

Addressing Summer Reading Loss: A Public Education Partners and Greenville County Schools Initiative

White Paper

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RESEARCH &
VALIDATION

Overview

Make Summer Count (MSC) is a summer reading initiative sponsored by Public Education Partners (PEP) for Greenville County Elementary Schools (GCS) in Greenville, South Carolina. PEP collaborates with community partners to introduce innovative programming in schools and deepen connections between schools and the community in an effort to strengthen public education and student achievement in Greenville, South Carolina. Through MSC, PEP provides students and families resources and opportunities to encourage reading through the summer. As part of this effort, PEP partnered with Scholastic, the global children's publishing, education and media company, to increase access to books and learn more about how summer reading activities contribute to reducing or stemming summer reading loss – the increasing gap between lower- and higher-income students that can occur when literacy resources are not equally available to all students during the summer.

MSC addresses the challenge of equal access to books and literacy activities during the summer by providing two targeted, research-based opportunities for literacy engagement: the MSC Book Selection and Family Reading Nights. The MSC Book Selection helps students build home libraries by providing them each with the opportunity to select, under the guidance of their teachers, 11 books within their reading levels to own and read over the summer. During Family Reading Nights, families are invited to learn techniques and strategies to support their children's reading over the summer, and children select an additional five books to take home. The program aims to serve students and families in higher-needs elementary schools, defined in this research as schools with 50% or more of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Price Meals, the resources they need to be able to read all summer long. PEP, GCS, and Scholastic approached addressing summer reading loss and conducting research by:

- Providing 11 free books per student to over 18,000 1st–6th grade¹ students across 29 higher-needs elementary schools via the MSC Book Selection; more than 209,000 total books distributed
- Hosting 23 Family Reading Night events to foster family engagement, reaching more than 1,200 participants
- Distributing surveys to over 9,000 3rd–5th grade students
- Distributing over 18,000 book logs to track summer reading in 1st–6th grade students²
- Analyzing assessment data on over 8,000 3rd–5th grade students

¹ Throughout this document, grade refers to the grade students were in during the fall of 2016

² Students in 5th grade rising into 6th grade were given logs to record their books over the summer; however, only students in 1st–5th grade in the fall of 2016 were included in analyses

This dual approach of providing access to books and tools for family engagement to address summer learning loss is based on the research indicating that during the summer months, elementary school students from low-income backgrounds experience greater reading loss compared to students from middle- and high-income backgrounds (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2001; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996; Kim, 2004). Allington and McGill-Franzen (2013) argue that disparity in access to summer literacy resources may actually result in students from less advantaged backgrounds experiencing a loss in proficiency while more advantaged students show modest reading growth during the same period. This phenomenon can lead to a two- to three-month gap in reading achievement between students from low- and middle-income families that accumulates to a substantial gap in reading achievement by the time students enter high school (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2007).

School districts have attempted to address summer reading loss by providing center-based summer school programs, but this approach is costly and difficult to sustain. In the absence of summer school programs, experts theorize that providing access to books over the summer may address summer reading loss in a more cost effective way (Allington, McGill-Franzen, Camilli, Graff, Zeig, Zmach, & Nowak, 2010). Moreover, strengthening the school and home relationship by encouraging family support of summer reading is a key component to ensuring that students read during the summer, and that they read in ways that build understanding (Kim & White, 2011). These principles are the foundation of MSC's goal of providing opportunities for all students to experience rich reading experiences over the summer.

This paper contains exploratory findings concerning the effectiveness of the MSC program as well as descriptive information about the students and families who participated. The findings should be contextualized in the sense that there was not a comparison group of students; rather this is an analysis of the unique results of all students participating in MSC. Additionally, this research does not account for additional summer learning/enrichment opportunities that may have been sought out for and participated in by some of these students and families.

Key Findings

Scholastic Research & Validation examined how summer reading activities might contribute to reducing or stemming typical summer reading loss, as well as the role of students' attitudes and beliefs about reading and their actual summer reading habits. Preliminary findings indicate positive effects on student and family measures based on data collected from student and family surveys, Family Reading Nights, book logs recorded by students over the summer, and spring and fall student achievement data.

Regarding the amount of summer reading reported by students, MSC students read more books over the summer than the national average.

MSC Students read an average of 14.7 books, compared to the national average of 12 books from Scholastic's nationally representative *Kids & Family Reading Report*™ with kids aged 6–11. The number of books logged over the summer by MSC participants decreased as students' age increased. The average number of books read among 1st graders was 16.9, while it was 12.0 among 5th graders. One explanation for this decrease could be that as students age they read longer books which require more time to complete.

