shows that well-structured, one-on-one volunteer tutoring programs are more effective than small or large group instruction. Thus, the Citywide OST Initiative launched Philly Reading Coaches (PRC), an early literacy pilot, to test the efficacy of an evidence-based, one-on-one volunteer literacy program adapted for OST.

PRC is modeled after Start Making a Reader Today (SMART)—a child-centered program that focuses on reading enjoyment and motivation. SMART conducted a rigorous randomized control evaluation that showed statistically significant positive findings in the areas of decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

In addition to having a strong evidence base, PRC is modeled after SMART because:

1. Participating K-3 children can choose the books they want to read. Research demonstrates the positive effects on reading achievement are almost twice as large when readers select their own books.
2. Each child picks 25 books to take home. Various studies have shown the benefits of building children's at-home libraries.

PRC also added two other components—parents and volunteers. Parental involvement in OST programs includes a wide array of activities, including: encouraging children to participate in the program; reinforcing skills learned at the program in the home, and advocating for the program. Thus, PRC will implement a parent assessment to understand in what ways (if any) participation in PRC engages parents. Also, PRC, like SMART, relies on trained volunteers. Therefore, PRC will capture volunteer attendance and retention data as well as work to understand how PRC engages volunteers.

Sidebar: How is PRC funded?

Philly Reading Coaches (PRC) is funded through the City of Philadelphia's Office of Children and Families and implemented by OST Providers.

The Need for PRC

- **Kindergarten Readiness:** The path to educational preparedness and success starts long before children enter school. Reading is the foundation for future learning, and the process of learning to read begins early.
- **Third-grade Reading:** Third grade is the pivot point in educational development when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Research shows that children who do not learn to read by the third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school than their reading-proficient peers.
 - In 2015, 60% of third graders in Philadelphia were reading below benchmark level. In 2021, the number has increased to 68%. This figure rises among children of color, children from low-income families, and English Language Learners, forming an alarming achievement gap.

As shrinking budgets cause classroom sizes to grow, it becomes increasingly challenging for teachers to provide one-on-one, guided reading practice for each student. PRC fills a valuable role by giving children one-on-one reading practice, creating an experience around books and reading that is positive and affirming of each student's cultural and social identity.

As a PRC volunteer, your role is not to teach children to read but rather to support the development of their early literacy skills, self-confidence, and critical thinking abilities.

PRC Program Overview

How are students selected to participate in PRC?

Staying true to the goals of the Citywide OST Initiative, PRC partners with selected OST providers that serve high-need communities across the city to identify enrolled K-3 students who could benefit from the program. After students are identified, we match them with a trained volunteer with whom the student will read one-on-one during each PRC session.

The Role of the PRC Volunteer

PRC: Helps Children Discover the Joy of Reading

One hour per week is all it takes to make a lifetime of difference in a child's life. * Let your PRC Site Coordinator know if you are available to read more than one hour per week.

Key Responsibilities:

- Support PRC's mission and vision and adhere to PRC's volunteer policies and procedures.
- Create a safe and positive experience for children from all backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles, and circumstances.
- Fulfill the commitment to read at the same time each week with your scheduled children. If you do not attend, it is likely those children will not be read with in your absence.
- Maintain open and regular communication with direct supervisors, reporting any concerns immediately.
- Follow site and PRC safety and security policies. Become familiar with school requirements and emergency procedures.

- Attend the orientation session and view the required videos.
- Help children choose books to take home each month.

Some PRC programs may vary in the number of days and length of reading sessions, depending on the site's needs. Your Site Coordinator will provide additional training and information for your particular site as needed.

Spread the Word!

Among new PRC volunteers, 20 percent tell us they came to the organization by word-of-mouth in their community. That means our current volunteers are our best recruiters for new volunteers! We depend on you to spread the word; there are always children waiting to be a part of PRC.

PRC Safety Policies

The safety of PRC children and volunteers is always our highest priority. All PRC volunteers must follow these safety policies:

