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What Works

Red Bag It

Raising a Reader simplifies its message – and takes off

By Muoi Tran

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REPLICATION

Red Bag It

Raising a Reader simplifies its message – and takes off *by Muoi Tran*

No color suits Raising a Reader (RAR) better than red. Even from afar, the bright red bags, in the clutches of little hands, draw attention. These simple and sturdy bags, filled with bilingual children's books, are the signature brand of Raising a Reader, a nonprofit take-home book bag program that encourages parents in at-risk homes to read aloud daily to children under 5. The bags rotate through schools, child-care settings such as Head Start, and local programs for young mothers.

"Raising a Reader teaches pre-literacy skills," said Melinda Su, RAR's director, "especially for low-income children."

RAR has also been successful organizationally in scaling up beyond its original local base. In two years, it has spread to 10 states, Mexico, and Botswana. Some 65,000 children have the signature red bags.

Founded in 1999 in Menlo Park, Calif., RAR is run by the Center for Venture Philanthropy (CVP), a division of the Peninsula Community Foundation. After success in 260 Silicon Valley child-care settings – with outside requests for information growing – Raising a Reader began a deliberate process to scale up nationally.

While the concept of lending take-home books is not unique, RAR emphasizes the advantages of local communities becoming affiliates. The results are not about "putting inanimate objects in the hands of poor people," but rather, about "a comprehensive delivery of the entire RAR theory

of change – the whole package," said Carol Gray, CVP's executive director. RAR provides educators in local communities with a 360-page operating manual and a host of organizational templates, including job descriptions and sample grant applications. New local coordinators – some of whom are teachers – attend a three-day training course where they are taught read-aloud strategies, how to talk about RAR, raise funds, build a local movement, and evaluate and report results.

"Raising a Reader was a perfect program to replicate," said Janell Flores, an RAR coordinator in San Francisco. "After we decided to implement the program, I could take what was given and go."

The expansion strategy hasn't always been smooth for RAR. Despite careful planning, for instance, first-year scaling-up targets went unmet, and existing providers survived on bare-bones funding. "What does it cost?" was the first question, and the largest hurdle. RAR counters this through a seed grant of \$14,000. Then, through conversations with local funders and providers, communities are encouraged to host a joint exploratory presentation to discuss launching a pilot and obtaining funding.

Local communities were also concerned about increased workload, and that RAR would displace existing projects. RAR reshaped its introductory sales pitch to emphasize the "plug and play" nature of its program. By simplifying the message, RAR conveyed how it could fit within existing systems and complement other literacy programs.

That, combined with the strong brand image and endorsements from evaluations, offered a powerful call to join the RAR movement. (According to a 2003 evaluation of 4,000 families in the San Francisco program, when compared to the control group, RAR fostered a 271 percent increase in low-income parents who read aloud to their children five or more times a week.)

"Parents love [RAR]. The moms talk about the increased creativity they've seen in their children," said Catherine Held, director of literacy programs at the California Parenting Institute in Sonoma County. "The dads and older siblings get involved as well. This is a whole new dynamic for the fathers who thought that they couldn't do anything to help their children." □



Raising a Reader teaches pre-literacy skills to low-income children, involving mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers.