

SUMMER READING PROGRAM IMPACT ON STUDENT READING ABILITY

A Report to the Williamsburg Regional Library

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The summer reading program, a staple in most public libraries, is a structured, thematic program that includes performances, events, and incentives. It exists to encourage children to read over the summer vacation. At the Williamsburg Regional Library (WRL), the summer reading program involves more than 3,000 children each year. In Virginia, libraries usually have about 13% of the eligible children participating. At WRL the percentage runs between 36% and 39%. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the summer reading program to determine what effect, if any, it has on a child's reading ability and attitude about reading.

In summer 2006, sixty-four students (36 students entering grade 2 and 28 students entering grade 5), their parents, and teachers participated in the study. Seventy-two percent of the participants reported reading at least one book. The Stanford Diagnostic Screening Test was used with participants in the spring (short form) and again in the fall (long form). Participating students, their parents, and teachers all completed surveys.

Eligibility for free and reduced price meals was used as an indicator of economic status. Children not eligible for free and reduced price meals read more books than those who were eligible. Ninety-four percent of the children who completed the reading program were not eligible for free and reduced price meals. Twenty-eight percent of the

children who did not complete the reading program were eligible for free and reduced price meals. Sixty-four students signed up to participate in the study and 46 (72%) checked out books or other materials from the library. This percentage relates only to the study participants and should be applied with caution to the larger population due to the small number of study participants.

On the survey they completed, teachers consistently rated children who participated in the reading program as having better reading skills, reading participation, and reading motivation than their peers who did not participate. These educators also rated participants as having better attitudes toward reading than those who did not participate. Ninety-two percent of participants agreed with the statement it is “A lot like me” to read more than five books over the summer; 88% chose the statement it is “A lot like me” to enjoy visiting the library; and 98% selected the statements it is, “A lot like me” or “A little like me” to pick books and spend free time reading.

Testing results for grade 5 showed some increase in post-test scores for children who participated in the summer reading program, but these results were less significant than those for students entering grade 2. Results for grade 2 indicated significantly higher post-tests on four of the five subscales of the Standard Diagnostic Test for summer reading program participants than for those students who did not participate. Students in both age groups who participated in the summer reading program and attended summer school scored significantly higher compared to students who did not participate.

In summary, children who participate in a summer reading program are more likely to retain and possibly increase their reading skills and exhibit a more positive attitude about reading, books, and library visits. In this study, younger participants

showed more significant growth in reading ability than older children. Children from lower income homes were less likely to participate in the summer reading program, and children that attended summer school or other enrichment programs may benefit more by adding participation in a summer reading program.

Summer reading programs can positively affect a child's reading ability, particularly a younger child who is building reading skills. Summer reading can affect children's attitudes toward reading, books, and libraries. Libraries should do more to enable children from lower income homes to participate in the programming they offer. Cooperation among libraries, summer school programs, and other summer enrichment can affect a child's reading ability more than any one program alone. Easy accessibility to summer reading programs through extended hours and outreach locations may increase participation among low income families as well as children involved in other summer activities.

In the summer of 2006, the Williamsburg Regional Library and the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University collaborated on a research evaluation of the library's summer reading program. The library and the Center entered this project acknowledging that the sample of students studied would be small. Both parties intended for the study to be a contribution to the larger body of work on summer learning loss and the role summer reading programs play in the development of reading ability and retention. The size of the study and the vagaries of standardized testing require that the reader view the results with caution. Readers are urged to examine and interpret the results in the light of the whole body of research on summer learning and summer reading programs.