1. I will sign in at the designated entrance.
2. I will follow the directions of the building administrators, teachers, and/or appropriate staff members.
3. I agree to conduct myself professionally and respectfully at all times. I understand that the volunteers are role models for students and will conduct myself accordingly.
4. I understand that I am responsible for following the policies and procedures of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and the City of Philadelphia (COP). I understand that the SDP and COP have a strong commitment to the diversity and inclusion of all students. I will uphold those policies and values while volunteering. I will not share my personal or political views with students while volunteering. If I have any questions about this, I will ask the Site Coordinator.
5. I will share with the Site Coordinator any concerns that I may have related to student welfare and/or safety.
6. I will only use adult bathroom facilities.
7. I will ensure that my clothing is professional and appropriate (clothing that covers your upper and lower body. Please be mindful of the wording and images on your clothing).
8. I will not possess weapons of any type while on school property or during school events off premises.
9. I will not possess or use tobacco or any nicotine-related products and will not possess or be under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, or illegal drugs on school property or during school events off premises.
10. I understand that in the course of volunteering, I may learn private or sensitive information about students, families, or staff. I agree to maintain confidentiality. I will not share information that I learn about students or staff with anyone except to carry out my volunteer duties, any legal duties, and as outlined in this code of conduct.
11. I agree to avoid exploiting or unduly influencing a student into engaging in an illegal or immoral act or any other behavior that would subject the student to discipline for misconduct, whether or not the student actually engages in the behavior.
12. I agree not to engage in sexual harassment of students, other volunteers, or school and city employees. I will avoid having inappropriate contact with any student, whether or not on school property, which includes all forms of sexual touching, sexual relations, or romantic relations, any touching which is unwelcome by the student or inappropriate given the age, sex, and maturity

of the student. I will refrain from touching or hugging students, even if the student instigates the conversation.

13. I agree to notify immediately (no later than within 72 hours) in writing the Site Coordinator if I am arrested for a misdemeanor or felony sex, drug, assault, or weapon-related offense or named as a perpetrator in a founded or indicated report in the Statewide database.
14. I understand that, if I am an adult, I am required by law to report suspected child abuse if I have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is a victim of child abuse.

Other Reminders:

- If you will be absent, make every effort to inform your Site Coordinator at least 24 hours before your scheduled reading time. Your Site Coordinator will work with you to try to find a substitute volunteer so that the children do not miss PRC.
- If it is not feasible to give 24 hours notice, please contact your Site Coordinator no later than 12pm on the day of a canceled shift.

The Importance of Reading with Children

Learning to read is the foundation for virtually all learning. Developing solid literacy skills at an early age gives children access to opportunities and choices and contributes to the health and vitality of our communities.

For many years, it was believed that children naturally learned to read by about the end of third grade. Today we know that, while teaching the mechanics of reading – the sounding out and decoding of text – is important, it's not sufficient to create strong readers. Children need active coaching and practice with strategies for interacting with books that promote strong thinking skills, increase vocabulary, and enhance comprehension.

In other words, children should be simultaneously “reading to learn,” even as they are “learning to read.” If we wait until fourth grade to begin teaching comprehension strategies and critical thinking skills, it may be too late.

The single most important activities for building these fundamental early understandings and skills are both reading with children aloud and having them read themselves, as they are able. The most powerful learning occurs for young children in the context of one-on-one interactions with trusted adults.

Home Reading Experiences Vary

Each child's exposure and experience with early literacy at home will vary greatly. These varied experiences are the result of vastly different economic, cultural and social circumstances among families. Some children enjoy daily shared reading from a very young age, while others enter preschool with little or no experience with books. Some homes contain hundreds of picture books, while in others, there are very few. Before kindergarten, a child in a low-income home is exposed to 25 hours of one-on-one reading time, while in a higher-income home, it's somewhere between 1,000 and 1,700 hours.

Children also vary in their preschool education experiences. In fact, it is estimated that nearly half of children in Philadelphia enter kindergarten without the skills they need to learn to read. This means that

kindergarteners may still be learning about basic concepts of how books work. Children who start behind generally stay behind.

As a PRC volunteer, you are implementing simple techniques that can make a powerful difference not only in helping children to learn to read, but in developing skills that will prepare them for future success in school and life. That's why your involvement in PRC is so important, helping to provide one-on-one reading practice and support, but more importantly, to give children a positive experience around books.

Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusivity

Cultural inclusivity and responsiveness is a major focus for PRC. Ultimately, PRC exists to give children a greater chance at success. With the potential for social, economic, and racial inequities to create barriers to success, we have a responsibility to ensure our organization is equitable and culturally inclusive.

Literacy outcomes in Philadelphia show a persistent achievement gap for our students of color, independent of socio-economic status or other influencing factors. To meet our mission successfully, PRC must address this and other gaps in achievement.

With a program goal of 400 volunteers reading with almost 200 students this year, we have an opportunity to change the story when it comes to the achievement gap in Philadelphia. We have a responsibility to better understand, serve, and reach the children in our program and to examine our organization, systems, and policies for bias and inequities.

We ask that our volunteers refrain from making assumptions about a student's home life or experience. Making broad generalizations about a student's experience based on appearance or cultural background may be harmful and insensitive.

