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Home Libraries

The Impact of Home Libraries on Academic
Achievement, Economic Success, and Health



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INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF HOME LIBRARIES

WE CAN CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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Making children’s books available to children is a cheap and feasible intervention that could change home dynamics to improve the future economic fortunes of children

(Manu et al., 2019, p. 1).

Literacy is the birthright of every child. Reading introduces children to new worlds and ideas, expands their imaginations, and helps them chart their own destinies. Books, magazines, and digital reading materials inspire educational engagement, encourage critical thinking and nuanced ideas, and ensure people walk through the world with empathy for those around them—qualities that become more and more crucial in challenging times.

Educators around the globe know that helping children develop into lifelong readers and learners is their most important work—laying a foundation for student success in school and beyond. While children make enormous academic leaps in school, their reading skills are also significantly enhanced outside of the school day and beyond the classroom.

Four decades of research with children of all ages, in varied socioeconomic and cultural groups, reveal that access to books in the home is one of the strongest predictors of educational achievement (Evans et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2014; Manu et al., 2019). Children in homes with more extensive home libraries read more, have higher-level reading skills, and attain more years of education overall than those with access to fewer books, even after controlling for parental education level (Crook, 1997; de Graaf et al., 2000; de Graaf, 1986; de Graaf, 1988; Evans et al., 2010; Georg, 2004; Park, 2008; Teachman, 1987). Increasing children’s access to books correlates to “dramatically positive effects” on reading growth and achievement (Allington, 2014).

THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR

Young people need home libraries now more than ever.

The benefits of books in the home do not stop in childhood. Adults who grow up with home libraries are more likely to find work (Evans et al., 2015) and have higher reading, math, and technological competence than their peers with fewer books in their homes (Sikora et al., 2018). Research also shows that having books at home as a child results in higher adult brain function (Berns et al., 2013; Weinstein et al., 2021), increased empathy (Kidd & Castano, 2013), and better physical health (Dewalt, 2005; Weinstein et al., 2021). Along with all that, books at home just might keep people alive longer (Bavishi et al., 2017).

Still, despite a longstanding and ever-growing body of research on the benefits of reading, a 2010 study of 21 nations revealed that nearly one-third of American families (28%) have fewer than 25 books in the home (Evans et al., 2010).

Researcher Susan Neuman puts it plainly: **“Environment matters for literacy development. And the good news for researchers and educators is that it is highly attainable”** (Neuman, 2016, p. 115).

There is a convincing progression of findings when considering the impact of home libraries.

1. Access to home libraries is unequivocally linked to student achievement and to lifelong success.
2. Children without access to reading materials in the home are more likely to suffer learning losses when out of school.
3. Home libraries are one of the best tools schools and communities have to combat learning loss.

This paper summarizes the importance of creating a literacy-rich home environment for all children, and outlines the essential components of a student home library—a tangible, cost-effective way to afford every child access to a bright, successful future.

THE LANDSCAPE: THE READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Educators and families alike can attest to the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on academic learning for myriad reasons, including community health issues, the challenges of remote learning, district-wide budget cuts, decreased family resources, teacher shortages, and mental-health challenges.

The most recent 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that the average reading score on the NAEP fell three points from 2019 to 2022—the largest drop since 1990. This sobering decline spanned students’ race, income level, school type, and location, and it disproportionately affected students in the bottom 10th percentile nationwide—students more likely to be from low-income communities and communities of color.

Educators have already begun impressive work to help increase achievement across the student population. Research tells us, however, that the work of closing the gap involves efforts and resources outside of the school day. Alexander et al. (2007) found that, prior to high school, learning gains across family income levels are nearly equal during the school year. It is time outside of school—specifically larger blocks of it—that are a challenge due to what they call “the unequalizing press of children’s out-of-school learning environments” (Alexander et al., 2007, p. 168).

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The achievement gap by family income traces substantially to unequal learning opportunities in children’s home and community environments

(Alexander et al., 2007, p. 168).

