

Seeking Oasis in Book Deserts

Building Home Libraries to Create Equity in Book Ownership

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Libraries have long promoted book giveaways to increase the love of reading and books. The educational benefits are well documented for increased print and book ownership access. Libraries also leverage programs such as 1000 Books Before Kindergarten and summer learning as popular programs to help families grow home libraries.

Despite these efforts, there are many socioeconomic disparities in which children in this country own books. Espinosa et al. found that children in the highest socioeconomic status have over five times the books in their homes as children in the lowest quartile.¹ A study by van Bergen et al. found that the number of books in the home helps predict early reading abilities, yet these gaps in book ownership persist.²

There are pernicious and persistent systemic barriers to children's book ownership. These gaps in where books are found are sometimes called "book deserts"—a geographic area where reading materials are challenging to obtain and was coined by Unite for Literacy.³ New York University researcher Dr. Susan Neuman points out that book deserts constrain the opportunity to come to school ready to learn.

Librarians, educators, and summer program leaders came ready to learn about this issue at the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) Annual Conference in October 2022. A panel presentation was convened to learn from successful programs that helped distribute books in summer learning programs. This discussion sparked the idea of a Moonshot Million Project to help program providers serving children who have

been historically excluded add books to their programmatic offerings.

Aaron Philip Dworkin, CEO of NSLA, says, "We urge you to join us in this effort to increase the human right of literacy, the love of good books, and exercise the skills needed in the complex act of reading for comprehension and joy. Through this campaign, we can help all children rise. Equitable home libraries filled with beautiful, affirming, and fun books are critical for our kids. We know summer programs can help in this effort and the enormous vision of equity and access for all our youth."

NSLA formed a working group to harness program providers together to think about ways to increase book ownership and distribute books in programs. Since the conference, interested program attendees have met to discuss ways to increase book ownership to youth in their programs and to help get the right books into kids' hands.

The Moonshot Million working group collectively aims to distribute one million books in summer programs in 2023. Here we examine book ownership, look at several successful programs and call out the systemic barriers to owning the right books for a home library many families face.



Elizabeth McChesney is a career-long Children's Librarian and Youth Services Administrator who serves as a consultant in youth services. She acts as Senior Advisor to several organizations including the National Summer Learning Association, Urban Libraries Council, and Laundry Literacy Coalition. A frequent speaker and writer, she is the author of several books for ALA Editions and is the 2021 recipient of the ALSC Distinguished Service Award.

The Benefits of Book Ownership

Research continues to grow that ties book ownership to success in reading. A University of Nevada research project shows that having even just twenty books in the home substantially impacts helping children achieve a higher level of education.⁴ This research shows that the more books, the greater the educational benefit for the reader. In fact, according to the study, the number of books in the home has as much of an impact on the child's educational attainment as the parent's education levels.⁵

Another study finds that access to print in the home is a strong predictor of reading achievement. This study shows that the home environment strongly predicts socioeconomic status. The study found this was true for children at age ten and again at age 15.⁶

According to a study by the National Literacy Trust, young people who have books of their own are more likely than their non-book-owning counterparts to agree with the statement that they become better at reading the more they read. They are also nearly twice as likely to agree with the statement that reading is "cool."⁷

Similarly, young people who own their books are less likely than those who do not have books of their own to agree with the statements that they prefer to watch TV to reading, that they cannot find things to read that interest them, and that they would be embarrassed if their friends saw them reading.⁸

Access to books in early childhood has been proven to have a persistent impact on vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension.⁹

In 2010 Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) conducted a meta-analysis of research studies about access to books and found that giving children access to print materials is associated with positive behavioral, educational, and psychological outcomes.¹⁰

A review of the research shows the following benefits to books in the home:

- better recognition of sounds and letters
- knowledge of a broader range of vocabulary
- increased listening skills
- a deeper understanding of how stories work
- instrumental tools in helping children learn the basics of reading
- increased enjoyment of books
- increased belief in books as enjoyable
- increased and sustained reading time¹¹

Inequitable Access to Books in the Home

Despite the benefits of book ownership to children and many positive and unique delivery systems, book ownership in this country is different for children based on socioeconomic factors. According to Dr. Molly Ness, director of the Coalition for Literacy Equity, many children face systemic barriers to book ownership and live in book deserts.¹²

