

The Life-Enhancing Benefits of Reading in Out-of-School Programs

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE 2013 ISSUE BRIEF

“Literacy unlocks the door to learning throughout life, is essential to development and health, and opens the way for democratic participation and active citizenship.”

—Kofi Annan,
former Secretary-General of the United Nations

Key Points

- Skillful, critical, and voluminous reading is one of the most important personal habits that lead to a successful academic career and a happy, productive life (Stanovich and Cunningham 2000; Atwell 2007; Bayless 2010; Robinson 2010).
- Out-of-school time programs (OSTs) are in a unique position to provide students with access to a wide variety of enjoyable reading materials such as books, magazines, comic books, blogs, and fan sites.
- Across the curriculum, reading enlivens and strengthens every after-school, before-school, and summer learning program.
- Avid readers of all backgrounds are higher achievers than students who seldom read; indeed, the achievement gap between white students and students of color disappears when both read widely and passionately (Swan et al. 2010).



For more than five years, Scholastic and the Afterschool Alliance have partnered to advocate for quality out-of-school time. This policy brief is a cooperative effort to spotlight the role of reading in effective out-of-school time programs. Reading is the best way to promote students' academic success and bolster their self-confidence and sense of well-being.



Afterschool Alliance

The Afterschool Alliance is the only organization dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of after-school programs and advocating for more after-school investments. The Afterschool Alliance works with the presidential administration, the U.S. Congress, and governors, mayors, and advocates across the country. The Afterschool Alliance boasts more than 25,000 after-school program partners, and its publications reach more than 65,000 interested individuals every month.



Scholastic FACE

Scholastic Family and Community Engagement extends literacy beyond the classroom to accelerate academic success. FACE provides literacy solutions to support schools, communities, and families. FACE brings together research-based programs and strategies that support students from birth through high school by focusing on the five key pillars of literary achievement: Early Literacy, Family Involvement, Access to Books, Expanded Learning, and Mentoring Partnerships.

We've long known of the life-enhancing effects of reading. But how do we help all students become strong readers? In 1998, leading literacy researcher Jeff McQuillan; issued this remarkable statement: "An analysis of a national data set of nearly 100,000 U.S. school children found that access to printed materials—and not poverty—is the critical variable affecting reading acquisition."

It's that simple: When students have access to books they enjoy reading, they read. And when they read, they become more accomplished readers. Since McQuillan's revelation, data from numerous studies has confirmed the importance of access to books and the engaged reading it enables, particularly for students from economically challenged households:

- According to a 2012 paper by Stephen Krashen, Syying Lee, and Jeff McQuillan, "access to books in some cases had a larger impact on reading achievement test scores than poverty . . . This suggests that providing more access to books can mitigate the effect of poverty on reading achievement, a conclusion consistent with other recent results (Achterman 2008; Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman 2010; Schubert and Becker 2010). This result is of enormous practical importance [as] children of poverty typically have little access to books (Krashen 2004).
- A number of studies confirm that when given access to engaging reading material, most children and adolescents take full advantage. More access to books results in more reading; in fact, sometimes a single, brief exposure to good reading material results in a lifelong love affair with books—also known as the "Harry Potter effect" (Cho and Krashen 2002; Krashen 2007).
- In 2007 Krashen wrote that "'reluctant' readers are often those who have little access to books . . . the most serious problem with current literacy campaigns is that they ignore, and even divert attention from, the real problem: lack of access to books for children of poverty."

Reading: The Best Protection Against the Summer Slide

In 2010 renowned literacy educators Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen found that when they invited children from low-income schools to choose 12 books to take home over the summer, the students' reading achievement increased. Just having access to books (and then, of course, reading them) helped prevent the so-called summer slide—the summer-induced reading achievement gap that appears between low-income children and with their more affluent peers.