These findings track with an earlier study that revealed “the achievement levels of children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds increase on par with those from favored economic backgrounds when school is open” (Entwisle et al., 1997, p. 152). By the end of Grade 5, however, the gap between the wealthiest and poorest students widens to nearly three years—even for those low-income students who entered school with a learning gap of less than one year (Entwisle et al., 1997).

ACCESS TO PRINT IS ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS IN SCHOOL AND BEYOND

- The likelihood of being on track in **literacy and numeracy** “almost doubled if at least one book was available in a student’s home” (Manu et al., 2019, p. 1).
- Books read in adolescence have **a direct correlation to adult literacy, numeracy, and technology skills** (Sikora, 2018).
- Children expand their vocabularies by reading extensively on their own. **The more children read, the more their vocabularies grow** (Allington, 2006; Armbruster et al., 2001; Kuhn et al., 2006).
- Children learn **an average of 4,000 to 12,000 new words each year** through reading books (Anderson & Nagy, 1992).
- Reading more often improves **technical reading, oral language, spelling skills, and reading comprehension** (Mol & Bus, 2011).
- Reading volume is **highly predictive of declarative knowledge**, and print exposure is more predictive than cognitive ability for developing a store of declarative knowledge (Sparks et al., 2014).
- A book-oriented home environment provides students with a wide array of academic skills, including “**vocabulary, information, comprehension skills, imagination, broad horizons of history and geography, familiarity with good writing, understanding of the importance of evidence in an argument**, and many others” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 189).

THE SUMMER SLIDE

By age 18, the average student in the United States will spend only 13% of his or her waking time in school (Wherry, 2004). That figure reflects weekends, school holidays, and—most of all—summer breaks. In most school districts, summer break lasts nearly three months—the length of one-third of the academic year. Taking a three-month break from the learning of any skill at any age would be detrimental to the success of learners, and several analyses conclude that, on average, students’ achievement scores decline over summer vacation by the equivalent of one month of learning. The extent of learning loss is understandably larger at higher grade levels (Cooper et al., 1996; McEachin & Atteberry, 2016; Atteberry & McEachin 2021).

Though the “summer slide” affects students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, it disproportionately impacts students from low-income communities. A groundbreaking study by Hayes and Grether (1983) found that as much as 80% of the reading achievement gap that exists between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in sixth grade is the result of summer learning setbacks, and many other studies have revealed similar findings.

- Cooper et al. (1996) published an extensive meta-analysis revealing that, on average, **summer vacation created a reading achievement gap of about three months between middle- and lower-class students**. The study reported that between Grades 1–6, the cumulative impact of this gap could snowball to 1.5 years of lost reading development.
- In their study of Baltimore students, Alexander et al. (2007) found that, by ninth grade, low-income students were reading at a level almost three grades behind that of middle-income students, with **summer reading loss accounting for more than half of the difference in reading skills**. This difference in achievement also predicted later dropouts and college attendance.

Alexander et al.’s (2007) “faucet theory” explains why lower-income students might learn less over the summer than higher-income students. During the school year, all students have access to resources and gains from in-school, teacher-led learning. However, while higher-income students retain access to learning resources over the summer, their peers from disadvantaged backgrounds no longer have access to the learning “faucet.” The faucet is turned off, making it more difficult for them to keep up with their higher-income peers (Quinn & Polikoff, 2017).

BOOK DESERTS

The “summer slide” is exacerbated by limited access to books during out-of-school time—a reality that has a more significant impact on students from lower-income families than on their peers.

Two important analyses of access to children’s books from Neuman and Celano (2001) and Neuman and Moland (2019) revealed that in low-income neighborhoods, fewer children’s books were available in stores, childcare centers, elementary schools, and public libraries than were available in middle-class communities nearby.

