



Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

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Using Afterschool and Summer Learning to Improve Literacy Skills

America's literacy rates remain a national challenge, and fourth grade reading scores tell the story. An analysis of 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fourth grade reading scores reveals that two-thirds of fourth graders are not "proficient" readers, including 36% who scored *below* "basic." Disaggregating the data sheds light on more disturbing findings: 58% of African Americans, 54% of Hispanics, and 52% of American Indian/Alaska Natives scored below "basic." For low-income children, *more than four out of every five scored less than "proficient,"* including 54% who scored below "basic" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Children who do not become proficient readers by fourth grade are on a trajectory for a wide array of negative consequences in school and in later life. According to the National Research Council (1998), "academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy based on third grade reading skills." Researchers at Yale University recently concluded that three-quarters of the students who are poor readers in third grade remain poor readers in high school and are far more likely to drop out than their peers (Shaywitz et al., 1997).

The root causes of the literacy crisis in the United States are well documented and multifaceted. A number of studies underscore that reading success—or failure—starts at home. By age 3, children from low-income families have a listening vocabulary only one-third the size of their more affluent peers (Afterschool Alliance, 2011), and they have significantly less access to print. Neuman (2009) found that there was only one book title for every 300 children in low-income neighborhoods. With less access to high

quality early care and pre-kindergarten programs, these children may hear as many as 30-million fewer words than do their middle-income peers before reaching kindergarten, impeding such important precursors to literacy as vocabulary acquisition and language development.

In addition, many low-income students miss too much instructional time as a result of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. As many as 25% of low-income students in urban school districts are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). When the school year ends, low-income students experience significant learning losses during the summer (See Heyns, 1978; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Luftig, 2003). Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996), for example, found that, on average, low-income students lose more than 2 months of reading performance every summer during their elementary school years.

However, most children—even the most vulnerable—can achieve the benchmark of reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Recent research delineates how people learn to read and provides best practices for teaching reading, via decades of work from the National Institute for Child Health and Development, the National Reading Panel, and others. Mounting evidence suggests that *afterschool and summer learning programs can play a vital role* in improving literacy outcomes for children. Reading enrichment, tutoring, and social-emotional development programs, combined with parent involvement and books and materials of high quality, are producing results that close achievement gaps (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001; Kim & White, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2012).

The Promise of Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs

One example of a successful summer learning program that has demonstrated significant improvement in reading achievement is Summer Advantage USA (www.summeradvantage.org). One of only two scientifically validated summer learning programs in the nation, this 5-week program combines rigorous morning academics with engaging afternoon enrichment activities. Since its inception in 2009, the program has served over 10,000 youth nationwide and has been offered by a number of 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs across several states. Youth (dubbed “scholars”) who participate in the Summer Advantage program experience over 2 *months of growth in reading skills*, as well as 2 months in math skills.

Summer Advantage attributes its consistent literacy gains to several key programmatic elements that support the literacy development of its scholars: (1) hiring exceptional educators and offering small-group ratios; (2) providing 2 hours of reading and writing instruction each morning, Monday through Thursday; (3) using a rigorous, research-based curriculum; (4) incorporating a multicultural leveled library into each classroom that speaks to the real interests of the scholars; and (5) providing pre-program professional development for program staff that focuses on child development and constructing engaging instruction. These program characteristics—sustained time, access to appropriate print, scaffolded materials, and staff development—are found in similar programs that result in reading gains (e.g., Kim & White, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2012).

Of course, unlike Summer Advantage, many summer and afterschool programs are not explicitly designed to “teach” reading as such; therefore, they may not typically have personnel and/or the expertise to take on such a task. Appropriate interventions can, however, still be effectively used by program staff to help students maintain or enhance their reading skills. The key is to design the *right kind* of summer and afterschool programs as delineated by research. Afterschool and summer learning programs can, in fact, easily infuse reading into activities that children and youth enjoy. So, in addition to strengthening reading skills with well-designed and explicit instructional interventions, these programs can serve to link children’s interests with literacy development by simply getting them to read more broadly, consistently, and intensively in pursuit of their interests (Afterschool Alliance, 2011).

The Importance of Getting to Know Students and Being *Explicit* About Their Learning

Because afterschool and summer programs may have students for a short term, Vanderbilt professor Anita Conn notes that the staff “dive into a preplanned ‘program’ without taking the necessary time to ascertain individual skills levels and target instruction to each student’s needs” (personal interview, 18 September 2011). Afterschool and summer program staff should make it a *priority* to find out about students’ backgrounds, communities, home lives, and first languages/language spoken at home. Programs can then provide a learner-centered focus, targeting each student’s needs, unique struggles, and potential resources.

Consider this scenario: An afterschool tutor reading *The Little Engine That Could* to a group of K-third graders discovered that not one child knew what an engine was. The tutor stopped, created the schema through pictures and acting out, and *then* proceeded with the story. Comprehension requires that readers know English letters, sounds, and print conventions—but also the *meanings* of words! The tutor recognized and addressed the lack of vocabulary knowledge in her audience: She asked, in pre-reading, what a little engine was; when she saw that nobody knew, she explained and then continued with the story. She targeted her “instruction” based on her informal “assessment” of what her audience did and did not know.

