

A Peer-Based Approach to Learning Acceleration

Narrator:

Welcome to The SRI Homeroom. Today, an innovative peer-based approach to literacy instruction.

Alida Hudson:

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Narrator:

Examining the impact and growth of PALS-RD, today on The SRI Homeroom. Welcome in.

Adrienne Woods:

Welcome to The SRI Homeroom. My name is Adrienne Woods. I'm a Senior Education Researcher with SRI and I am a member of the LEARN Network. In 2022, the Institute for Ed Sciences funded the LEARN Network, which stands for Leveraging Evidence to Accelerate Recovery Nationwide. The LEARN Network has the goal of accelerating learning growth, especially among students who are most likely to be struggling or falling behind post-pandemic with the goal to scale or increase the use of evidence-based products or practices in schools.

As part of this network, we at SRI, we're lucky enough to work with four product teams who had developed evidence-based products in literacy and math. We offered one-to-one and group-based feedback to help them adapt and position their evidence-based products to scale successfully according to their goals. And that's how we got to know PALS-RD and Alida Hudson.

Alida Hudson:

Hi.

Adrienne Woods:

It's so great to have you, Alida.

Alida Hudson:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Adrienne Woods:

So tell me a little bit about yourself.

Alida Hudson:

I'm Alida Hudson. I am a researcher at the American Institutes for Research or AIR. My research primarily focuses on examining evidence-based practices for promoting positive reading outcomes in children, pre-K through 12. And I'm really also interested in examining and building teacher's knowledge

of evidence-based practices and helping them implement them in their classrooms. I'm a part of the PALS-RD research team, and I get to work on projects with PALS and examining its effects with students.

Adrienne Woods:

Cool. I don't know if you know this Alida, but I actually first learned about PALS before I even started grad school a long time ago because I interviewed for grad school with its founder, Doug Fuchs.

Alida Hudson:

Oh, wow, I didn't know that.

Adrienne Woods:

So PALS has obviously been around for a really long time. It's been really successful for a really long time. Can you tell us a little bit about the origin of PALS, what it stands for, and then how that sort of spun off into PALS-RD?

Alida Hudson:

Yeah. So you know that program was developed by Doug and Lynn Fuchs and their colleagues at Vanderbilt University over 30 years. And they've collaborated with local classrooms in Middle Tennessee and local classroom teachers in the public schools they were working in. And they worked with those teachers to learn about the needs through research and direct collaboration with those schools and educators to really help them understand the practical challenges that these teachers were facing in their classrooms with meeting the needs of their students.

And what we see in the classrooms is that we know students' reading comprehension, especially by fourth grade, is essential for future academic and life success. However, we also know from working with district and campus level stakeholders and teachers that we have this wide range of student abilities within a classroom. So we have students anywhere from one to two years below grade level to one to two years above grade level. And it's really hard and challenging for teachers to meet the individual needs of every single student in their classroom.

So PALS was really created by the Fuchs to address this need and to take advantage of the natural heterogeneity of students' abilities in a classroom. So they developed PALS, which is Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies for reading in grades two through six to really meet the needs of all students, so below level learners, above level learners, and everywhere in between.

So PALS Reading works by incorporating cooperative learning or what we call peer-mediated learning into instruction. And peer-mediated learning or cooperative learning is recognized by the National Reading Panel as well as several other meta-analyses as being an evidence-based method for building students' comprehension specifically as well as other reading skills. And this is likely, because it really works within a student's zone of proximal development. Meaning that it allows students to use what they already know and build on it in a way that's not too challenging for them.

So PALS is a supplemental literacy curricula, meaning that it can be used in addition to any core curricula that the teacher or school is already using. It's a way to additionally support students' reading fluency and reading comprehension alongside whatever they're already doing in the classroom. And PALS-RD specifically is used in fourth grade classrooms and it aligns with the existing literacy instruction and the teacher's schedules. So it's engaging all of the students and it supplements the standard curriculum.

