



READ Together: Working with Educators and Caregivers to Build Literacy

Kids Need to Read's program improves reading proficiency for low-income kindergarten students

Childhood Literacy in America: An Overview

It can be difficult to believe literacy deficits not only continue to pose a great societal challenge, but remain a leading determinant of future academic and socioeconomic status in the United States. On average, children born into white-collar families know 45 million words by age four; children on welfare, in contrast, know only 13 million words at the same age.¹

We often take access to books for granted, but the reality is that the more impoverished a community, the less likely enough age-appropriate literary resources are available to children. Even with numerous studies, government programs, and nonprofit missions aimed at raising awareness of America's literacy plight, communities—and their children—continue to suffer from a severe lack of books.

Impoverished families live in communities with little to no bookstores, are reticent to utilize public libraries and do not have the mobile/web-enabled capabilities to purchase books via the Internet. Thus, some U.S. cities see book-to-child ratios as low as 1-to-830. This "print gap" underscores the importance of books to developing vocabulary.²

Despite challenges in easily obtaining literacy resources for children in low-socioeconomic environments, the divide in school readiness for reading narrowed by 16 percent between low- and high-income students from 1998 to 2010. One likely reason for the shift? Better access to high-quality books, preschool options, and literacy programs have encouraged caregivers to read to their children at an early age.³

More must be done to sustain literacy gains in our most disadvantaged communities. Kids Need to Read, a national nonprofit that provides new books to recipient schools in need, created a program to address the potential disconnect between access to books and adult readers in the classroom, and the same access in the home: READ Together.

Through a multi-tier approach of print resource availability and caregiver involvement, Kids Need to Read strove to develop early childhood literacy skills in 69 kindergarten classrooms across 20 schools nationwide.

^{1 2} 2016. Where Books Are All But Nonexistent. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/where-books-are-nonexistent/491282/>

³ 2016. The Good News About Education Inequality. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/opinion/sunday/the-good-news-about-educational-inequality.html>

Participating Schools and Program Challenges

Kids Need to Read sought high-poverty locations with significant deficits in vocabulary to pilot the READ Together program. Some participating schools, such as 107th Street Elementary in Los Angeles, CA, and Lincoln Elementary in Hillsboro, OR, have student populations of 100 percent meeting individual state criteria for free and/or reduced lunch. Others, like Spann Elementary in Jackson, MS, are only slightly better with approximately 90 percent of students meeting similar state criteria.

Caregiver involvement in a student's education, too, is a challenge for many of these schools and their communities.

"We have a difficult time getting some parents to even complete homework with their child," said Vicki Latham, gifted education teacher at Spann Elementary. "We strive to involve all parents and caregivers as much as possible through parent/teacher conferences or PTA meetings, but they tend to group homework, special literacy programs, etc. under one big umbrella."

Reading between caregivers and their children is a primary focus of READ Together. School can only achieve so much, after all, and it is increasingly important for caregivers to ensure learning continues beyond the confines of the school day.

Kids Need to Read distributed 200 age-appropriate books to each participating school for individual kindergarten students to take home. This allowed students to experience a different book at home every night during the school year.

However, with agrarian calendars still dictating the form and function of the U.S. school year, summer months and a lack of caregiver involvement can result in regressive learning and educational loss between grade levels—referred to as the "summer slide."

To negate the effects of the summer slide, each student was given 12 new books, some bilingual, to read over the summer, build his or her home library, and make reading material available for low-income families when school was not in session. Kids Need to Read gave out nearly 18,000 books for the summer portion of READ Together.

Yet, having access to books outside of school could not ensure children were being read to by caregivers. To combat the absence of a reader/listener relationship, Kids Need to Read also provided "reading buddies": Stuffed animals that give children a companion to which they can read aloud.

When READ Together launched at the beginning of the 2015 school year, more than half of surveyed participant students were considered to have beginner-level literacy skills, with 50 percent at the bottom tier in vocabulary skills and 67 percent at the bottom of reading and literacy skills.⁴

READ Together's ambitious goals were about to undergo a critical test. Would providing books, caregiver guidelines and reading buddies to young, low-income students be enough to offset the effects of poverty on childhood literacy skills and vocabulary development?