Coordination With Classroom Teachers

Certainly, to the greatest extent possible, afterschool and summer program staff should coordinate their programming with learning in the classroom, either to reinforce it or pre-teach it, and then provide additional opportunities for children to process, to practice, to extend, and to reflect upon the experience. If, for example, the state focuses on state history in fourth grade, the summer or afterschool enrichment activities might involve field trips to local historical sites or guest speakers who present interesting,

Urban Arts Partnership – New York City

Urban Arts Fresh ED and Fresh Prep are two great examples of programs tailored to the interests and backgrounds of their target student demographics. They use hip-hop as a way of developing critical literacy, critical thinking, and test prep skills among youth in New York City. These programs also explore the use of hip-hop as a tool to increase students’ synthesis of information, analytics of texts, and performance on standardized assessments.

educational activities that set a context, a background, for learning. When children return from the field trip, or after the speaker talks, staff should be explicit about the experience: “Where did we go? Why? Who lived there? What happened there? What did you learn? Anybody learn any new words? Was our trip interesting? Why? Let’s write about it in our journals/write a story for our parents/draw a picture/write the new words on our word list.” In this informal discussion and activity, children have an opportunity to engage metacognitively, to recount concretely their experience, to add to their knowledge base, and to add to their vocabulary repertoire.

By contrast, misalignment of in-school, afterschool, and summer program learning goals and objectives creates missed opportunities. Consider the case of an at-risk child. He learned short “a” words (c-an, D-an, p-an) in the regular classroom, consonant blends (br-own, bl-own) in the resource room, and colors (red, blue, brown) in his afterschool program. His homework? Memorize spelling words containing the short “a” sound: bat, man, can, ran, and, hand. His day revealed two missed opportunities for someone else to reinforce what was going on in the classroom.

Other Ways to Encourage Literacy

Even if a particular afterschool or summer program’s mission is not specifically to teach reading or to teach the subskills involved, staff still can encourage literacy. Program leaders and staff should ensure that books are available and accessible. A reading corner for children, with many, varied, interesting books and lots of comfy pillows, is invaluable.

In addition to books at the program site, regular visits to the public and school libraries are always a good activity for children and their families. Many libraries provide free or inexpensive resources for summer reading programs. In her groundbreaking study, Barbara Heyns (1975) found that the library, more than any other public institution, contributes to the intellectual growth of children over the summer. Some parents have never been in a library and have never checked out a book; staff can explain the concept of the lending library, reassuring parents that it is okay to let children read library books, as opposed to putting those books away to “protect” them. Story time at the library also provides a nice model for how to read to children.

Importance of Parent Involvement

Finally, afterschool and summer programs should work intentionally to increase and enhance parent involvement. Numerous studies and anecdotal evidence have demonstrated the importance of parent and family involvement in reading (see Fan & Chen, 2001, for a meta-analytic review); however, to create an environment that values the parent as the child’s first teacher, programs must be flexible and accommodating. “Business as usual” may need to be modified, scheduling open houses or parent information sessions at different times. Staff should share details about the program and suggest specific ways that parents can support their child’s learning offered at multiple times to accommodate parents’ schedules. The goal is to empower parents to model and encourage literacy activities, to go to the library, to talk with their children all the time, to tell their own stories.

In communicating with parents, staff should provide and solicit ideas for activities. For example, “literacy activities” can be as simple as reading the back of the cereal box together every morning for 10 minutes during breakfast. Reading Is Fundamental (www.rif.org) and other websites contain a treasure trove of suggested storytime activities.

Program staff should communicate frequently and consistently with the family, but they should make sure that they communicate in such a way that the parent actually receives and understands the message. To that end, staff should closely re-examine the kinds of communications they send to parents. Obviously messages from program staff should not patronize; but messages should, nevertheless, be short and simple. Though program staff would never intend this consequence, many adult new or nonreaders are intimidated by a wall of text. Research indicates that many parents do not think they have the skills to encourage the literacy efforts of their children (Cook-Cottone, 2004), and if staff send home text that parents have no chance of reading, programs have unwittingly verified the parental fears.

On family nights, programs should provide models, help, and multiple opportunities for parents to observe and participate in literacy activities. Translators may be needed, and staff planners should ensure that lots of pictures are associated with text. The bottom line is that programs should help parents understand how important they, as parents, are to the literacy development of their children. Some programs communicate with parents weekly by phone, text, or postcard. Some programs teach parents how to do reading assessment. As Karen Mapp says in frequent presentations, “Parent involvement goes beyond the bake sale!”

Conclusion

Summer and afterschool programs have a great potential to help close the gap in achievement among at-risk populations and to enlist more partners for improved reading and literacy because of their community and family connections.

Serious programs should do their homework to ensure top quality in programming that enhances literacy for children of all ages and levels of achievement. Research abounds on best practices and their foundational philosophical underpinnings. Careful planning on the front end, parent communication and involvement, on-going assessment, and best practices throughout should help many more summer and afterschool programs, leading to increased reading achievement, higher literacy rates, more families of readers, and more literate communities across the country.

For More Information

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) the nation's oldest and largest children's literacy nonprofit: www.rif.org

RIF's extensive collection of expertly designed, scaffolded reading guides and activities for parents, educators, and community coordinators is available at www.rif.org/mbc.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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