An Outstanding Opportunity for a Public Library, School Library, and University Course Partnership

by Dana Tucker and Judi Moreillon with Carol Richmond and Michelle Lynn

As most librarians who work with children know, youth who read over the summer do not suffer from “summer reading loss.” When students continue to read independently, their reading proficiency remains stable over the summer, and they are more prepared for the next school year. Researchers, librarians, teachers, and parents have identified the public library summer reading program (SRP) as support for students’ reading when the school library is closed.

Judi Moreillon, assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman’s University, explored this issue for her Information and Communication Technology course. The project, “Expanding Our Reach through Summer Reading,” was designed to increase communication and collaboration between school and public librarians as well as embed school librarians in the SRP and the public librarian in the locations and facilities where children spend the summer months.

Moreillon contacted Dana Tucker, youth services librarian at the North Branch of the Denton Public Library (DPL), to tackle the project. Along with then-graduate assistant and school librarian, Julie Sorum, they began their collaboration by seeking feedback from the four elementary school librarians whose students are in the North Branch’s service area. While waiting for feedback, the team gathered research-based evidence for the soundness of school-public library collaboration for summer reading. Using the evidence and data from the survey, they developed a planning timeline, which included step-by-step procedures for working toward increasing elementary school students’ participation in the 2014 SRP.

Research Summary

Researchers and practitioners in the field have identified summer reading loss as a problem that can be addressed. Many researchers have studied this issue with the goal of finding evidence to help close the reading achievement gap between children who live in poverty and those from affluent homes (Roman and Fiore 2010). Some have found the positive impact of summer reading has been most pronounced for low-income families and most particularly for kindergarten and first-grade children (Allington and McGill-Franzen 2013). One study showed that teachers and parents recognize children are better prepared for the new school year when they have engaged in reading through a summer reading program (Bogel 2012).

School librarians and others have called for school and public library partnerships. Librarians know that for many students the public library is their only source for summer reading materials. A recent Pew Study noted that libraries can do a better job of outreach for both preschool and afterschool activities (Rainie 2013). Summer reading programs fit into this strategy for serving the year-round literacy needs of the youth in our communities.

Project Timeline

The timeline that follows encapsulates our procedure, which began with the survey and ended with an evaluation of the SRP outcomes. You can access our timeline at: http://tinyurl.com/collab4srpt.

These are some of the highlights:

1. The school and public librarians will jointly pitch the idea of publishing the names of all youth who complete the SRP in the Denton Record Chronicle. (The infographic will be our handout: http://tinyurl.com/collab4srpinfo.)
2. The public librarian (PL) will visit the school to promote the SRP with children and will present at PTA meetings or participate in spring school events in order to reach parents.
3. The PL will also visit students who are involved in summer school as well as day camps, daycare centers, and other locations where students spend their summer time.
4. Each school librarian (SL) will provide a storytime or other presentation at the public library during the SRP.
5. To recognize the achievements of the youth who participated in the SRP, the SLs and PL will jointly plan and facilitate an author event to be held the Saturday before the school year begins.
6. The librarians will evaluate the program and plan for the next year.

Summer reading Program Collaboration: Photos courtesy of the authors

Woodrow Wilson Elementary 4th Graders enjoy a read-a-thon at the North Branch Library.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS
For our community, increasing communication and launching collaboration between the school librarians and public librarian are the solution to the problem of summer reading loss. The survey and the infographic were the first steps in increasing communication and extending the invitation for collaborative work. The infographic also supported advocacy efforts and appeals for support in the community, particularly with the media. (One idea was to invite the media to all of the outreach efforts in the community.)

**Intended Outcomes**

- Increase participation in North Branch Library’s summer reading program by at least 10% from 2013
- Increase June and July youth item checkouts at North Branch by at least 5% from 2013
- Increase June and July youth program attendance at North Branch by at least 5% from 2013
- Collect data to document increase - record child’s school at SRP registration

**Collaboration in Action**

The public-school library collaboration began with a joint meeting facilitated by Moreillon and attended by Tucker and two Denton ISD librarians: Michelle Lynn of Evers Park Elementary and Carol Richmond of Wilson Elementary. The meeting allowed the librarians to establish their mutual goals for students during the summer, and brainstorm how they could work together to encourage even more students, particularly those who are not highly motivated readers, to maintain their reading levels over the summer. The team determined that DPL’s SRP would be the primary vehicle for motivating the area students to read during the summer. This entailed raising awareness with children and parents before the program began. Many ideas were generated in that meeting, and the team was able to carry out most them in the months following the initial brainstorm.

In the past, DPL’s SRP publicity had been a flyer that went home in the folder of every elementary-aged student and, when possible, a visit to the school by the public library staff to raise awareness of the SRP. These traditional publicity efforts were still made for SRP 2014, but additional awareness-raising campaigns were initiated to make the parents more aware of the SRP and to encourage students and families to experience the public library first-hand.

