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Promising Practice

Reaching Rural Students with Resources and Enrichment-Focused Learning in the Summer Months

Kathrina M. O'Connell

This promising practice describes the summer programming transformation at a rural, Title I school. After eliminating barriers to education and remediation overtones, the school now provides free transportation, meals, and books for all participants and engages them in research-based, enrichment-focused literacy learning. The program's first year experienced a 746% increase in registration, a 34% increase in retention, and an 18% increase in attendance. Similar registration and participation numbers were reported in years two through four, with reading growth demonstrated in all four summers. Both students and their parents reported increased engagement and motivation to read in the summer months. Results from the program's modifications highlight the need for and value of equitable and enrichment-focused summer learning in rural communities.

Rural schools share assets such as resilience, adaptability, strong family involvement, and close connections to businesses and their communities. They also share many challenges that are commonly experienced in geographically isolated areas, such as a lack of resources, struggles with transportation, and difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers (Johnson et al., 2021). These commonalities are also shared during the school year and throughout the summer months. While rural schools often communicate the desire to support learning all year, providing programming can be problematic. Summer budgets are typically small or nonexistent and finding teachers to lead learning can be difficult. In addition, accessing learning opportunities can be challenging, if not impossible for rural families. Parents may want their child/ren to participate in summer programs, but family work schedules and the lack of bussing often pose barriers to students' access to learning opportunities in geographically isolated areas.

Other options for summer learning are often inaccessible to students. Libraries, museums, and 'camps' are not as readily available for students in rural locations as they are for children living in urban areas (VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2016). In addition, it can be difficult for children in rural areas to access print and electronic books in the summer months (McGill-Franzen et al., 2016). Schools and their libraries are often closed in the summer months and internet availability is often limited for students once they are away from the school building.

When students are not engaged in new learning during the summer months, they often lose skills learned during the school year (Allington et al., 2010). Mokhtari and Velten (2015) noted that students can lose as much as three to four months of reading skills in the summer months, which is

frequently referred to as *summer learning loss* or the *summer slide*. Researchers have shown that summer learning loss is also cumulative, adding up over a child's educational career (Leefat, 2015; Shin & Krashen, 2008). These summer learning losses prevent students from building new skills when they return to school each fall. Johnson et. al (2021), in their study of rural schools, noted that the largest learning gap between rural and nonrural schools could be attributed to large declines in learning during the summer months.

Redesigning Rural Learning for the Summer Months

Prior to 2019, a small, rural Title I school conducted its K-6 summer school program with a loose schedule of independent reading, computer work, and recess. Students in grades 7-8 attended summer school because they had failed a course during the school year, learning was punitive. There were no school-year resources provided for students in the summer (e.g., transportation, meals, books) which also contributed to summer learning loss.

In 2019, a sixth-grade teacher at the school developed a new summer learning program, the Literacy Academy, that combated learning loss that was documented each fall when students returned to school. The research-based program was designed to be engaging and motivating, one that would be appealing to her middle-school-age students. She developed the literacy curriculum around four key classes that included independent reading with teacher conferencing, teacher read-aloud and writing, small-group reading, and readers' theater. Each week had a genre emphasis and all texts connected to the summer's theme (e.g., nature, sports, animals). Busy-work worksheets and skill-and-drill activities were

replaced with learning that focused on student choice, collaboration, and creativity.

She recognized, however, that even an engaging program would not motivate summer reading if students weren't able to access it. Nearly 100% of students at her school relied on bus transportation during the school year and would need the same resource in the summer. She advocated for this need with the school board, and the board members approved a trial summer for transportation. The teacher also recognized students' need for food security in the summer months. As a Title I school, many of the students received nutritional support during the school year and needed the same support in the summer months. She worked with the food service staff to acquire a five-year summer meals grant from the state of Minnesota. Acquisition of the grant secured funding for summer breakfast and lunch, five times a week, for all children in the community under the age of 18.



Figure 1. A student reads their new book while eating breakfast at the summer Literacy Academy.

There were also barriers to students' book access in this rural community. The school library was closed in the summer months and the nearest library and stores were often inaccessible to families in the remote area. The teacher sought community and business donations and grants to provide all participants with free books. Each student selected books during the last week of school and during the last days of the summer program, so that they had access to books when school was not in session. Since book ownership is an important motivator for reading, the students kept their books and were treated to one additional book on the last day of the

program, when they took a field trip to a bookstore. In the program's second year, the school opened its library for book check-outs during summer programming.

Study Design

Reallocating school resources required a research focus with data collection and analysis for continued approval of summer program funding. The mixed-methods design of the study included quantitative data (e.g., registration, attendance, STAR reading scores, Likert scale questions on student and parent questionnaires) and qualitative data (e.g., student focus groups, open-ended questions on student and parent questionnaires). To measure summer reading gains, STAR reading scores were collected at the end of the school year in May and again at the beginning of the school year in September. Student focus groups were included to give voice to the participants, for whom this program was designed, and were conducted at the end of the summer program. Student and parent questionnaires, with postage-paid return envelopes, were mailed home after each summer, in October.

Research permission was granted by the K-12 school superintendent each year. Parents' written consent and students' assent were provided for STAR reading, focus group, and questionnaire data collection each summer. All students were able to participate in the summer Literacy Academy whether they provided research permission or not, but only the data of students who provided consent were used for analysis.