Moreover, according to Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, forty-five percent of our nation's children live in neighborhoods that lack public libraries and stores that sell books or in homes where books are an unaffordable or unfamiliar luxury.¹³ At the same time, two-thirds of the schools and programs in our nation's lowest-income neighborhoods cannot afford to buy books at retail prices. That means that today, 32.4 million American children go without books—even as study after study has shown that literacy is crucial to success in school, future earning potential, and the ability to contribute to the nation's economy.¹⁴

Ness says that "In communities that experience high poverty and systemic oppression, books are hard to come by."¹⁵

Book ownership disparities exist in both urban and rural areas. According to the US Department of Education, 61 percent of families living in high poverty have no books in their homes.¹⁶ This statistic means our nation's children are not all starting school with a level playing field and may not be ready for school.

Successful Book Give-Away Programs

Summer programs offer a rich opportunity to build in a book giveaway program or to offer high quality children's books as prizes or raffles. Building on the idea of using books as a part of summer programs, six successful and inspiring examples of book giveaways in summer programs were highlighted during the NSLA Conference.

The New York Public Library gave away five hundred thousand books during its 2022 summer learning program. The books were given out in person at branch libraries and during outreach events across the city. NYPL Director of Children's Services Lex Abenshon said, "Our goal was to increase both an engagement in reading at the library and a love of book ownership. We saw youth's ability to choose their book as critical in these efforts."

In partnership with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission and the San Francisco Unified School District, the **San Francisco Public Library** (SFPL) created and distributed book bundles to communities experiencing poverty or racial exclusion during their summer 2021 and 2022 program, Summer Stride. The book bundles featured age-appropriate, culturally affirming, and fun books and a unique activity guide to enhancing engagement with the books and culturally uplifting summer learning. Each bundle included a warm invitation to visit their local library and receive

another free book. Moreover, partners take great pride and care in distributing books directly to youth and families.

“We are always better when we work in community and partnership,” says SFPL Youth Services Manager Christy Estrovitz. “The Book Bundles allow us to build towards meaningful home libraries through trusted agencies directly serving youth we all want to reach. Together we spread library love and celebrate our youth and families in affirming ways.”

Araba Maze, aka Storybook Maze or The Radical Street Librarian, saw the need right outside her Baltimore, MD door and began reading culturally affirming books to youth in her neighborhood. “I was reading to my nieces one day on my stoop in Baltimore, and little kids started gathering around, and I was like, ‘Oh, OK, you guys can join us!’” she said. Maze began reading to the kids weekly and became inspired to become a children’s librarian. Now she is on a mission to end book deserts in Baltimore by placing book vending machines throughout the community.

As a United Way of Central Maryland Change Maker recipient, Araba works to bring culturally-affirming books to places where children most impacted by systemic barriers are likely to find them. Of the Moonshot Million campaign, Araba said, “Increasing book ownership through summer programs is a brilliant way to build home libraries and for kids to see themselves in books they are inspired to read. This can help with COVID learning loss and summer opportunity gaps.”

Google Kids & Family staff set out on a mission to buy books for kids as part of a corporate giving strategy. The staff landed on a project in Chicago, at the Cook County Department of Corrections. An early learning space is being created in the Maximum-Security Division Waiting Room, and to augment this, Google Kids is providing books for families during these visits.

A child and their loved one experiencing detainment can choose a book the child will take home and own. Says Dr. Nneka Jones-Tapia, a clinical psychologist and the head of Justice Initiatives at Chicago Beyond, “Allowing a parent and child to choose a book together not only helps build the child’s library, but it helps to break the cycle of trauma we see with families experiencing detainment. These books become physical symbols of family love.”

Jane Park, a senior content strategist at Google Kids & Family, adds, “For our team, this is a partnership opportunity we felt advances our values of caring for children and families. Our team has raised funds and purchased books for this project to increase equity and provide children and families with beautiful books during this vulnerable time in their lives.”