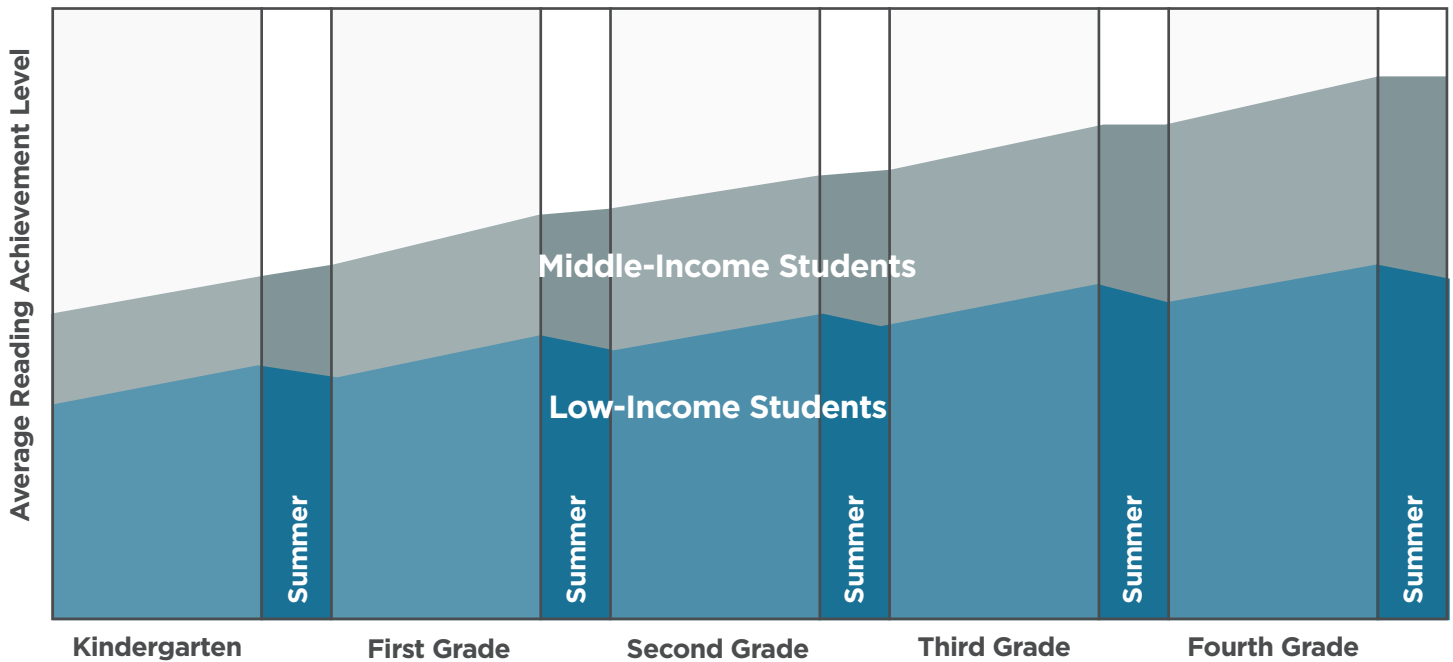
This is profoundly significant because, over a number of years, time lost during the summers adds up to a serious achievement gap between children with means (and books) and children without. Hayes and Grether (1983), using achievement data from the New York City public schools, estimated that as much as 80 percent of the reading achievement gap that existed between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students at sixth grade could be attributed to the summer slide. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2010) sum it up:

In other words, each of these studies suggested that summer reading setback is a major contributor to the existing reading achievement gap between more and less economically advantaged children—reading activity is the only factor that consistently correlated to reading gains during the summer.

Although much of the summer slide research has focused on the elementary grades, researchers from Johns Hopkins University used data from the Beginning School Study in Baltimore to examine the long-term educational consequences of summer learning difference by family socioeconomic level. They examined student achievement scores from ninth grade back to first and concluded that the achievement gap between the student haves and have-nots is largely due to the differences in access to books and, consequently, to the summer slide. They also suggest that the students who are harmed by the summer slide are less likely to graduate from high school and attend a four-year college (Alexander et al. 2007).