The summer Literacy Academy was initially designed for students in grades 5-8, for four weeks (16 days) at the end of July and the beginning of August. The duration was modified in 2020 due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements. Classes were limited to nine or fewer students, so participants were only allowed to attend one 10-day session. The original schedule resumed in 2021 but was modified in 2022 to include two two-week (8-day) sessions in June and August. Students could attend either or both sessions, as requested by parents in their questionnaire responses from 2021.

Literacy Academy curriculum training was provided for the teaching staff, summer bus routes were arranged by the school's transportation director, and meals were prepared by the school-year kitchen staff. The curriculum maintained the same format but was updated each year to reflect books that matched the summers' themes (e.g., nature, sports, animals). In addition, guest speakers (e.g., United States Fish and Wildlife Service staff, local artists) and visitors (e.g., pheasants, traveling zoo animals) that matched

the theme were also invited. Emphasis was place-based, noting the vegetation, animals, and activities of rural Minnesota.

Participation

When the Literacy Academy was established in 2019, 97 students in grades 5-8 registered for the program, and 93 participated (96% retention). This was a 746% increase in participation and a 34% in retention from 2018. A parent noted that their child attended in 2019 because “it was the first time that enrichment was offered during the summer.” The K-12 school district had a total of 700 students, so nearly one in seven students participated in the summer program. The high participation rate, along with parent requests, prompted fourth grade to be added to the program in 2020. In addition, the school board voted to provide bus transportation for all students participating in summer learning each year thereafter.

In 2020, participation declined (73 student registrations, 74% retention rate) because bussing could not be provided due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements. Some parents worked together to carpool for their children, but many could not. Parents’ work schedules and distances between families created obstacles for collaboration. Summers 2021 (95 participants, 96% retention) and 2022 (95 participants, 96% retention) had participation results similar to the program’s first year.

An increase in daily attendance was noted in the first year, from 58% in 2018’s summer school to 76% in its first year as the Literacy Academy, and a high of 79% in 2021. Many parents emphasized that



Figure 2. Students read nonfiction texts collaboratively.

bussing transportation and free meals were very important factors for their children’s regular attendance. With parents working and some families living as far as 18 miles away from the school, free transportation made the program accessible for

students. For children who relied upon school meals during the school year, the summer Literacy Academy’s meal service provided food security during summer break. In addition, both students and parents noted that free books motivated participation in the program.

Rural Readers’ Literacy Growth

Summer learning loss was reduced in all four summers, and for many students, the program supported summer learning gains. In the first year of the program, 39% percent of participants demonstrated reading gains. STAR scores were not collected in 2020 due to home quarantine with the COVID-19 pandemic, but the assessments resumed in 2021. That summer, 47% of participants demonstrated reading gains at the beginning of the next school year. In 2022, 51% of participants demonstrated reading gains at the beginning of the school year in September. This is significant because not only was summer learning loss reduced, but many students started the school year in September above the reading level achieved before school was dismissed for summer in May.

Recognizing the Value of Social Skills

A significant outcome not initially considered was the value of social engagement for students in the rural community. When asked why they attended the program, one student responded, “I got to see my friends and I don’t have to be home alone.” One parent noted that the summer Literacy Academy was a great way for their child “to stay connected with friends and work on reading skills.” With time after breakfast and lunch for outdoor play, as well as recess in the middle of the morning, students had ample time to interact with their friends during free time and in classes. In all four summers of the program, students noted that seeing their friends was the number one reason for attending the Literacy Academy.

Geographic isolation, transportation limitations, and parents’ work schedules often present barriers to students’ summer social interactions. It is not uncommon for students in rural areas to go all summer without seeing their friends in person. The Literacy Academy, with its equitable bus transportation, made it possible for students to interact with their friends in a supervised, structured, learning-based environment. After home quarantine for five months during the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, the summer Literacy Academy was especially important for providing the time needed for students to reacquaint themselves with each other and school routines before school started again in the fall. As

one student noted, they needed “to have some human contact” in the summer.

Significance of the Practice

Schools are screaming for skills *remediation* post-COVID, but enrichment-focused summer learning has the potential to build foundational literacy skills needed for enhanced school-year growth. The Literacy Academy was enveloped in asset-focused instruction that provided opportunities for new learning. The school also eliminated barriers to learning by providing free meals, transportation, and books for all participants. For the majority of participants, the summer Literacy Academy was the only academic-focused learning activity attended in the summer months.

The general ideas for this promising practice are not new or innovative. However, the amalgamation of concepts is promising. It did indeed take time and collaboration to organize all the resources needed to support students’ summer learning. The school board took a leap of faith in approving summer bussing for one year, but due to benefits to students’ learning, now budgets money every year. Shifting resources

from back-to-school remediation to summer enrichment supports students’ learning all year.

The summer Literacy Academy demonstrates how to pivot around enrichment and includes activities that incorporate choice, collaboration, and creativity. Students don’t want to return to school during summer vacation and be assigned boring tasks and remedial work. Instead, they need to be empowered to become agentic learners and literacy leaders through literacy learning experiences that connect to their lives outside of school.

Rural programs must also consider students’ social needs. Many students are geographically isolated in the summer months, and they need time to engage with their peers in positive and structured learning environments. The summer Literacy Academy schedule includes movement and social time throughout the day and embeds regular student collaboration throughout its literacy classes.

The summer Literacy Academy serves as a model for rural summer school programs. The outcomes of the study school’s redesign demonstrate the need for enrichment-focused learning with equitable resources for rural students during the summer months. In doing so, rural schools can reach their students and support their literacy development all year.

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