A Program that Works: The Impact of READ Together

"The READ Together program books were the only ones our kindergarten students were able to check out and take home. That fact alone promoted literacy in the home," said Julie Kautenburger, reading specialist at Palomino Primary School in Phoenix, AZ.

⁴ 2015-2016 READ Together Impact Report: Inspiring literacy in school and at home. Kids Need to Read.

"These types of programs introduce reading and literacy into homes that would not have it otherwise. The students are excited about reading, and want to share it with their parents."

Kids Need to Read's goal—that children "read together," either with a caregiver or reading buddy—resulted in measurable gains throughout participant classroom locations. By the end of the school year, the number of participating students that met the standard for reading and literacy skills more than doubled, and almost half of overall students gained literacy skills.

"Teachers tell me that the kids love taking home books to share with their parents, and parents tell me they enjoy having more books in the home," said Reading Interventionist Margaret Codina at J.B. Sutton Elementary in Phoenix. "We've observed good gains in our kindergarten DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) scores since taking part in READ Together."

Students also responded well to reading buddies. Many were excited at the onset of READ Together, noting that it was fun to read with a buddy, and excitement only grew throughout the school year.

"Reading Buddies went home, and the students loved them! The kids talked about reading with their buddies," said Kautenburger.

"We already have a book buddies program in our building that works well, and now we're combining it with the reading buddies," added Latham. "That way we can keep it all under the umbrella of literacy."

What about caregiver engagement? While Kids Need to Read worked closely with participant classrooms to cultivate a supportive culture for students by providing daily reading resources and bilingual educational flyers, it was ultimately the caregiver's responsibility in the home.

"Parents and caregivers want to help their children with reading, so READ Together was a way to make that happen. Many are reluctant to try, but we are changing that with Kids Need to Read's help," said Kautenburger. "This program gave them tips and materials to use."

"Some parents liked that the program helped with older siblings as well as the kindergarteners, too. If the parents couldn't read with the kindergarten students, the older siblings did. This helped both the older students and the younger ones," she added.

Other educators had similar experiences, emphasizing how READ Together supplemented existing programs and efforts to involve caregivers in a child's educational growth.

"We have a school program called academic parent teacher teams (APTT) to enlist parents as partners in the children's learning," said Codina. "The importance of reading together at home is one of the messages we impart at APTT meetings, and READ Together has helped us strengthen that message."

Literacy for All

While there are still gains to be made, READ Together's pilot year and resultant data were inspiring enough to continue the program into the 2016–2017 academic year—and now include first grade along with kindergarten classrooms.

Feedback from the pilot schools, their teachers and students has allowed Kids Need to Read to re-evaluate and strengthen the core concept of READ Together's genesis: partnering with educators and caregivers to address the most critical components of developing high reading proficiency levels.

"I think READ Together does well in all three critical areas—making literacy resources available, engaging caregivers, and neutralizing the regressive effects of the summer slide—by ensuring there are books in the home," concluded Codina.

"We appreciate that there are organizations like Kids Need to Read that get books into the hands of our young students," said Kautenburger.

"Stay the course!" echoed Latham. "We appreciate you all."



About READ Together

Among the children Kids Need to Read serves, a startling number have no books at home with which to enrich their lives. While there should be a sense of urgency for caregivers to read to and with their children during their earliest years, many parents are simply unaware that such repetitive experiences are vital to the wiring of the brain and to long-term success. This is why the READ Together program partners with schools and other literacy organizations to encourage adult caregivers to read every day with their children. The program utilizes a wealth of books, educational resources, tips for caregivers on the go, and inspiration—all designed to increase at-home reading activities. Through the use of these books, educational handouts, live presentations, story time, and other supporting resources, the program engages kindergarten and first grade students with a foundational focus on increasing reading proficiency levels for their future success.

About Kids Need to Read

Founded with a passion to improve the lives of disadvantaged children by providing inspiring book collections and engaging literacy programs to underfunded schools, libraries, and organizations across the nation, Kids Need to Read aspires to empower and embolden every last child through a culture of reading. For many of the children it serves, Kids Need to Read represents a crucial link to a strong literacy education, and its programs help build and nurture support systems that these children may be lacking elsewhere in their lives. By immersing children in an integrated world of literary experiences that teaches them, firsthand, the impact of reading on every aspect of life, imagination is ignited and confidence is built for a prosperous future, regardless of race, economic status, or personal capabilities.