The graph below demonstrates the relationship between income levels and reading achievement during the school year and the summer, with the understanding that students are not participating in a summer school program. The blue line depicts the average reading achievement level of low-income children, and the gray line reflects the level of middle-income children. As is evident, low-income children lose a significant amount of reading power over the summer months while middle-income children continue to grow as readers. Over time, this difference contributes significantly to the widening of the achievement gap.

Summer Reading Achievement Trajectories



R. Fairchild, B. McLaughlin, and J. Brady. (2006). Making the most of summer: A handbook on effective summer programming and thematic learning. Baltimore: Center for Summer Learning.

Read to Lead a Better Life— and Why Access to Books Is Essential

In 2010, as part of its 90th anniversary, Scholastic, the largest publisher of children’s literature in the world, launched a campaign called Read Every Day, Lead a Better Life. The goal of this research-based initiative is simple: “to promote the importance and value of reading for success in school and in life.” Scholastic even published a “Reading Bill of Rights” that outlines its most fundamental beliefs about the right of all children to have abundant, easy access to books they love.

The Reading Bill of Rights

WE BELIEVE that literacy—the ability to read, write, and understand—is the birthright of every child in the world as well as the pathway to succeed in school and to realize a complete life. Young people need to read nonfiction for information to understand their world, and literature for imagination to understand themselves.

WE BELIEVE that the massive amounts of digital information and images now transmitted daily make it even more important for a young person to know how to analyze, interpret, and understand information, to separate fact from opinion, and to have deep respect for logical thinking.

WE BELIEVE that literature and drama, whether on printed pages, screens, on stage or film, help young people experience the great stories of emotion and action, leading to a deeper understanding of what it means to be truly human. Without this literacy heritage, life lacks meaning, coherence, and soul.

WE BELIEVE every child has a right to a “textual lineage”—a reading and writing autobiography which shows that who you are is in part developed through the stories and information you’ve experienced. This textual lineage will enable all young people to have a reading and writing identity which helps them understand who they are and how they can make their lives better. In short, “You Are What You Read.”

WE BELIEVE every child should have access to books, magazines, newspapers, computers, e-readers, and text on phones. Whatever way you read, you will need to figure out what the facts are or what the story tells you. No matter how and where you get access to ideas, you will need the skills of reading to understand yourself and your world.

WE BELIEVE that reading widely and reading fluently will give children the reading stamina to deal with more challenging texts they will meet in college, at work, and in everyday life. And every child should be able to choose and own the books they want to read, for that choice builds literacy confidence—the ability to read, write, and speak about what they know, what they feel, and who they are.

WE BELIEVE that all children have the right to a great teacher who will help them learn to read and love to read. Children need teachers who provide intentional, focused instruction to give young people the skills to read and interpret information or understand great stories they will encounter throughout life.

WE BELIEVE that in the 21st century, the ability to read is necessary not only to succeed but to survive—for the ability to understand information and the power of stories is the key to a life of purpose and meaning.

As it turns out, “Read Every Day, Lead a Better Life” isn’t just an inspiring slogan—it’s the truth! Look at what the research says about those who love to read versus those who don’t.

Why Reading Matters So Much

Extensive and intensive reading leads not only to high scores on reading achievement tests, but to a more fulfilling and productive life as well. “For the majority of young people, enthusiastic and habitual reading is the single most predictive personal habit for the ability to achieve desirable life outcomes.” (Bayless 2010). The U.S. Department of Education (2005) maintains that avid reading promotes

- better skills acquisition,
- superior grades,
- and a desirable life, as measured by income, profession, employment, and other attributes.