At Wilson Elementary School, a little more than a mile from the North Branch Library, many of the students had never stepped foot inside the public library. School librarian Carol Richmond and Wilson’s 2nd and 4th grade teachers wanted to change that trend, and in 2014, they began annual field trips to DPL’s North Branch. These field trips, which were conducted at the end of the school year, included public library staff talking about the SRP, a library tour, and a read-a-thon.

According to Richmond, “Our visits to the public library resulted in a new excitement about the library and what it has to offer. Even students who were regular library users were introduced to areas of the library they had never visited and had a new comfort level with the facility. Students had such a positive experience that they were eager to return on their own.”

The day before school let out for the summer, Wilson Elementary School’s PTA held its annual “Mustang Break-Out Day,” a school-wide event at a local park with activities for the whole family. Richmond and Tucker ran a joint school/public library booth at the event advertising the SRP and signing up students and parents for the program. While many signed up who already planned to participate, other children who had never come into the library or who had not previously participated in the SRP signed up as well.

After the success of the SRP sign-up at Mustang Break-Out Day, Caleb Leath, Wilson’s principal, announced that all students who completed their 10 days of reading and turned in their form at DPL would be invited to a party when school was back in session. Leath also made an automated phone call to all Wilson families in early August reminding them to stop by the library and turn in their forms. Participants were treated to an outdoor party with popcorn and lemonade in September.

During the months of May and June of 2014, Evers Park Elementary School librarian Lynn along with Tucker collected new and gently-used books to distribute at the city’s free-lunch sites during the summer; many of the books came from Denton ISD teachers and librarians. The school/public library collaboration soon turned into a city-wide collaboration. Nine local businesses, three library branches, and the school district had boxes for donations for a month, and the Community Market had a “Bring Your Books to the Market” day. Two Denton citizens stepped up and donated $1,200 to the effort to add to the $1,000 of public library donation funds used for the project. Through contacts at the Denton Record-Chronicle, Lynn was able gain enough publicity for the project to collect over 5,000 books for the
children that needed them most. During June and July, Lynn, Tucker, DPL staff, and volunteers sorted and distributed the books to over 600 children at free lunch sites. Children were encouraged to sign up for DPL's SRP at the lunch sites and were given information about the program to take home to their parents. At the sites over 200 children signed up for the program and over 500 fliers with SRP registration forms were distributed.

According to Lynn,

So much evidence points to the fact that kids will read during the summer if they have access to reading material. The problem was connecting kids to books. Our town's transient population and higher levels of poverty mean fewer kids have home libraries. Also, public library branches are not necessarily close or convenient to all neighborhoods. We wanted to bring books to the kids who needed them the most – at-risk kids who would lose literacy skills if they didn't read over the summer.

Collaboratively Planned and Implemented Event

The team decided to hold an event marking the end of the SRP and the beginning of the new school year. We thought this would be a good way to reinforce the connection between the public and school libraries for children and families. Moreillon, author of Ready and Waiting for You (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers 2013), served as the guest author for the event. All team members selected school poems, and Tucker took responsibility for gathering materials for back-to-school crafts.

All of the librarians greeted the children and parents. Moreillon shared her book, and the children shared their excitement or misgivings about returning to school. The librarians performed the school poems, and everyone facilitated craft activities, which included making bookmarks, decorating writing journals, and building crazy pencil tops. A fun time was had by all.

**2014 Summer Reading Program Outcomes**

The outcomes for the SRP in terms of numbers were quite positive. Participation in the SRP at North Branch increased by 27% over the 2013 level. Based on the average number of attendees per program in both years, North Branch youth program attendance in June and July increased by an average of 23% per program compared with 2013. The North Branch youth circulation in June and July actually decreased by one-fifth of a percent from 2013. There were other factors that could have accounted for this, including the fact that DVD and CD checkouts are decreasing because of increased ebook checkouts, streaming services, and download services. (All DPL branches experienced decreases during this period.) SRP 2014 was the first year the library tracked participation data based on the child’s school of attendance.

Tucker will be able to compare those figures at the end of summer 2015.

Beyond the numbers, however, the outcomes in terms of collaboration between the public and school librarians and the university librarian preparation program were outstanding. The librarians have formed relationships based on their shared commitment to literacy in the community. They are building on this foundation as they prepare for the 2015 SRP. In addition, the library science graduate students had the opportunity to see a real-world example of how librarians can work together to solve a literacy challenge. This project will serve as a model of best practices in librarianship in future semesters as well.

**References**


Bogel, Gayle. 2012. “Public Library Summer Reading Programs Contribute to Reading Progress and Proficiency.” Evidence Based Library & Information Practice 7, no. 1: 102-104.