When Neuman and Celano performed their survey of four low- and middle-income areas in 2001, and of six low-, middle-, and high-income areas in 2014, they cataloged a severe discrepancy in access to children's books, finding that wealthier communities have as many as three businesses selling books for every one that sells books in poorer communities (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Neuman, 2016).

What's more, Neuman and Moland (2019) found that these neighborhoods, sometimes referred to as book deserts, "may seriously constrain young children's opportunities to come to school ready to learn" (p. 127). They note, "Across Washington, D.C., Detroit, and the Los Angeles Basin, the data are consistent:

Children's books are hard to come by in high-poverty neighborhoods. During the precious summer months, with schools closed and preschool programs often converted to day camps or shut down for the vacation, the likelihood of finding a book for purchase in these neighborhoods is very slim" (p. 137).

Similarly, Bradley et al. (2001) found that children from low-socioeconomic households are less likely to have even 10 books in their homes. With these data in mind, any attempts to level the playing field and boost student reading achievement must look beyond the schools to the homes and communities where children live and learn.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOME LIBRARIES VS. SUMMER SCHOOL

In a 2010 randomized study of a summer-reading pilot program in 17 high-poverty elementary schools, 842 students were provided with 12 paperback books each summer for three summers. The books were self-selected by the students and sent home with them for the summer.

After three years, researchers compared student scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test with those of a control group. They found that the reading achievement scores of the students who received the summer books for three years were significantly higher than those of the control-group students.

What's more, the measurable impact of a home library was equal to or larger than high-cost interventions.

- The score increase over three years was **equal to or larger than the achievement effect of attending summer school** for the same amount of time.
- The score increase was **equal to or larger than the achievement effect sizes reported for implementing comprehensive school-reform models** (Allington et al., 2010).

While home reading during the school year will help to close the achievement gap during those months, it is equally—if not more—essential that young readers have a vibrant, exciting collection of books at home during the summer. With summer break accounting for one-fourth of the year in many districts, **books that are engaging and easily accessible are an inexpensive, proven way to reduce summer learning loss.**

THE IMPACT: THE HOME LIBRARY IMPERATIVE

In an international study of more than 70,000 participants in 27 nations, Evans et al. (2010) revealed that after controlling for economic status, father's occupation, and parental education, the effect of home access to books had about the same impact as parental education on student achievement. The impact was double the impact of the father's occupation and outpaced family economic status. What's more, students with the biggest gains from home libraries are those who came from a lower economic status.

These findings are game-changing. Schools and communities don't have control over parental education, occupation, or economics, but institutions can put books in children's homes and close the achievement gap.

Studies from around the globe show that access to print resources—ranging from board books to read-aloud books to magazines—and shared reading experiences with caregivers in early childhood before formal schooling begins have both an immediate and long-term effect on children's vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension skills (Neuman & Moland, 2019).

The academic impact of home access to books and reading materials continues long after these early experiences. We know that when books are part of a home environment, children are more likely to read for pleasure and have a better vocabulary. Studies show they also have increased access to information and a more comprehensive "cultural toolkit" that positively impacts educational achievement (Evans et al., 2010).

Reading volume and exposure to books outside of school have a positive effect on students' reading achievement and are powerful contributors to a variety of academic skills.

- Students with more books at home have higher educational attainment (Evans et al., 2010).
- Children growing up in homes with many books go on to receive, on average, three years more schooling than children from bookless homes, regardless of their parents' education, occupation, and economic status (Evans et al., 2010).

- Home library size predicts school success in both elementary and later years (Park, 2008; Sikora et al., 2018).
- Twenty-one minutes a day of reading outside of school results in higher scores on reading achievement tests and an increase of more than 1.8 million reading words annually (Fisher & Frey, 2018).
- High literacy levels, enhanced by out-of-school reading, positively influence academic performance at secondary school (Daggett & Hasselbring, 2007) and on vocational choices later in life (Kirsch et al., 2002).
- When students have access to a larger number of books in their home, their reading motivation is higher, their attitude toward reading is more positive, and reading competence increases (Gambrell, 2011; Katzir et al., 2009; Merga, 2015; Park, 2008; Retelsdorf et al., 2011; Sutter & Campbell, 2022; Zucker et al., 2022).