Adrienne Woods:

That's so nice. And how do teachers feel about this? What does it sort of look like for them in the scope of their day-to-day?

Alida Hudson:

So it's designed to be used three times a week for about 30 minutes part-time over the course of say, 18 weeks. We have gotten really good feedback from teachers. They really find it easy to implement into their classrooms. They feel like it's beneficial and it's really engaging and motivating for their students, because all students have a role and all students have an instructional activity that they're engaging in for that entire 30 minutes. So teachers have found that it fits seamlessly into their classroom and it really does support what they're already doing and those goals that they're trying to accomplish with their students.

Adrienne Woods:

That's great.

Alida Hudson:

So PALS-RD, what teachers do is they assess all of their students' reading abilities or reading fluency, and they rank students from the strongest reader in their class to the weakest reader in their class. And then they divide that list in half and then they use that list to pair students together in meaningful partnerships. So a strong reader with a middle range reader and then a high mid-range reader with your weakest reader. So it's making these meaningful partnerships where students are close enough to each other's ability where you still have a stronger student and a weaker student, but they're not so far where you're pairing the strongest student in the class with the weakest student in the class.

So for example, if you have 20 students in your class, you'll have 10 pairs and all 20 students will be actively engaged for the entire PALS time. And this also allows the teacher to differentiate between pairs as they're working. So you could get different pairs, different reading materials. The teacher can walk over and support different pairs in different ways. So it really does allow the teacher to meet the needs of all of his or her students in a way that's not feasible if you're trying to just use whole group direct instruction.

So the pairs engage with each other through structured activities. And the great thing about this is in each pair, one student is assigned the coach and the other student is assigned the reader, and then they work through an activity and then they switch roles. So within each PALS activity each time, every student gets to act as both the coach and the reader, which is one reason we think that it's really motivating for students because they do get to act in both roles.

Adrienne Woods:

That sounds so fun.

Alida Hudson:

Yeah. And through each of these activities, not only does the teacher teach them what to do in the activity, but the teacher also trains the students to use specific prompts or corrections and feedback to support each other in these partnerships. So that, like I said, it really is supporting all students in your classroom and they're getting that immediate specific feedback that we know is so important.

Adrienne Woods:

That's awesome. One of the things that I remember learning about when I first encountered PALS was this phenomenon that when you teach someone else the material, you end up learning it better yourself. And that to me made so much sense for why PALS has been so successful for as long as it's been around, because it capitalizes on that naturally with your peers, which is probably easier to talk to a kid in your classroom than it is to talk to your teacher. And so it's a really cool model and it obviously works because it's been around for 30 plus years, right?

Alida Hudson:

Yes. And it's been expanded, so I think it started as grades two through six and now K-1 programs that focus on those foundational reading skills. There's a high school program that really targets those upper adolescent skills. I know it's been used in math and lots of other content areas. And so it really is a model that can really work for, like I said, any curricula, any setting. It's pairing students together and teaching them to work together, which we know is also a life skill of how to work with a partner and how to work with a peer and give constructive feedback and positive feedback and all those things, which I think is why, one, we see that increases student skills, but also we see that the students do find it very engaging and motivating.

Adrienne Woods:

That's great. So it sounds like it's been expanded in a lot of different ways. Can you tell us a little bit more about how PALS-RD specifically came about? What was the need that led to this particular fourth grade intervention being sort of spun off from the original PALS?

Alida Hudson:

So this was really in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which we know disrupted students' learning. These fourth graders would have been in kindergarten during the COVID-19 pandemic, so they might have missed some of that foundational early literacy skills that we know are so essential to later reading and literacy development.

So PALS-RD or PALS Reading with Differentiation really came about in response to that and we thought about how can we take the PALS Reading curriculum, which is really designed to build students' fluency and comprehension and make an adaptation that will also address potentially some of those earlier foundational skills.

One thing that we did was we incorporated continuous progress monitoring through a CBM-Maze, which is essentially a quick assessment that students take every three weeks and it kind of gauges their progress. So where they started and the progress that they're making. And then we had teachers use those assessment scores to continuously regroup their students.