Reading Together

Literacy development in the kindergarten through third-grade years can be quite variable. Part of the role of being a volunteer is getting to know your students, and customizing your approach to their emerging interests, abilities and needs, knowing that they are growing rapidly and may be interested in and capable of more as the year goes on.

Children of all reading abilities love to be read to, and reading aloud plays a critical role in building vocabulary and knowledge about the world. Exploring books together helps the child become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of reading. Children may choose to read with you or to have you read aloud to them.

During each reading session:

- Allow enough time to sign in, wear a PRC name tag, and go to the PRC reading space.
- Pick up the student's folder
- Greet the child, assist in selecting books, and enjoy reading together.
- Complete the Daily Reading/Book Giveaway Logs
- Sign out

Reading Aloud

A common myth regarding early readers is that they should be encouraged as soon as possible to move away from listening to books read aloud to reading independently. The truth is, reading aloud continues to be extremely beneficial, even for children with strong reading skills, all the way through to eighth grade and beyond.

Research has shown children's listening skills are at least two full years ahead of their reading levels. It isn't until about the eighth grade that listening levels and reading levels converge.

In other words, children can listen to, understand, and enjoy books that are too difficult for them to read independently. More advanced stories are more exciting, enriching, and challenging than anything children could read on their own, supporting growth in vocabulary and comprehension.

Not only is it okay for you to read aloud to your PRC students, it's good for them. Indeed, taking turns between you reading to the child and the child reading to you may be the best of both worlds.

Some kindergarteners are just beginning to learn how to interact with books. Reading aloud will support them greatly in their reading development. As you read, point to the book title, author, and various features of the text in both nonfiction and fiction books; these strategies will support them in developing early literacy skills.

Reading Aloud:

- Exposes a child to rich language, proper grammar and exciting new ideas.
- Engages and encourages a child's imagination.
- Stretches a child's attention span and ability to focus.
- Models positive reading behavior.
- Shows children that books are worth attention and interest.
- Is fun for both you and the child.

How to support PRC students in meeting reading benchmarks

- Spend more time discussing the books you are reading together. Think about spending more time on fewer books each session.
 - Ask the child to make a prediction on what the story is about.
 - Take a "picture walk" before reading to get a framework for the story – look through the pages and ask the child questions about the pictures.
- Read aloud to your student, and pause during certain parts of the book to discuss what is happening or what each of you thinks might happen next.
- Stop to talk about new or difficult words as you read books together.
- Be sure to include both fiction and non-fiction books when reading with your student.
- If possible, try to find good "companion" books (books with similar themes – e.g., two Dr. Seuss books, two books about frogs) to the ones your student chooses. That way, you can compare the two books and talk about what your student liked or didn't like about each one.

Reading with Kindergarten through Third-Grade Children

For this age group, the three most important things you can do are: actively engage the child in the reading experience, model and encourage critical thinking, and have fun.

Actively engage the child

Research clearly shows that active engagement, rather than passive listening, is critical to children becoming strong readers.

- Use expression and enthusiasm while reading.
- Use dramatic gestures.
- Use your voice to convey the intention or feelings of the characters.
- Vary the pace at which you read, such as reading more quickly during exciting episodes.
- Act out parts of the story; children love to pretend.
- Allow a wiggly child to move about while you read aloud.
- Encourage the child to select books to read together.
- Stop in the middle of a book if a child seems uninterested; ask the child to choose another book if it's not interesting.
- Some indicators that the text is too hard include having to sound out more than one out of five words or reading very slowly, one at a time.

Model and Encourage Critical Thinking

Someone with **critical thinking skills** is able to do the following:

- Understand the logical connections between ideas
- Identify, construct and evaluate arguments
- Detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning

A crucial transition for children is moving beyond learning to read to reading to learn – reading in order to master complex subject matter in the upper grades and beyond. Research tells us that children today need more support in the areas of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and knowledge development, and that that support should begin at a very young age, even before children learn to read.

- Ask questions and initiate conversation about the story as you go along; this helps the child develop crucial thinking and reading comprehension skills.
- Talk about the pictures throughout the book; encouraging attention to detail will provide visual “hints” that support comprehension.
- Identify challenging words, inserting short definitions of new words into the flow of the story. Doing this helps build the child's budding vocabulary and increases comprehension, both major predictors of future reading success.
- Ask the child to summarize or retell the story after you've finished. Encourage the child to make connections between the story and his or her own life.

Be sure to be responsive to the attention, activity level, and interest of the child, adjusting your strategy as needed. Always keep in mind the age and development of the children with whom you're reading.

Asking Open-ended Questions:

- **What** just happened in the story?
- **Who** is the main character?
- **Where** does the story take place?
- **How** do you think a particular character feels?