Above all, students who have more books read more and enjoy reading. In their survey of the print access and reading habits of a group of Grade 11 students, McQuillan and Au (2001) found that “the number of books personally owned by the students in this study was significantly correlated with both reading frequency and reading achievement” (p. 232).

The exponential benefits of books in the home extend far beyond students and brick-and-mortar schools. When young people are provided with access to home libraries filled with diverse, high-interest texts, the impact ripples into their communities and beyond.



What students learn at home provides an essential foundation on which schools can build. Without it, neither students nor schools can reach their full potential
(Wherry, 2004, p. 6).

HELPING MINDS AND BODIES THRIVE

Neuroscientists find that reading not only strengthens the language-processing regions of the human brain, but also affects its sensorimotor regions (Berns et al., 2013). In fact, the impact of an “early-life book-oriented environment may be important in shaping cognitive aging” (Weinstein et al., 2021, p. 274).



Availability of books at home during childhood may be related to improved late-life cognitive abilities and to slower cognitive decline, independently of education and life-course factors, such as health, lifestyle, and socioeconomic indices
(Weinstein et al., 2021, p. 280).

Dewalt and Pignone (2005) argue that literacy is life-saving in the most concrete of senses, as it provides adults with a better understanding of, and access to, healthcare: “Patients with inadequate literacy have less health-related knowledge, receive less preventive care, have poorer control of their chronic illnesses, and are hospitalized more frequently than other patients” (p. 463).

A longitudinal study from Bavishi et al. (2017) found that book readers have a 23-month survival advantage over nonbook readers at the point of 80% survival, and a 20% reduction in risk of mortality over 12 years of follow-up. They put it simply: **“The benefits of reading books include a longer life in which to read them”** (p. 44).

Books are not only good for our bodies. The empathy they build—along with social perception and emotional intelligence—provides immeasurable benefits to society. Perhaps the greatest hallmark of our humanity is our ability to understand the thoughts and decisions of others. There is a clear link between regular reading and social-emotional development and awareness. The greater access children have to books in school and at home, the more likely they are to cultivate an appreciation for diverse experiences and develop empathy for others (Cleaver, 2020).

“Understanding others’ mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies,” write Kidd and Castano (2013), adding that “reading uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters’ subjective experiences” and increases our understanding of the world around us and how others act within it.

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It’s difficult to succeed in life if you can’t read well. And it’s very difficult to get good at reading if you don’t have books to practice with at home. There may be no better way to impact children’s overall futures than by making sure they have a steady supply of quality books to read in their homes (Noonan & Fox, 2020, p. 3).

GETTING MORE BANG FOR YOUR BOOK: BUILDING IMPACTFUL HOME LIBRARIES

For years, research has shown that the very existence of books in the home is correlated with student well-being, academic achievement, and future success. Additionally, we know that students who own their own books are more likely to value them (Clark & Poulton, 2011) and to read at or above grade level (Merga, 2015). But what should these home libraries include?

We now have a nuanced understanding of how home libraries can yield the highest impact, including which books should be included in home libraries, how those books should be selected, and how many books make a measurable difference in the lives of students.

A WIDE VARIETY OF BOOKS



Just as we want children to eat the rainbow as they fill their plate with fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods, we want children to read widely and have experience with a wide range of story book types, genres, authors, characters, and language (Cleaver, 2020, p. 27).

In their groundbreaking work, Nagy and Anderson (1984) identified an astonishing gap in vocabulary exposure for school-aged children, finding that a middle-grade reader who struggles to read might read 100,000 words a year, while a voracious reader in the same class might read as many as 50 million words a year.