We also developed a differentiation. So what we know from research from the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guides is really these upper elementary students, they encounter many multi-syllabic words in their text. And if we give them strategies to help them decode the word, so let's break it into word parts, let's break it into a prefix and a base word in a suffix, that's going to help these students who may have been missing some of that foundational decoding during the pandemic, that's going to help them read longer words. But morphology instruction also helps build their vocabulary, because now they're looking at, "Okay, I know this is a prefix, what does that prefix mean and how does that change the meaning of the base word?" So it's kind of hitting two birds with one stone, so decoding and vocabulary, which is why we chose and we thought that it would be a great addition and modification to PALS Reading.

Adrienne Woods:

Okay. So PALS-RD sounds like the users are fourth grade teachers and their students specifically developed post-COVID, which was a huge need. So can you describe the steps that you all took to really learn about what those specific needs are among teachers and students post-pandemic and what challenges they're encountering and how PALS-RD really fits in with their existing workflow?

Alida Hudson:

We know from the research that students from Hispanic communities and students from low-income communities were hit very hard by the pandemic and their learning was severely disrupted when compared to their white, more affluent peers. So we knew that we kind of wanted to target this community to see how can we help support their post-pandemic learning because they were a community that had this great need.

We then worked with UT Rio Grande Valley and developed a partnership there along with Vanderbilt and the Fuchs Tutoring Center to target districts in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, which is a primarily Hispanic, low-income, bilingual community to implement PALS-RD in fourth grade. So with these students who would've been in kindergarten during the pandemic. We did a pilot year study where we asked teachers to implement PALS-RD with differentiation. And through interviews and surveys with those teachers, we got feedback on how it's going, what supports they needed, things we needed to tweak and things like that before we ran the full randomized control trial that looks at the effects in a research statistics way.

Adrienne Woods:

And what did you learn?

Alida Hudson:

So we learned that ... So again, we worked with grade four students and although we did not see any kind of direct main effects for all students on PALS, we did find that among grade four students who started the year with weaker comprehension abilities that PALS-RD really worked well for them. So students who began the program with below average reading comprehension showed significantly greater gains in reading comprehension than similar peers who are not receiving the PALS instruction.

Adrienne Woods:

So it really did help them catch up. That's great.

Alida Hudson:

It did. So we found a moderate effect, which is equivalent to a 21 percentile point increase in improvement. So when you're thinking about these students who are below grade level really having a lot of reading challenges, they implemented PALS three times a week for 18 weeks and we saw these significant gains and the teachers really enjoyed it. They thought it was easy to implement, they thought it sat well on top of their original curriculum. And we always also like to say that it's a cost-effective method. It really doesn't take any additional materials or anything like that. It's just pairing students together and teaching them how to work together to increase these reading scores.

The other thing that I think is really interesting is because we were targeting post-pandemic learning and learning recovery, we compared our grade four students during the '24, '25 school year, so post-pandemic. We looked at their reading gains from the grade three state standardized test to the grade

four state standardized reading test, and we compared their gains there to pre-pandemic. We found that our grade four students that received PALS instruction performed similarly so that they had the same reading gains as pre-pandemic peers.

Adrienne Woods:

Wow.

Alida Hudson:

And so you're like, "Oh, it's the same." But all the research recently since the pandemic has shown that, especially in fourth grade, reading growth from third grade to fourth grade has slowed significantly after the pandemic. So to see that these students who receive PALS are performing the same as the students before the pandemic, we took that as a win because-

Adrienne Woods:

That's huge. Yeah.

Alida Hudson:

... it's kind of indicating that we can help this learning recovery, we can get kids back to where they were prior to the pandemic.

Adrienne Woods:

That's great. All right, I want to transition a little bit more to talking about PALS-RD's scaling story. So now that we've established that it works in very important ways, like you've said, especially around a really critical period of the transition between learning how to read and then reading to learn things is right around the third to fourth grade level. So it's really great that you've demonstrated these effects. What are your goals for PALS-RD? How do you plan to scale it into the hands of more communities and more folks who could benefit from this kind of supplemental reading tool?