Dorothy Weintraub, vice president at **Scholastic**, added the commitment of Scholastic to helping children build book-rich home environments. “For 102 years, Scholastic has been committed to helping families develop their home libraries in meaningful ways,” Weintraub says. An example of their commitment to building home libraries can be seen in their partnership with the

Laundry Literacy Coalition (Too Small to Fail and Laundry Cares Foundation), in which Scholastic provides nearly five thousand books each summer to children participating in laundromat-based summer learning programs.

Mia Harding, chief impact officer at **The Literacy Lab**, says “We believe reading is a human right. Reading is the foundation for educational success and opportunities in life, yet many children are not given the time and skills to build this foundation.” Through The Literacy Lab’s Leading Men Fellowship, Black and Latino young men of color are placed in participating schools to help implement research-backed reading intervention strategies, model reading aloud, and build more equitable outcomes for youth in historically excluded school communities.

Harding says, “Books which are windows and mirrors are critical for our youth, and allowing kids to choose the book they most want is critical to building a successful home library. Summer programs have a tremendous opportunity to build these rich, at-home collections.”

Getting Book Distributions Right

We know that books matter and having a home library has been proven to substantially impact a child’s outcomes. However, what are the right books, and how can public libraries co-create collections for distribution with their communities?

Dr. Susan Neuman et al. looked at this along with geospatial mapping of book distribution in the City of Philadelphia in 2021. In this study, she also looked at the right books to include in library or community-led book distribution programs. Her research found that the number of books often superseded the quality and content of books for many program providers.¹⁷

Additionally, she adds, “Often parents were neither consulted nor asked to serve on selection committees for the books in giveaway programs.”¹⁸ Neuman’s recommendations include creating focus groups of parents so that different types of books, like decodable books, readers, and biographies that are racially uplifting, will be included in selections for book distributions.

Adds Dr. Molly Ness, “Beautiful picture books, lushly illustrated, may not always be the most welcome book. A decodable book that can help a child to read may be closer to families’ goals for reading time and home library development. The important thing is that we respectfully include families in selecting titles.”

Lisa Dwyer, director of Strategic Operations for the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEARS), runs a Mayor’s Summer Reading Club throughout greater Atlanta in partnership with the Mayor’s Office. A frequent collaborator and partner with her public libraries and other family-oriented programs, Dwyer says,

Building home libraries of books is essential to our summer program strategy. When families see themselves in books, it

increases the motivation to read and engage with the book, and this is the ultimate goal: to end book deserts and give each child equitable opportunities. In the summer of 2022, we successfully used multi-lingual versions of the book *I'll Build You a Bookcase* (by Jean Ciborowski Fahey) to encourage and celebrate home libraries for our families.¹⁹

A Children's Author Contributes and Reflects

Author Fahey spent a long career at Harvard Teaching Hospital, where she tested children for reading and learning disabilities. She says, "I saw that children need books to practice language and to have lots of choices each day."

In 2020, she answered an OpenIDEO call for a book to help inspire a love of reading and books in the home. Her book, *I'll Build You a Bookcase* (Lee & Low, 2021), was not only the winning submission but is an inspiring two-generational story of families reading from a home bookcase full of books that grow with the children portrayed on the pages.

"I wrote this story because I wanted a way to reach our tiniest of children," Fahey says. "By reading to them as soon as they are born, no time wasted, we set them on the great journey toward literacy. At the same time, reading strengthens the bonds that

allow children to feel safe and loved by the important people in their lives."

The William Penn Foundation has purchased twenty-five thousand books to donate to families with young children. "Talking and reading with children is how we lay the groundwork for strong readers in the future, even when it seems like they are too young to understand. This book seeks to engage children with its emotionally resonant writing and storyline while giving ideas to adults about how to support early language development," says Elliot Weinbaum, program director at William Penn Foundation (<https://williampennfoundation.org/>). The book is available in English plus four bilingual editions, including Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, and Vietnamese.

Fahey says, "Building a home library is essential for setting children on a path to life and learning success. Congratulations to the Moonshot Million working group at NSLA for leveraging summer programs as a vehicle for helping so many kids achieve and grow in this way." &

For more information on the Moonshot Million initiative or to join the NSLA working group, contact Liz McChesney at lmcchesney@summerlearning.org or lizmccchesney6712@gmail.com.

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