Those regular readers are *wide reading*—reading a variety of books at home and at leisure—and in doing so, building stamina and increasing their reading fluency (Fisher & Frey, 2018). Home libraries are essential for wide reading across numerous texts every day, allowing for different progress depending upon a child’s age (Torppa et al., 2020).

- In early grades (K–2), **reading achievement drives the volume** of books read; children who are strong readers read more. During these years, home libraries make for good practice, building fluency and comprehension and ensuring that students think of themselves as good readers.

- After Grade 3, the relationship flips, and **volume drives reading achievement**; children who can access and read large quantities of a variety of books become more skilled readers.

No matter the child's age, however, the research is irrefutable—the more access to high-quality books outside of school, the better the reader (Mol & Bus, 2011). A home library, like its classroom counterparts, should include **illustrated chapter books, graphic novels, fiction, nonfiction, myths, fairy tales, fantasy, poetry, or books that are wildly successful in current popular culture** (Zepp, 2022).

BOOKS SELECTED BY STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS

In addition to wide reading—accessing texts with varied content and skill level—students should be encouraged to read deeply. Deep reading is the hallmark of the avid reader; it happens when readers fall in love with a genre, consume the backlist of a favorite author, and get excited when they discover a new book on a topic they love. This is where reading becomes fun and young readers become lifelong readers (Cleaver, 2020).

Home libraries should be special. They should include books that are selected to engage and excite individual students, honoring their unique skills and interests. Teachers and administrators are well poised to help families build and create libraries for their students, naturally understanding which texts best allow kids to explore and learn. In partnership, students and educators work together to build a curated library of books that inspire, educate, and entertain (Gabriel et al., 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2018).

Content selected with individual students in mind will interest and motivate even the most struggling readers, resulting in stronger reading skills (Baye et al., 2019; Koskinen et al., 1994). Students who play a role in selecting their own reading materials are more motivated to read, expend more effort to read, and gain a better understanding of texts (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, 2008; Schiefele, 1991). Book fairs, book clubs, and summer book packs curated by teachers for their students all facilitate this kind of home library collection.

As home libraries increase confidence in reading and encourage readers to read more and think of themselves as better readers, the most effective home libraries must include **books with different difficulty levels**, encouraging students to feel comfortable reading at their own reading level while offering the opportunity to expand and explore beyond their abilities (Zucker et al., 2022).

WHERE TO BEGIN?

The 2022 *Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report* has identified the types of books that young readers want to explore.

Kids want to choose the books that they read:

- 93% of kids say their favorite books are the ones they picked out themselves
- 92% of kids say they are more likely to finish reading a book that they have picked out themselves

Kids want:

- Chapter books (58%)
- Picture books/storybooks (56%)
- Graphic novels (37%)
- Comic books (35%)

Personalization is key—content that is too advanced could frustrate readers, and content that is too simple runs the risk of boring them (Baye et al., 2019). To achieve the best possible results for any home library program, **books should be selected with the help of teachers and educators** so students are guided to select books that will engage, excite, and enhance their reading skills (Kim, 2006).



Success with challenging reading tasks provides students with evidence of accomplishment, resulting in increased feelings of competence and increased motivation (Gambrell, 2011, p. 176).

BOOKS THAT REFLECT THEMSELVES AND THE WORLD

Recent research indicates that effective home libraries cultivate appreciation for diversity and empathy, allowing students to better understand not only the people and world around them, but also themselves (Cleaver, 2020). Books in a home library should reflect students' personal experiences and culture while positively depicting the rich tapestry of cultural and ethnic groups around them (Worthy & Roser, 2010).



Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author.

When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop 1990, p .ix).

Every educator understands this intuitively, having seen students transfixed by mirrors and opening and walking through sliding glass doors. When children find themselves in the books they read, the experience feels magical. All children require windows and sliding glass doors to thrive—and home libraries are an essential component of this.

Children from dominant cultural and social groups have no trouble finding mirrors in texts. But if they are always staring into the mirror, they become transfixed, unable to find empathy or understanding for those who are not like them. They require windows onto the world beyond their small piece of it, and sliding glass doors to walk through in order to see themselves as part of an enormous whole.