Alida Hudson:

So the next kind of scaling plan within the next year is to really expand IT to 15 school districts across the United States. So in our kind of pilot study the past three years, we were really just looking at a few districts in a certain region that we knew there was this great need. So the next goal is to scale it to 15 districts nationwide to support this with the Fuchs Tutoring learning team at the American Institutes for Research, we're going to adapt some of those RD materials for broader more general use.

So teachers or schools that are wanting to use PALS-RD, we will be able to provide them with asynchronous, scalable professional development aligned with the science of reading and really tailored to classroom implementation. So again, helping make it cost-effective and time efficient for schools and teachers wanting to implement this.

After that initial 15 districts, the next goal would then be by 2027 to expand it with now a shift towards sustaining adoption and deepening the impact. So having schools use this long-term or more than one year renewing their interest in PALS and getting teachers trained in PALS and using PALS. And then beginning in 2028, we would really like to make PALS-RD available for national adoption through open enrollment. And again, we're going to use all of the previous things to really continue to iterate the program and make it usable and scalable for users. And this last stage, hopefully, there will be this return on investment for districts that have been with us and just show the longevity of the program.

Adrienne Woods:

Yeah. What would be the team's goal as long-term scaling? Is this something that you would love to be an open source educational resource? Or is it a product that people buy, like they would buy a curriculum? Or what's sort of the vision there?

Alida Hudson:

So we do know the training in materials will be for sale eventually to districts and schools that want to adopt the program.

Adrienne Woods:

Cool. So since you started working on PALS-RD, have your scaling goals changed from the very beginning to where you are now over the course of working with the LEARN Network or learning more about implementation of PALS-RD?

Alida Hudson:

Our scaling goals have definitely evolved over, one, the research study and also just the feedback that we've gotten through meetings with SRI and the LEARN Network. We've really thought about, again, how to ensure the longevity within districts, how we can support schools and districts wanting to really invest in this and how they can get their best return on investment.

So really, shifting it from kind of a research project that we're used to sometimes here at AIR to really how can we make this to where it's usable and feasible, and cost-effective, and time-efficient for schools? Our scaling structure has really tried to bridge that research to practice. So how can we take this evidence-based effective practice that we know is working and has evidence of working and scale it to where it's open and available to everyone that you don't have to be part of a research study to get it?

Adrienne Woods:

And it sounds like the asynchronous training that you're planning to offer too is going to be really helpful for folks in sort of long-term sustainment too, right? Not only getting the program but then being able to make sure that they can continue using it and learning about it and updating their skills every so often. Right?

Alida Hudson:

Correct. Correct. And we decided to go the asynchronous route, one, just because we know the demand on teachers right now and their time and school's time and everything that's on them.

Adrienne Woods:

How has the PALS team at AIR evolved, or how is it going to evolve to support those scaling goals over the short term and the long term?

Alida Hudson:

As of right now, so for the research study, AIR, UT Rio Grande Valley, the LEARN Network, Fuchs Tutoring and Vanderbilt have all been partnered together to really research the study with fourth graders. And we've also been thinking about the scaling plan and what the next step looks like. As we know, a lot of our PALS research has been funded by grants.

So we are going to have to work as a team to figure out what that next step will be and whether that's bringing in a new person that's really focused on marketing and how to market this to schools to share the research findings that we know are so positive and so effective for students, especially those students with reading difficulties. But we might need someone to help us come in and market it in a way that it really speaks to the schools and districts that we're trying to share this product with.

We also know that as we scale PALS-RD, that we have to invest in teacher training and coaching. So this is not a product that we're just going to buy off the shelf and hand to a teacher that we really believe in the coaching and to support teachers as well as training the teachers on how to use it and fit it within their classroom as well as how to train their students how to use it because we know that's a big part of it as well, especially post pandemic and getting students to work with each other and talk to one another again. That is one thing that I didn't mention before that we saw in our study.

