

DOLLAR GENERAL AFTERSCHOOL LITERACY ISSUE BRIEF

Taking a Year-Round Approach to Literacy

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The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with Dollar General Literacy Foundation, is proud to present this issue brief examining the vital role afterschool programs play in building students' literacy skills. This issue brief will focus on the year-round support needed to help students with their reading, writing and critical thinking skills. This issue brief will also delve into the variety of ways afterschool and summer learning programs are taking a year-round approach to literacy, helping students catch up and keep up.

After walking into the Redhound Enrichment afterschool program in rural Corbin, Kentucky, you might think that you've interrupted a celebration: the room loud and slightly chaotic. Upon closer inspection of the surroundings, however, you see that the group of elementary schoolers at one table are reading about different cultures and discussing the countries they plan to write about. In another corner of the room, you find a group of middle schoolers working one-on-one with elementary school students to help improve their reading skills. In yet another area, the mix of older and younger students that comprise the program's debate club are excitedly preparing to argue the opposing sides of an issue pulled from last night's headlines. A separate group of high schoolers sit in the café area, rehearsing their lines for an upcoming musical. After the daily check-in with students' school-day teachers, a staff member works on homework assignments with a few students who are struggling in English.

This bustling scene is, in fact, an afterschool and summer learning program operating with clear goals and intentional programming. In its approach to literacy education, Redhound Enrichment focuses on the whole child, integrating reading and writing into a range of activities that show students the ways in which literacy is relevant to their lives. Because the program is open year-round, Redhound Enrichment staff is able to keep kids' development in reading, writing and critical thinking on track during the school year and the summer months, when many fall behind. During the 2014-2015 school year, half of Redhound Enrichment students who typically perform below that of their peers scored at the proficient or distinguished level in Kentucky's reading exams, compared to the state average of 37 percent. And 100 percent of the program's struggling students made gains in their reading grades.

Afterschool and summer learning programs like Redhound Enrichment are instrumental in efforts to improve literacy in the U.S. It was estimated that more than 90 million adults in the U.S. possess only basic or below basic literacy skills—the skills needed to read and understand very short and easy documents and text.¹ These are the critical skills one needs as an adult to perform everyday activities and make important life decisions, from applying for a job to understanding apartment rental agreements or home mortgages.

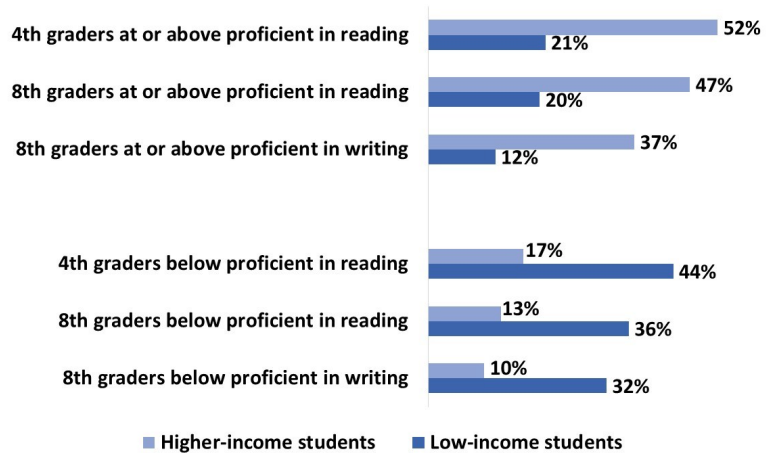
Not There Yet—Too Few Students are Reaching Literacy Proficiency

Unfortunately, the state of adult literacy is unsurprising when looking at the status of literacy proficiency among U.S. students, where just 1 out of every 3 students is reading at or above “proficient” for his or her grade level.¹ In 2015, 36 percent of fourth graders and 34 percent of eighth graders performed at or above the reading proficient level, and in 2013,² the most recent assessment of high school seniors, 38 percent of seniors scored at or above the proficient level. In the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment, only 27 percent of eighth grade and 12th grade students scored at or above the proficient level in writing.³

The NAEP scores also reveal the struggles that students from low-income families face regarding literacy proficiency compared to their higher-income peers. The 2015 Nation’s Report Card found that less than 1 in 4 fourth graders (21 percent) eligible for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program (FRPL) are at or above proficient in reading, compared to more than half of students who do not qualify for the program (52 percent).^{4,ii} Among eighth grade students, the gap in literacy proficiency between students from lower and higher-income families is just as large, with 1 in 5 eighth graders eligible for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program at or above the proficient level in reading, compared to close to half of their higher-income peers (47 percent).⁵

Students in lower-income families are also more likely to perform “below basic” compared to students from higher-income families. More than 2 in 5 fourth graders who qualify for the FRPL program (44 percent) received a below basic reading achievement level, more than 2.5 times higher than their higher-income peers (17 percent).⁶ Similarly, eighth graders qualifying for the FRPL program are almost 3 times as likely to score below the basic level reading achievement compared to eighth graders ineligible for the program (36 percent vs. 13 percent).⁷

TABLE 1.
Students from low-income families are less likely to score at or above proficient and more likely to score below basic in both reading and writing.



i. NAEP scores are categorized into three achievement levels: “basic,” “proficient” and “advanced.” Students who do not receive an average reading score of basic are classified as performing in the “below basic” range.

ii. Qualifying for the Federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program is commonly used as a proxy for families living in or near poverty.