Specifically, with regard to summer reading loss, we found that the majority of students participating in MSC did not experience summer reading loss that is typically associated with students in higher-needs schools.

More specifically, 78% of 3rd–5th grade students maintained or increased their reading level from spring to fall 2016.³ In addition, students who read more books over the summer⁴ were less likely to experience summer reading loss. Students who read 11 or more books were less likely to experience summer reading loss as defined by moving to a lower MAP performance tier at the end of the summer – 15% vs. 26% of students who read 10 or fewer books.

We also found a substantial increase in reading stamina, or the time spent reading without taking a break, from spring to fall 2016 for MSC students.

The percent of students who read for one hour or more without stopping increased from 13% to 26%. Hiebert (2015) defines stamina, a critical reading proficiency, as a student's ability to "independently maintain reading focus over long periods of time [and the] ability to sustain mental effort without scaffolds or adult supports" (p. 16). Stamina skewed higher among MSC students who read more books.

³ Reading levels as measured by overall MAP RIT performance tiers created for this study's analyses

⁴ For our analyses, we split students between those who recorded 10 or fewer books and those who recorded 11 or more books. Students who read "more books" are those who reported reading 11 or more books during the summer.

Students also reported increased confidence in reading after participating in MSC.

Eighty-two percent agreed that they were better readers after the summer. Twenty-four percent of students who read 11 or more books over the summer reported increased reading confidence (as measured by agreement to the statement "I am a good reader") from spring to fall, compared to just 9% among students who read ten books or fewer.

In addition to the Book Selection, MSC implemented Family Reading Nights to foster family engagement and provide families with tools to support their children's reading over the summer. Chin and Phillips (2004) note that parents of lower-income children often provide access to books for their children, but they do not necessarily have the tools to help facilitate rich reading activities, discuss the books in meaningful ways, or help their children select books at the right reading level. MSC's targeted approach was designed to engage families by providing a welcoming environment for the entire family and to equip them to engage in rich read alouds and book discussions with their children.

Families overwhelmingly found the MSC program to be valuable.⁵

Ninety-nine percent agreed that the program contributed to their children reading more books over the summer, 98% agreed that their children were better readers after the summer, and 100% found Family Reading Nights to be valuable for learning about how to support their children's reading. One family member said, "My child loves the [MSC Book Selection] because we don't let him buy at the normal book fair because the books cost too much." Another said, "The free books that were given to my child made her ask more frequently to read. It also made her want books and not toys at the store. She received so many books that we would read 5+ books before bed. This made her 'hungry' for more. Thank you."

• Next Steps

These preliminary findings are in line with research showing the importance of providing access to books to help address summer reading loss (Hart & Risley, 2003; Heyns, 1978; Neuman & Celano, 2001); as well as engaging and equipping families to support their children's reading during the summer (Benson & Borman, 2010; Chin & Phillips, 2004). Together PEP and Scholastic will continue to explore the relationship between access to books and increased family engagement, and summer reading loss during the summer of 2017.

⁵ Based on families who responded to the post-survey (n=101)

Specifically, PEP will continue their Book Selection activities and refine these processes by utilizing self-selection of books and ensuring that books are even more well-suited to students' interests and reading levels. PEP will also continue to provide opportunities to engage families by hosting Family Reading Nights, using these events to provide families with tools to have meaningful conversations about books. Scholastic will continue their work with PEP and Greenville County Schools to provide students and families the books and resources they need to read all summer long. Additionally, Scholastic Research & Validation will continue their work by gathering more specific and longitudinal student data to determine the impacts of MSC on students in Greenville County Schools, and will also expand the summer reading initiative research to other districts in the country as well as include a comparison group of students this summer.

Future program development and implementation efforts include ensuring that students get books that are not only of interest to them, but also at the right reading level. White, Kim, Kingston, & Foster (2014) suggest that providing students with free books alone is not necessarily enough to impact reading outcomes, but that reading books that are matched to students' interests and reading levels helps them to read independently and with understanding. Other suggestions to further the success of summer reading initiatives are to improve ways to track student reading over the summer, including the Scholastic Summer Reading Challenge, a free online program in which students self-report the number of minutes they read during the summer. Schools might also consider using TrackIt!, a fee-for-service platform where students can not only log the title of a book but also log time read and complete a "think sheet" – activities that build literacy skills – for selected book titles. School administrators and teachers may also "track" students by uploading district assessment data and other performance measures in to the software.

The promising findings from MSC highlight the need to continue supporting evidence-based summer reading programs that are sustainable, cost-effective, and replicable across sites. Together with community-school partnerships and rigorous research, we can continue to combat summer reading loss in an engaging and meaningful way for all families and schools.

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