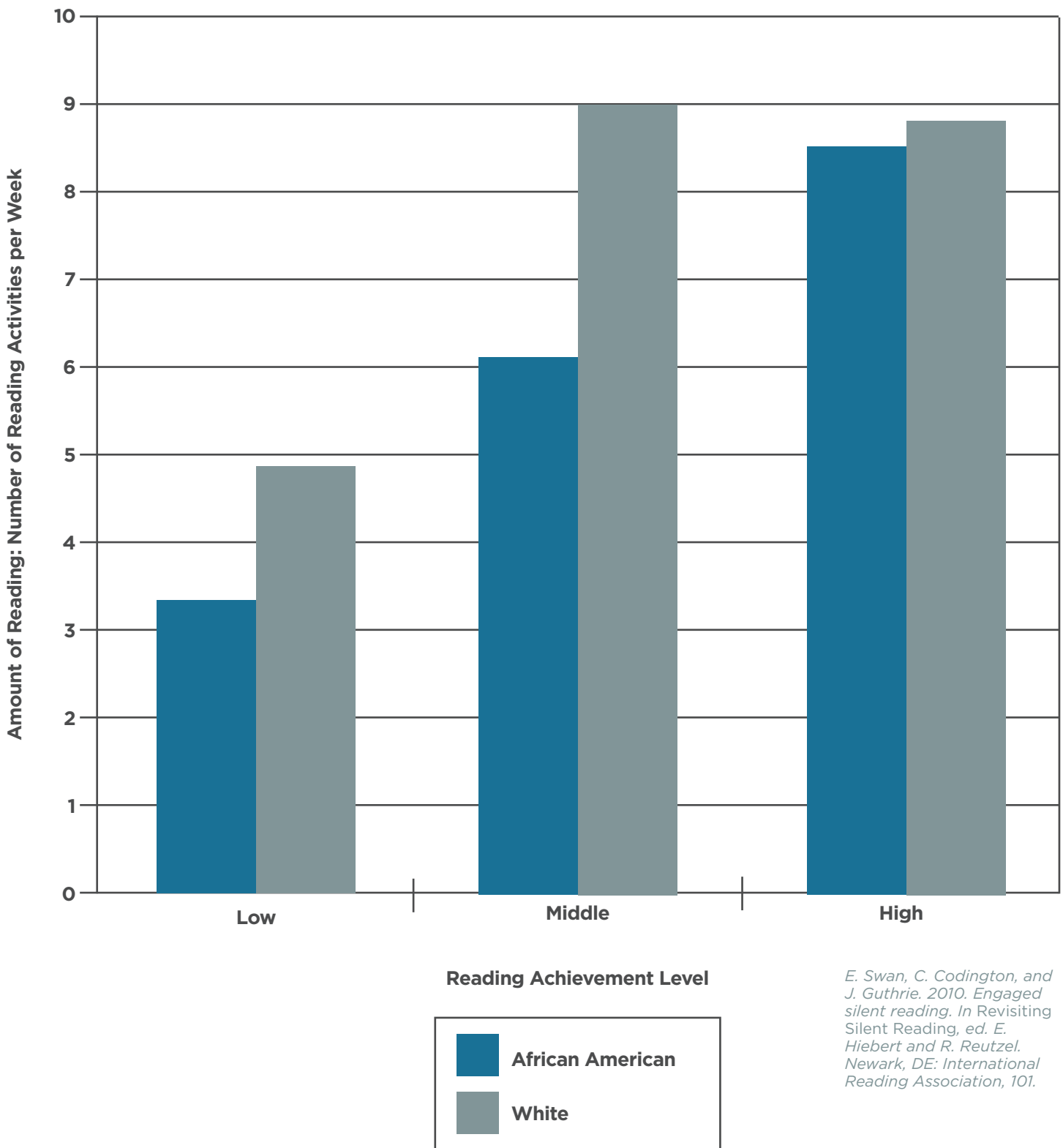
Donalyn Miller, a sixth-grade teacher in Keller, Texas, and the author of the bestseller *The Book Whisperer* and the Teacher Magazine blog of the same name, supports a library of more than 2,000 books in her classroom. She has her students read self-selected books for 20–30 minutes in class every day. Why? Because, as she explains, “We teachers have more than enough anecdotal evidence that the students who read the most are the best spellers, writers, and thinkers. No exercise gives more instructional bang for the buck than reading.”