Prior studies of PALS have had great teacher and student fidelity, meaning that the teachers do what they're expected to do as part of PALS and the students do what they're expected to do as part of PALS. In our study, we found high teacher fidelity, so the teacher was following kind of the manual and the procedures to a tee, but we found lower student fidelity, and we kind of hypothesized that, that might also have something to do with COVID and just how students in that really crucial foundational time of their life, kindergarten, they were behind a computer screen and really not having to interact with one another. So it's really training the teachers on how to train the students to, again, work with each other, talk to each other, provide that feedback and support with one another and things like that.

We also know that as we scale this program, we have to build flexible tools that teachers and schools can integrate into their existing workflow, into their existing school day, as well as really helping teachers use their data from those CBM-Maze assessments or from whatever progress tool they're choosing to use to drive the instruction in the PALS groupings. But again, we know that all of that is going to come down to teacher training, and so we're really going to have to invest in that as we want to scale this nationwide.

Adrienne Woods:

Yeah, that's a great perspective to have, and I think I've definitely talked about this on this podcast before and probably also with you all and our one-to-one meetings, but we make the analogy a lot that there's a difference between a free beer and a free puppy, right?

And so sometimes, when you create these tools that are really effective and really helpful, you still have to teach folks how to use it and you still have to invest in making sure that they can use it effectively. And like you said, if things have changed post-pandemic, there might be some sort of tweaks that teachers need to make that they previously were doing fine and now there's sort of some updates. So I think it's really awesome that you all are thinking about that moving forward.

Alida Hudson:

Thanks.

Adrienne Woods:

So what recommendations and or lessons learned would you want to convey to other researchers and developers who are maybe developing something that they're hoping to scale in a similar way or achieve broader adoption and help as many students and teachers and schools as possible?

Alida Hudson:

Yeah. I think lessons learned and recommendations would be to definitely work with the educators who are actually in the classrooms on the ground using the product. I think PALS overall, not just through our study, but since Doug and Lynn Fuchs developed it years ago, it's always been developed alongside classroom educators. And all the iterations have been made because we've gotten feedback and listened to the people on the ground in the classrooms.

There has to be that buy-in from the end users, so the teachers in the schools that we want to use it, there has to be that buy-in, there has to be that purpose and they have to see the usefulness of it. And I think giving them a voice in the development and the usage and the ways that they possibly adapt it to fit within their classrooms, I think all of those things are really important to consider as you're thinking about making a program that you want to scale and make larger, and just knowing that you have to be somewhat flexible. Right?

And sometimes that can be hard, because it can be your baby, and I'm sure if Doug was here talking about it, he's been working on this for 30 years, and so he sets a great example of how it continues to change and it's responding to the needs that we see in the field and the only-

Adrienne Woods:

Which can also change, right?

Alida Hudson:

Which can also change.

Adrienne Woods:

Especially during post-COVID like we talked about. So, yeah, that's a great point.

Alida Hudson:

Yeah. I think we also need to think about, or I would also recommend seeking cost-effective, structured evidence-based practices and how we can help schools and districts, especially in this time, use the most efficient and effective things in a cost-effective manner, and really being cognizant of that too.

Adrienne Woods:

Great. Well, it's been so great to chat with you today about PALS and how it started, origins 30 years ago and how it's shifted into PALS-RD and kind of continued to achieve success, including in these changing times. It's been really great to chat with you today.

Alida Hudson:

Thank you so much. Glad to be here.

Adrienne Woods:

And thanks so much for joining us on The SRI Homeroom. We'll see you next time.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to The SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI Education, a division of SRI. Our guest today was Alida Hudson, researcher with the American Institutes for Research. Our host was Adrienne Woods, Senior Education Researcher with SRI and a member of the LEARN Network. Learn more about them,

their work, and access a transcript of this episode with the links in today's show notes. You can browse our entire library of episodes by visiting SRI.com/homeroom. The views expressed in today's episode belong solely to the participants and do not represent the views of SRI or any organizational funder or partner.