

North Carolina Encourages All Children to “Find-a-Book”

Last year, MetaMetrics collaborated with the North Carolina Governor’s Office on the statewide “Find-a-Book” summer reading initiative, which focused on mitigating summer learning loss—when students’ reading skills diminish over summer break.

The Dilemma of Summer Loss

The problem of summer loss is not new. During the school year, teachers, librarians and parents work hard to ensure that students develop the reading skills necessary for success in school and in life. Regardless of their abilities at the beginning of the school year, students tend to grow at about the same rate. But when summer break comes, students leave the formal learning environment of the classroom and, instead of progressing, many begin to slip in their abilities. Research shows that all students lose some degree of reading ability when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer. 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.¹

In many cases, this decline in student reading ability can be attributed to a lack of practice. On average, low-income students, who often lack access to reading materials or a high-literacy environment at home, experience a loss in reading achievement of more than two months.² However, if schools and libraries connect students with books that match both their abilities and interests, students can avoid this backsliding and, in some instances, continue to build their reading skills.

North Carolina’s “Find-a-Book” Campaign

Based on this premise, North Carolina’s “Find-a-Book” summer reading initiative encouraged all communities to help students retain and grow their skills over the summer by making sure they had access to good books. Like many school districts and public libraries around the country, North Carolina already had the tools for connecting students with ability-appropriate books. Students in grades 3–8 and high school receive a Lexile measure on their report cards.

North Carolina’s summer reading initiative leveraged the free, Lexile-based book search of the same name (“Find a Book”) to help students select fiction and nonfiction titles that best met their reading abilities and personal interests. The book search is based on the research of Harvard University Professor Dr. James S. Kim, who demonstrated that when students read a minimum of eight high-interest, ability-appropriate books over the summer, their reading skills grow as much as students who attend summer school.³

Gov. Bev Perdue launched the summer reading initiative at an elementary school in eastern North Carolina, where she read to a third-grade class and demonstrated the “Find a Book” search, which MetaMetrics revamped in support of this initiative. She asked school faculty to promote the program to students and parents, and urged community members to become involved as mentors and volunteers. The Governor’s Office also worked with MetaMetrics and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to draft letters on the initiative that were sent to principals and public librarians, as well as to parents with their child’s end-of-grade score reports. The letters were accompanied by informational flyers that each of these groups could reference when helping students find books based on Lexile measures. Public librarians, for example, were encouraged to keep the flyer at the circulation desk in the event parents or students had questions about Lexile measures or “Find a Book.”

“Find a Book” in Action

School districts and public libraries across the state did their part to promote the value of Lexile-based summer reading. In Durham, N.C., for example, the school district and public library partnered with MetaMetrics on a multi-year program that uses the library’s annual summer reading program as a springboard to help students and parents select books based on Lexile measures. Dr. Carl Harris, former district superintendent and new Deputy Assistant Secretary of Education for Policy and Strategic Initiatives at the U.S. Department of Education, applauded the district’s use of “Find a Book” to promote summer reading in this video: www.dpsnc.net/channel-4/bright-ideas/technology-boosts-summer-reading.

In addition, MetaMetrics started a summer reading program with the Durham chapter of Communities in Schools. Fueled by Dr. Kim’s research, the program provides below-grade readers with eight free Lexile-targeted books that they choose themselves. Students are tested before and after summer break, and those who report reading the most books show the most growth in reading ability. In fact, students who read at least seven books over the summer grow more than 80L. Students in grades 4–5 typically grow between 110L–140L in an entire calendar year.

As part of these programs, MetaMetrics delivered in-depth training sessions on Lexile measures and “Find a Book” to public librarians. The organization also collaborated with them, and faculty from the Durham school district, to develop and print a custom Lexile map—a list of sample titles and text at various Lexile levels—which was sent home to parents with students’ report cards. In addition, MetaMetrics designed and printed posters promoting Lexile measures and the book search which were displayed in the public libraries.

A Remedy for All States

Communities around the country can easily replicate these efforts by using “Find a Book” to build summer reading lists for students, or simply by encouraging parents and students to create their own Lexile reading lists. By visiting www.lexile.com/findabook, entering a Lexile measure and picking topics of interest, students can create personalized reading lists that they can use at the library, bookstore or online when selecting books to practice reading. Students also can locate titles through links to WorldCat, an online network of public library holdings, and Barnes & Noble.com. If students don’t know their Lexile measure, the book search provides a starting Lexile range based on a student’s comfort with grade-level books. Currently, more than 115,000 books have a Lexile measure, and this number continues to grow.

The promise of using “Find a Book” to build student reading ability has been so well received that Barnes & Noble, the world’s largest bookseller, now allows its customers to use Lexile measures to search for books online and in stores. Barnes & Noble has replicated the book search’s core functionality on its website to allow customers to shop for books by Lexile level and interests.

Integrating “Find a Book” into a new or existing summer reading program comes at no cost for school districts and public libraries. But the value of targeted student reading does not have to stop there. Teachers, librarians and parents can use the book search throughout the year to help students select titles that best support their classroom and leisure reading.

Research has proven that reading is critical to every student’s life chances. By collaborating with their communities, school districts and public libraries can use “Find a Book” to ensure that every student has the opportunity to read a good book. When students read at their Lexile level, they can strengthen important literacy skills and develop a lifelong love of reading.

^{1,2}Cooper, 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.

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.