See what’s possible when students love reading and feast on books:

- “Reading is like any other human proficiency—practice matters. Voluntary, engaged reading, in school and out, is powerfully linked to high levels of proficiency.” (Allington 2012)
- “It is during successful, independent reading practice that students consolidate their reading skills and strategies and come to own them. Without extensive reading practice, reading proficiency lags.” (Allington 2012)
- Students who read widely and frequently are higher achievers than students who read rarely and narrowly. (Guthrie 2008; Atwell 2007).
- Increased frequency, amount, and diversity of reading activity increases background knowledge and reading achievement. (Worthy and Roser 2010; Guthrie et al. 2008).
- Providing student choice and creating responsive classroom environments with links to real-life experiences and lots of opportunities to talk about texts helps kids build communities around books, bolster self-confidence, and stay engaged. (Guthrie 2008).

And note that the reading gap between white and African American students all but disappears when both groups read. As leading educator and author Phyllis Hunter (2012) states, “Both white students and students of color perform off the charts when they have the benefit of hours of avid reading backing them up.”

Association of Amount of School Reading with Achievement for Two Ethnic Groups



E. Swan, C. Codington, and J. Guthrie. 2010. Engaged silent reading. In Revisiting Silent Reading, ed. E. Hiebert and R. Reutzel. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 101.

The Gift of an Extra Ten Minutes

Although we wish all students would get hooked on books and devote hours every day to reading, it turns out that adding even ten extra minutes of reading a day makes a difference—which, of course, makes reading a perfect activity for a before-school, after-school, or summer learning program. Reading builds reading stamina and exercises brain muscles in ways that nothing else can—and even an extra ten minutes helps.

Percentile Rank	Minutes of Reading Per Day	Baseline - Words Read Per Year	Plus 10 Minutes - Words Read Per Year	Percent Increase in Word Exposure
98	65	4,358,000	5,028,462	15%
90	21.1	1,823,000	2,686,981	47%
80	14.2	1,146,000	1,953,042	70%
70	9.6	622,000	1,269,917	104%
60	6.5	432,000	1,096,615	154%
50	4.6	282,000	895,043	217%
40	3.2	200,000	825,000	313%
30	1.8	106,000	694,889	556%
20	.07	21,000	321,000	1,429%
10	.01	8,000	Based on Reading Level, -300,000 Words	
2	0	0		

Distribution of time spent reading books outside of school, with estimated words read per year and projection of increased words per year if students read for an average of ten more minutes each day. Adapted from Adams (2006) with baseline data from Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988).

Reading After School and All Summer Long: Five Action Steps to Make It Happen

To make sure the students in your out-of-school time program are getting the most out of their reading life, we recommend these five action steps, which are easy to implement in any after-school or summer learning setting:

1) Bring on the books and reading!

No matter what type of after-school or summer learning program you run, there are many wise and wonderful ways to get your students to read. Imagine the possibilities:

Sports/recreation programs

Roll out a cart of sports-themed books and magazines for students to read, including biographies of famous athletes, books of sports statistics, and healthy living/nutrition books—kids might enjoy learning about their pulse and heart rate and what happens to them when they exercise. Students might also enjoy reading recipes and then making healthy snacks.

Arts programs

House a small library of art history books, biographies of artists, and books about arts and crafts with engaging instructions for art projects students can try on their own. You might also invite local artists and authors to work with students to create their own writing and artwork based on the books they have read.