The reverse is also true. As Bishop (1990) writes in her landmark text, *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (p. 557).

HOW MANY BOOKS?

While the precise number of books needed to produce the optimal impact on children's growth is not clear, one thing is certain: when a child begins their home library journey with few books in their home, **even one book can make a difference in their reading lives.**

Manu (2019) found that “the likelihood of being on track in literacy-numeracy almost doubled if at least one book was available at home compared to when there was none” (p. 1). This finding was supplemented by research indicating that each additional book in a home library has larger benefits for families with fewer books than for families with many (Sikora et al., 2018).

While there is no agreement on the exact number of books needed for a sustained, measurable impact on young people, a survey of the research on the ideal quantity of books in a home library reveals a variety of insights.

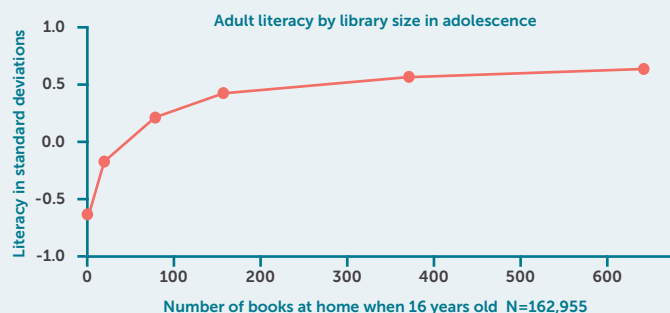
THE CONTINUUM

Five Books: Reading five books during the summer can **prevent a decline in reading achievement** when returning to school (Kim, 2006).

Twenty-Five Books: A child who hails from a home with 25 books will, on average, **complete two more years of school** than a child from a home without any books at all (Evans et al., 2010).

Forty Books: When second-graders were given 40 carefully selected books over three years for their home libraries, their **fluency improved, and parents reported increased time spent reading at home** during weekends, holidays, and summer breaks (Minkel, 2012).

Eighty Books: Having approximately 80 books in an adolescent home library **raises literacy levels to average** (Sikora et al., 2018).



More Than Eighty Books: While **literacy increases** beyond an 80-book home library, at some point the benefits of a home book collection level off in relation to reading skills—more than 350 books in a home is not associated with significant literacy gains (Sikora et al., 2018).

However, growing up in a home with 500 books has other benefits—propelling a child an average of 3.2 years further in education than peers in an otherwise similar home with few or no books. That child is 33% more likely to finish the ninth grade and 36% more likely to finish high school than an otherwise identical child from a home with no books (Evans et al., 2010).

THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR

Books in the home matter.

PROMOTING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING

More than half a century of literacy research, dating back to 1966, shows again and again that the interactions young readers enjoy at home with caregivers—from conversations to storytelling to read-alouds—play a significant role in academic success and beyond. Children who are read aloud to at home develop a stronger vocabulary, more background knowledge, better expressive and receptive language abilities, and stronger phonological awareness and early-literacy skills (Durkin, 1966; Bus et al., 1995; Neuman & Celano, 2006).



Book reading allows parents and children to derive meaning from text in relation to their own lives (Neuman, 2016, p. 118).

The impact that families and caregivers have on reading skills continues long past preschool age. Parent involvement in child reading is positively associated with reading achievement for fifth-graders (Koepp et al., 2022), 13-year-olds (Price & Kalil, 2018), and 15-year-olds (Schubert & Becker, 2010).

Researchers posit that, when caregivers and children share books, they enhance the quality of their reading in the long term, making for frequent conversation and increased caregiver understanding of a child's learning (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). Family involvement in learning connects the world inside and outside of school and makes the school day more relevant to students—increasing developmental outcomes for children (Weiss et al, 2006).