- **When** have you felt the same way?
- Try giving a **five-second pause** to allow the child time to think and respond to each question.

Have Fun

Children flourish when given one-on-one attention, encouragement, and praise. After all, learning to read is challenging. We don't want young children to form an impression that reading is too hard and should be avoided, or worse, that they are “bad” at reading. Patience and compassion are two of the biggest gifts you can offer the children with whom you read.

Most of all, make it fun for the children. Keep it light and mix it up. Be flexible. Be aware if a child is overwhelmed or frustrated, and change course as needed. Research demonstrates that children are more motivated to read when they enjoy reading and feel confident in their abilities.

Strategies to Engage Reluctant Readers

While many children do become excited and engaged in reading, some seem more reluctant or disinterested. Just because children don't show a natural interest in reading doesn't mean that they cannot become skilled and even enthusiastic readers.

What is a reluctant reader? A reluctant reader may be a child who simply needs to be coaxed into reading texts, or maybe even vehemently refuses to read. Reluctant readers sometimes hide their ambivalence toward reading by using other behaviors. Highly active, disruptive or distracting behaviors may be indicators that a child is reluctant or struggling with reading.

There are a number of things you can do to help engage a reluctant reader:

- Observe the child when they approach a reading task.
- Encourage the child to choose their own reading material.
- Introduce the child to some especially engaging picture books with elaborate illustrations.
- Bring the story to life with your voice and movements.
- Share your own love of reading or your own story of how you learned to read.
- Read aloud to the child. It is one of the most powerful ways to engage them in reading.

Some kindergarten through third-grade children are shy when adjusting to new situations, settings and relationships. For kindergarteners in particular, this may be their first social interaction outside of their family. Be patient with them, and give them time as they get to know you and what to expect during PRC.

Books

PRC encourages children to select their own books. Encouraging children to choose the books to read can make a big difference in getting them involved and engaged. Ask questions about why they selected each book to better understand their interests. In becoming familiar with the children's interests, you'll be able to suggest some additional choices that appeal to them, as well as expose them to new topics. Research has shown that books need to grab readers' attention in the first few paragraphs, or else they may become disinterested.

Increasingly, students are expected to read and comprehend a wide range of fiction and non-fiction texts. In addition to supporting students in meeting grade-level reading benchmarks, PRC believes all

students should have the opportunity to see their own identities reflected back to them, as well as to be exposed to cultures and experiences that may differ from their own, in the books they read.

PRC is committed to ensuring that all children have access to high-quality, authentic literature, story books, and non-fiction titles representing diverse and multicultural perspectives.

Research suggests that multicultural books play an important role in building self-esteem (mirror books) as well as promoting understanding of cultures different from one's own (window books).

Mirror books allow readers to see images and reflections of their own lives. Finding their own cultures and values in books helps children to develop a positive sense of cultural identity and can be a powerful tool in building self-esteem. When they are familiar with the scenes portrayed, they experience a sense of belonging. Beyond the social-emotional benefits, research shows that comprehension is positively impacted when students have access to diverse books that reflect their cultural identities.

Window books allow readers to see the lives of others. To build bridges of cultural understanding, books that uniquely represent a culture are needed. Stories can present unfamiliar groups and their customs and everyday life in ways that show them to be natural and understandable. Connecting with and relating to multicultural characters could reduce prejudices toward that culture. Multicultural books can play an important role in developing attitudes of open-mindedness about diversity.

Selecting Books

- Children shouldn't be discouraged from choosing a book above their reading abilities. It is okay for the volunteer to read the material, or parts of it, and talk about it with each child.
- Children may also want to re-read the same book repeatedly. This repetition promotes mastery and confidence in reading ability.
- If a child is having trouble selecting a book, the volunteer can help guide the selection process by suggesting some titles that may appeal to the child's interests.
- Encourage children to select non-fiction titles which will help reinforce what they are learning in the classrooms.
- Books that reflect the child's culture or home language may be especially engaging and

Book Giveaway Days

PRC children receive four books per month to take home and keep.

Your Site Coordinator will provide information about book giveaway days at the site.

Volunteers should encourage children to take home books they have already read. Children find more success at home when they sit down with a familiar story.

*Thank
You*

On behalf of everyone at PRC, thank you for making a difference in the lives of Philadelphia's children! By giving the gift of your time and dedication, you're helping transform our vision of a Philadelphia where every child can read and is empowered to succeed into reality.

We hope you enjoy your experience as a PRC volunteer. Ultimately, you're here to have fun and inspire children in learning to love to read.

Let's go turn some pages!