

April 2009: Summer Reading Programs

Summer's coming. And with it comes the likelihood that some of the hard-earned academic progress made over the school year will regress—especially among lower-income students. One key to preventing this summer slide is getting students to read over the summer. However, providing students with high-interest books that match their reading abilities and promote growth can be a challenge. Fortunately, there is a free resource available to schools that can make this happen. This month's lead article is written by the president of MetaMetrics, Inc., the company that developed the Lexile Framework for Reading. Many states now report student Lexile scores along with state assessment scores and all major standardized reading tests and many popular instructional reading programs can do this as well. Keep reading to discover how many districts and communities are promoting summer reading programs and how your students can use the Find a Book feature to create a reading list tailor-made to their interests and ability (and if your school does not have Lexile scores available, the feature still works by estimating a student's reading ability).

— Patti Kinney, Principal, National Center for Middle Level Leadership

Connecting Students With the Right Summer Books to Raise Achievement *by Malbert Smith III, Ph.D., President, MetaMetrics, Inc.*

No matter what type of academic calendar a state or school district follows, students attend school every year for an average of 180 days. During that time, talented teachers, dedicated administrators, and involved parents work hard to ensure that students build the skills necessary for success in school and in life. Then summer break comes, the formal learning process ends and, instead of progressing, many students start to slip in their abilities.

Research shows that all students experience some level of learning “loss” or “slide” when they do not engage in educational activities over the summer. This summer loss is particularly evident in students' reading abilities—simply due to a lack of practice. In fact, low-income students, who often do not have access to adequate reading resources at home, experience an average summer loss in reading achievement of more than two months.¹ Students also score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer vacation than they do on the same tests at the beginning of summer vacation.²

With the school year coming to a close, school districts, public libraries, and community organizations are planning summer reading programs to engage students in reading. Libraries and city park programs will promote themes linked with books that interest children and will award incentives like tickets to sporting events and free T-shirts to motivate them to reach the programs' reading goals.

Each of these programs can help to encourage students to keep reading over the summer and to develop a lifelong love of learning. Yet, providing students with high-interest books that are appropriate for their reading abilities—and that promote reading growth—can be a challenge. Durham Public Schools and Durham County Library in North Carolina launched a community-wide effort to do just that last summer.

As in many school districts and public library systems, Durham educators and librarians already had a tool to connect students with books that match their reading abilities. A partnership between the Durham community, the local chapter of Communities in Schools, and MetaMetrics, Inc. used the public library's annual summer reading program as a springboard to involve students and parents in choosing reading materials based on Lexile measures. MetaMetrics'

Lexile Framework for Reading provides a common, developmental scale for matching readers with text that presents an appropriate level of challenge while maintaining interest and learning.

The Durham READS program was modeled after the research of James Kim, associate professor of education at Harvard University. Kim demonstrated that if students read just eight books over the summer that match their Lexile (ability) level and are about topics that interest them, their skills could grow as much as if they had attended summer school.³ Last summer, Durham READS provided over 80 low-income, struggling readers in the third and fourth grades with eight free, Lexile-targeted books about their favorite subjects. Participants were tested before and after the summer and, in most cases, the results indicated that growth in reading ability was directly proportional to the total number of books read. For example, students who read seven books grew more than 80L over the summer. To put this growth into perspective, rising fourth and fifth graders typically grow between 110L–140L in an entire calendar year.

This summer, Durham READS will provide more than 300 low-income, struggling readers with ten books each. However, students now will pick their own books from a set of Lexile-targeted, high-interest titles selected by their school librarians. This shift to having participants choose their own books is expected to result in more books being read and more students maintaining or growing their reading abilities over the summer.

Similarly, MetaMetrics is working with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, TX, on a two-year summer reading study based, in part, on Kim's research. About 2,000 low-income, below-average rising fourth graders will participate in a randomized, controlled trial to determine if providing books matched to a student's Lexile level and interests is a cost-effective intervention to mitigate summer reading loss. Half of the participants will receive eight Lexile-targeted books this summer; the other half in 2010. Students' reading test scores then will be compared between the treatment and control groups to determine the overall impact of a targeted summer reading program on student reading ability.

Last year, Houston Independent School District (HISD) collaborated with Houston Public Libraries to stop summer loss by encouraging

all 200,000 of the district's students to read at least five books, or a collective one million titles, over the summer. The program was an important part of HISD's intensive literacy program, "Literacy Leads the Way," which is designed to improve preK–12 students' overall literacy skills. As part of the program, students' Lexile measures were sent home so parents could better understand their child's reading ability, as well as how they could help their child select books that can strengthen their reading skills. Students who read five books over the summer received a "Millionaire Club" T-shirt, a restaurant coupon, and a chance to win free tickets to a soccer match. The Houston Public Library also offered students (up to age 18) who read 10 books or read for 10 hours a certificate, school supplies or music downloads, and a free ticket to the circus.

