

Durham READS

In 2008, MetaMetrics partnered with a local chapter of Communities in Schools to develop a summer reading program aimed at preventing summer loss. Based on the research of Harvard University's Dr. James Kim, "Durham READS" served over 80 struggling and reluctant third- and fourth-grade readers at two elementary schools in Durham, N.C. Throughout the summer, each student received eight books (one per week) that were targeted to his or her Lexile measure and chosen interests.

The Challenges

The transition from lower to upper elementary school is a crucial time for students' reading growth, as well as their long-term academic achievement. From kindergarten through third grade, students are most often *learning to read* well.. Upon entering fourth grade, students typically have to rely on *reading to learn* in order to keep pace with curricular demands (Chall, 1983). If a student is not able to make this transition, his or her reading growth could slow.

The participating students in Durham READS faced two transitional challenges. First, their reading abilities and enthusiasm already lagged behind their peers, and they risked disengaging from school entirely as it became more rigorous. Second, and more importantly, many of the students went home to high-poverty households that often lacked the reading resources and literacy habits to support their reading growth. Without the benefit of a structured school environment and a household with the means and education to keep them reading, many students' reading abilities drop over the summer. Cumulatively, these lost summers comprise the achievement gap in many communities.

The Approach

The best way to strengthen reading skills is practice. The Durham READS program focused on getting books into high-poverty households and choosing books that each student would be most likely to read. The two keys to selecting books that the participants would likely read were: 1) matching their individual interests; and 2) matching their reading ability (Lexile measure). The students had to want to read the books *and* be able to read them.

Over the eight weeks of summer, the students received eight free books on their favorite subjects (based on a survey they completed in the spring) and at their Lexile level (based on the results of a placement test they took prior to school year end). Students were asked to return a survey postcard about their participation in the program. The students were tested again after the summer to examine the impact of the program.

The Results

The Durham READS program had a positive impact on the students who reported reading the books they received. In general, the more targeted, high-interest books the students read, the more their reading ability improved. Struggling, high-poverty third- and fourth-graders typically lose between 100L–150L in reading ability over the summer. No Durham READS participant who read at least one book showed such a loss.

Of the 84 students who received books, 49 returned a participation survey. The respondents read a total of 159 books over the summer. Students who read seven or more books grew more than 80L. To put this number into perspective, rising fourth- and fifth-graders typically grow between 110L–140L in an entire calendar year. Of the 22 students who completed three or more books, only two showed a negative difference between their spring and fall test scores. Most students held steady or grew.

Lessons Learned

As a result of the Durham READS program, 84 economically disadvantaged households now contain a total of 672 more books. Here are some other lessons learned from the program:

- *Cheerleading spurs student participation*

A summer reading program is more successful with an enthusiastic leader. In one of the two schools that participated in Durham READS, the literacy coach championed the initiative. Students at that school not only read more books, but also returned more of the survey postcards. The students simply did not want to disappoint the literacy coach when they returned to school in the fall.

- *Parent involvement spurs student participation*

A literacy advocacy program for students' parents and guardians can increase their involvement over the summer. When parents occasionally remind their child to complete his or her summer reading, that child is likely to read more books.

- *Students will read it if they can choose it*

Durham READS used information from an interest survey to search for Lexile-targeted books in those interest categories, but ultimately chose the specific books for each student. Ideally, students can use a media center computer in the spring to search an online books database and choose the specific books they want to receive over the summer. This, or another process in which students can choose their own books, will likely improve the chances that the books are read.