Science programs

As fourth-grade teacher Meghan Everette writes, “STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) . . . generates excitement in learning about the world around us with real-life problems and collaborative solutions.” (2012) To help interest your students in STEM subjects, build engaging STEM book collections covering topics such as wild weather, fascinating facts about the human body, how machines work, and the like. Biographies of famous scientists such as *Giants of Science: Marie Curie* are also a surefire bet. Scholastic magazines such as *Science World* and *SuperScience* are fun and full of informative articles and beautiful photographs. Students will also enjoy books with instructions on how to conduct their own science experiments.

Academic programs

The best way to give your students an academic boost is to help them develop a reading life—which means offering a great selection of books, encouraging students to choose their books, and providing a consistent, predictable time for reading and then discussing what they read with you and their peers. Students who love to read know which books, genres, topics, and authors they prefer—but it takes access to a wide selection of books, as well as the time to read, to figure that out. And don’t forget to invite your students to write—and let them edit each other’s journals for an additional literacy boost. Typically, students who read a lot are not only strong readers, but capable writers as well.

2) Encourage reader’s choice.

Again and again, research tells us that kids thrive as readers when they’re allowed to choose their own reading materials (Allington 2012). Think about your own reading life . . . you can read any book you choose, so why shouldn’t your students have the same freedom?

As literacy researcher Richard Allington reminds us, self-selected wide reading is the “most potent factor in the development of reading.”

3) Establish a predictable time to read every day.

We mention the importance of reading time in Step #1 but it’s worth revisiting. If you make the time to read as consistent as snack time, kids will learn to count on it and plan for it—they’ll always have at least one book they are reading, with plans for their next. Like every other good thing we do, reading has the best impact when it becomes a habit—ideally a habit we can’t live without! If possible, schedule 20–30 minutes every day for reading.

If you’re running a reading test prep program, how much time should you devote to the different aspects of test prep? In 2002 John Guthrie analyzed multiple studies and came up with this rule of thumb:

- spend 40% of your time providing guided reading instruction
- 20% fostering independent reading
- 20% promoting comprehension strategy work
- 10% boosting motivation
- 10% teaching the test format

Again, it’s crucial to help your students find books they’ll love to read—and to make sure they have the time to read them.

4) Share books, talk books!

The only thing possibly better than reading books we love is talking about them with our friends. Reading experts Barbara Moss and Terrell Young (2010) suggest you set time aside for both independent reading—each child happily lost in his or her own book—and community reading time—a time for book talks, interactive read-alouds, and book sharing. Let’s explore the aspects of a successful community reading time::

Book talks

To help your students connect with the right book, you’ll want to promote the books, magazine articles, and other print or digital materials you add to your reading program. Hold up the book up so your students can see its cover, give a two- to three-minute synopsis, and then explain why you think it’s such a terrific book. Your aim is to spark enthusiasm for the book, so think lively “book commercial” rather than plodding book report. You’ll quickly discover that book talking is one of the most effective ways to get kids reading. Scholastic’s online Book Talks—hundreds of scripts and videos that will get your students excited about children’s books from all sorts of genres—are a great free resource. See <http://www.scholastic.com/librarians/ab/booktalks.htm>.

Interactive read-alouds

Interactive read-alouds are one of the best ways to hook your students on books and reading—they encourage kids to engage in a close read of the book while participating in an invigorating literary conversation with their peers. (Or with their parents—consider reaching out to the parents in your program to remind them of the essential role they can play in turning their children into lifelong readers.) For a successful experience, consider following these steps:

- Prepare for the read-aloud: Familiarize yourself with the book before you share it with your students. Read it and then consider which aspects would be helpful for you to focus on—literary elements, structural features, genre, author style, etc.
- Introduce each book with a brief book talk that helps set the tone for the interactive read-aloud and alerts your students to the book’s essential words and important text features.
- Read the book aloud, using your voice to express the meaning. Stop briefly to comment, ask a question, or invite your students to share their thinking. If your students keep readers’ notebooks, this would be a good time for them to jot down notes.
- Invite students to reflect on the book’s purpose and themes, share what they absorbed from the text, and remark on what they noticed from the author’s writing style.
- Connect the book to other titles you’ve read and enjoyed together. Note similarities and differences. What big ideas do the two books explore?
- Plan for ways to extend or enrich the text after the read-aloud. Have multiple copies of the book so kids can read on their own. Encourage your students to do additional research about topics the book explored.