What's more, when parents are encouraged to read with their children at home, children become more interested in reading as a concept and more driven to become readers themselves (Armbruster, 2001).

HOW IT CAN WORK ON THE GROUND

As part of their project on reading outside of school, Fisher & Frey (2018) encouraged schools in the study to schedule additional family information sessions to “keep focused on reading volume” (p. 93). Principals took the reins in these meetings, pointing out that “Getting your kid to read every night is as important as getting them to brush their teeth.” And they encouraged parents to institute family reading time—time without screens, when families could read and talk.

The Results Are Powerful:

- **Higher library checkout rates** in the current year (+9%) than for the same students during the same period the previous year;
- **Higher writing scores on district benchmark tests** (+4%) compared with other district schools;
- **Higher fluency rates** (+2%) compared with the students’ past reading records or with other schools in the same district; and
- Students and parents anecdotally reporting **reading more books** (Fisher & Frey, 2018).

PROVIDING PARENT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

The benefits of home libraries for students are irrefutable, but they can be supercharged if parents are offered training and support to enhance and encourage student learning.

In a 2006 study of a voluntary fourth-grade summer reading intervention, young readers were given eight books over the summer. Parents and families were provided with comprehension strategies to employ with children. The results were remarkable, with small, mighty libraries eliminating summer reading loss—suggesting that the impact of home book collections was maximized when parents were engaged in the process (Kim, 2006).

It is important to underscore the fact that students and families are not choosing to forgo reading during summer and out-of-school time. In fact, research broadly shows that the opposite is true—**when children are provided with books outside of school, families are eager to engage with them and support reading growth.**

HOW IT CAN WORK ON THE GROUND

In a study providing 12 books in Spanish and English to young readers and their families, Neuman and Moland (2019) prioritized fostering community among Spanish-speaking parents.

To do so, they established a book club for parents, providing “an important social opportunity for parents to gather together, to share information about books, and other things as well” (Neuman & Moland, 2019). This book club provided time for parents to talk about their children, academics, and school activities. Importantly, it also provided a safe, nonjudgmental space for parents who struggled with reading.

In a group, parents with low reading proficiency:

- **Chimed in more** while reading with their children;
- **Developed more confidence in their own reading** using the repeated texts as scaffolds;
- **Reported high levels of enjoyment** in fostering their children’s skills, as well as their own; and
- **Continued to attend book clubs** after the study concluded.

What’s more, children across the project saw substantial increases in receptive language and concepts of print measures in a 12-week period, *regardless of the parents’ own reading abilities* (Neuman & Moland, 2019).

The personal connection that young people discover when owning and sharing books with those around them is reflected in the research on young readers and motivation to read far beyond preschool age. Data show that young people are motivated to be active and engaged readers when they receive books as gifts, “suggesting that schools should explore avenues for promoting book ownership, particularly for those children who may not receive books as gifts” (Koskinen et al., 1994). This is true across socioeconomic lines.



Book-sharing interventions, in which caregivers engage in interactive reading with children, are relatively cheap, feasible to implement and improve the social-emotional and cognitive skills (Manu et al., 2019, p. 2).

Beyond the quantitative data, students who receive books for a home library from teachers, schools, and communities report an increased love of reading and an eagerness to share that love with parents, siblings, and friends (Minkel, 2012). Those students also report sharing their books with others in their family and social groups—a familiar trait in book lovers, and perhaps the best proof that home libraries are a powerful tool for positive change.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, communities, and families are doing all they can to combat its toll on student learning—especially among children in low-socioeconomic areas. To do so, schools and homes need every resource possible, particularly those that make a large impact with a small investment.

Home libraries are powerful, purposeful, and productive. When intentionally built by educators and students, small, personalized libraries deliver an undeniable bang for a book, rivaling programs that require significantly more expense and manpower. Books in the home reduce student learning loss, increase reading skills, engage families, and establish a healthier, more active, and more empathetic community where young people thrive.

Books change lives, and students deserve to have access to them all day, every day.

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