HISD's plan also included intensive reading programs at the middle level designed to ensure that by the end of the eighth grade, all students are reading on grade level and are well prepared for the subject content they will encounter in high school.

Any state or school district can easily replicate these initiatives across all grade levels by using MetaMetrics' "Find a Book" Web site to build summer reading lists. By visiting www.Lexile.com/findabook, entering a Lexile measure and picking from a list of favorite subjects, students can build and print a custom list of titles that match their reading abilities and interests. Then, through a link to WorldCat, an online national network of public library holdings, students can see if their local library has the books. For students who do not have a Lexile measure, the "Find a Book" Web site offers a utility for estimating reading ability based on the student's grade and overall comfort with the reading materials at that grade level. The site is freely available to educators, parents, and students via any computer with Internet access.

Mitigating summer reading loss is key to meeting the No Child Left Behind goal of having all students read at grade level by 2014. By collaborating with their communities, schools and districts can leverage existing summer reading programs—and Lexile measures—to develop targeted reading programs that keep the educational faucet turned on and ensure all students have access to level-appropriate reading materials year-round.

¹Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 227-268.

²Ibid.

³Kim, J.S. (2005). Project READS (Reading Enhances Achievement During Summer): Results from a Randomized Field Trial of a Voluntary Summer Reading Intervention. Paper presented at Princeton University, Education Research Section, November 7, 2005.

From the Field

American Falls, ID: Randy Jensen, principal of William Thomas Middle School in American Falls, ID, shares an innovative way his school promotes summer learning.

In addition to encouraging non-proficient students to attend summer school, the students are also provided training in web-based software programs that students can do at home. School personnel meet with parents and students at the end of the school year to set goals for completing these programs during the summer. A program in Idaho called "Computers for Kids" provides students that don't have a computer at home with one, so every student has access to a computer. Additionally, the school worked out a program with a local internet provider to provide free basic service for economically disadvantaged students. This enables almost all of our students to participate in this summer learning program.

Greensboro, NC: Theresa Hinkle, former seventh-grade English/Language Arts teacher at Kernodle Middle School in Greensboro, NC, shares the journey her school embarked upon as they worked to find ways to encourage students to read during the summer break.

Each spring the English/LA teachers meet as a department to discuss summer reading assignments to ensure that appropriate levels of reading are being assigned and assignments are not duplicated across grade levels.

Over the course of the years, several different strategies have been tried. One year, attempts were made to differentiate by ability by assigning different books to students in the AL (advanced learner) program. However, that didn't work as well as predicted because students moved in and out of that program and students new to the school didn't know their status. Another year we had every rising seventh grader (for example) read the same book and then choose two others from a recommended list. In other years, students could make the choice...simply pick any three of the five books suggested for the grade level. Usually the books were thematic and based on what the students would be studying. For example, since seventh-grade social studies classes would be learning about world cultures, books about young adolescents set in different countries/cultures were selected. Sometimes the focus was on "coming of age" books. One year several different genres were on the list—realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, nonfiction—with no attention given to theme.

In terms of follow up, students were initially expected to come in with reading logs kept over the summer but that was not always effective. Some teachers gave either a teacher designed test or an accelerated reader test. Seventh grade usually went with a written assignment on any one of the books read. For example, after teaching character sketches at the beginning of the year, students were asked to choose a character from one of the summer novels and write about that person. Assignments were also differentiated by increasing the complexity—students in the advanced learner program might be asked to compare/contrast characters from two different books, for example. One year when the same book was assigned to the entire grade level, students worked in groups to create board games about the book. This worked well since everyone had read the book and could therefore play the game as a review.

In retrospect, the bottom line was that we never really settled into one mode but we liked the idea of encouraging summer reading, and we found that most of our parents supported the reading and most of our students did the reading, so we kept trying to find a way that worked the best. Unresolved issues tended to center around how much student choice to give and the level/type of accountability. While consistency was not always maintained throughout the school, it was generally maintained within a grade level.

Houston, TX: Several middle schools in the Houston, TX, ISD use the following strategies in conjunction with student Lexile scores.

Personalized summer reading lists are generated by the students based on their interests and their Lexile levels. For example, if a student is interested in stories about friendship, mysteries, and animals, he or she can go to a computer in the library and type that in along with the Lexile score that was given out by the Language Arts teacher. The student can then print out a list of books to check out at the public library. It is very personalized and students are much more likely to read from the list than having to choose books from a "one-size-fits-all" list.

During the school year, classes that are focusing specifically on content area reading pull articles based on Lexile levels for specific science, social studies, and math topics. They are then able to group students of similar Lexile levels and have students read the articles and share the information learned with students in other groups.