Book sharing

Try to set aside five to ten minutes at the end of every reading session for your students to share what they’ve discovered about the books they’re reading independently. This simple exercise might be the best way to establish a “joyfully literate” reading experience in your out-of-school program.

5) Host book distribution events.

Did you know that 61% of low-income families have no children’s books in their homes (Binkley and Williams 1996)? When we understand that children from literacy-rich home environments enter school with more knowledge about reading than children without access to books, it’s clear that all children need books in their homes. Seize any chance to give children books that you can—at summer reading initiatives, kindergarten readiness programs, back-to-school nights, family literacy nights ... wherever children have gathered to learn more about reading.

The Role of the Common Core State Standards

As noted by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), although the Common Core State Standards is essentially a policy document and thus different than the rich collections of programs and initiatives that comprise high-quality OSTs, a “strong and clear shared mission [exists] between the two.” Both aim to increase student achievement and prepare students for success in college and a career after high school. There are numerous implicit links between the Common Core and out-of-school programs; the CCSSO suggests we would do well to make those connections explicit, given OSTs’ increasing role in boosting student academic achievement. It would benefit OSTs—particularly those that support students academically in math, science, and English skills—to align their programming with the thoughtful standards that now make up the Common Core. By adapting to the Common Core, OSTs are better able to support and complement student learning that happens during the school day.

Examples from the Field

Out-of-school time programs come in all shapes and sizes and feature a range of activities. You can weave in reading time to enhance what your OST already does, or you can model an OST on a program that makes reading its main focus. Here are two examples of very successful reading programs:

The Center for Community Arts Partnerships’ Act/Write program

The Center for Community Arts Partnerships’ Act/Write Program (Act/Write) is an after-school theater and poetry program that works with a number of community partners, including the Columbia College Fiction Writing Department and Free Street Theatre, to offer Chicago’s public school students innovative arts and literacy workshops. These workshops promote increased literacy and writing skill development through word games, public readings, creative writing, and small-group readings and discussions. Students from Columbia College teach their pupils how to learn writing skills from what they read and apply those skills to create their own stories. The Act/Write program culminates in the publication and public reading of students’ work, giving students the opportunity to turn their writing into a performance piece.

Tutor Power Hour

The Tutor Power Hour program in Dallas, TX, provides one-on-one literacy tutoring to 3rd- through 12th- grade students, all of whom are Latino and qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. The program’s volunteer tutors receive approximately ten hours of literacy tutoring training before they are paired with students. In addition to helping students improve their reading skills, tutors engage students in discussions about the texts. This encourages students to think critically about what they read and shows them that their opinions are valued and important. The goal of Tutor Hour Power is to build students’ literacy self-esteem, and teach them strategies to become self-sufficient, critical, and confident readers.

Onward to Success!

In our dynamic, fast-paced world, students will succeed to the extent they are proficient readers who can comprehend a wide range of demanding texts. After-school programs are uniquely positioned to provide all students with access to rich, enjoyable books—and the time for students to read and discuss the books. No matter the focus of your program, there's always room for reading. Make it a key component of your program and watch your students shine as readers, thrive as learners, and evolve as informed citizens. When your students read every day, they will enjoy richer, more meaningful, and more successful lives.

“Ensuring that books are available to any child at any time of the year will be a good first step in enhancing the reading achievement of low-income students and an absolutely necessary step in closing the reading achievement gap.”

—Anne McGill Franzen and Richard Allington, 2009

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For more information about the **Afterschool Alliance**, visit www.afterschoolalliance.org.