Writing is another area in which a gap exists between students from lower and higher-income families. The 2011 NAEP found that low-income students were less likely to perform at or above proficient, as well as more likely to perform below the basic level in writing, than students from higher-income families. Approximately 1 in 10 eighth grade students who qualified for the FRPL program (12 percent) scored at or above proficient, compared to more than 1 in 3 students who did not qualify for the program (37 percent). On the other end of the scale, eighth graders from lower-income families were three times more likely than their higher-income peers to perform below the basic level in writing (32 percent vs. 10 percent).⁸

Summer Matters

The need for activities and lessons to bolster students' reading, writing and critical thinking skills is not only confined to the school year. Research has found that during the summer months, students can lose some of what they learned during the school year. One meta-analysis reports that students lose up to one month of "grade-level equivalent skills relative to national norms."⁹ The same study also found that the summer months impacted students differently, depending on their social-economic status. The study reported that learning loss was greater for students in low-income families compared to their middle-class peers during the summer months; students from low-income families lost reading skills while students from middle class families made gains in reading. This change in reading achievement during the summer created an approximate three month learning gap between lower-income and middle-class students. Another study that examined the long-term impact of differences in summer learning opportunities found that the gap in achievement between ninth graders from low-income families and their higher-income peers can largely be traced back to unequal access to summer learning.¹⁰

Although the percentage of students taking part in a summer learning program is growing—from 1 in 4 families reporting that at least one child attended a summer learning program in 2008, to 1 in 3 families in 2013—more than half of families of school-age students reported that they wanted their children to be enrolled in a summer learning program in 2014.¹¹

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Taking a Year-Round Approach to Literacy

Last year, the average reading score for fourth and eighth graders in all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, continued to fall below the proficient achievement level. Additionally, all 50 states saw a wide gap in average reading scores when looking at income level.¹² There was not a single state where the average reading score of students from higher-income families—at both the fourth grade and eighth grade levels—was less than 13 percentage points higher than students from low-income families. These numbers make evident that more must be done—both during the school year and summer—to help boost students’ literacy proficiency.

Programs that are open and offer a medley of literacy-related activities year-round can build on students’ school-day lessons during the school year and take advantage of the summer months, helping to ensure that students are ready and caught up by the fall to start the new school year. An ever-growing body of research points to the role afterschool programs play supporting students from elementary school through high school to make academic gains—including literacy—as well as improve engagement in school, which in turn can help school-day performance.

For instance, an evaluation of the YMCA High School Youth Institute—a year-round, community-based program serving low-income, urban communities—found that students actively participating in the program made greater gains in their English language arts standardized test scores compared to students not in the program, while also seeing greater improvements in their grade point average.¹³ An evaluation that examined Beyond the Bell in Los Angeles, California—afterschool and summer learning programs in more than 600 schools serving elementary, middle and high school students—reported that students in the program performed better on their California Standards Test scores and California High School Exit Exams in English language arts compared to their peers who did not participate in the program.¹⁴ The evaluation also found that students attending the program were more likely to attend school than non-participants, with 70 percent of participants reporting a school-day attendance of 96 percent or higher versus 56 percent of their non-participating peers. Another evaluation of Beyond the Bell found that during the 2013 school year, close to one-third of students who were English language learners (ELL) and classified as “high attenders” of the program (32 percent) were redesignated as fluent English proficient, compared to 1 in 5 ELL students who did not attend the program.

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An Interview with the 2016 Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Award Winner

Redhound Enrichment Afterschool Program

What led to the start of Redhound Enrichment?

In 1991, the Corbin Independent School District conducted a needs assessment of the community and found that a significant number of families in the area were working parents in critical need of a safe place for their children to go when school let out. At the start, Redhound Enrichment was part of a family resource center, focusing solely on providing a safe environment for third, fourth and fifth graders. However, in the mid-1990s, the school district received funding to become a 21st Century Community Learning Center, and Redhound Enrichment was able to incorporate academic enrichment into the program and take advantage of the after school hours to not only keep kids safe, but support their academic success and overall wellbeing. We now serve elementary, middle and high school students and provide a mix of academic supports, hands-on activities, physical activity, and opportunities to connect and collaborate with their peers.



What aspect of your program do you think is most important to your program's success?

Our holistic approach to learning—focusing on our students' academic, social and physical wellbeing—is a cornerstone of our program. We want our students have a well-rounded learning experience when at Redhound Enrichment, so we provide enrichment activities that build on our students' school-day lessons, but we do not replicate what they do during the school day. A project-based learning model helps students fully engage in activities, transforming a potentially dry subject area into a fun, interactive and interesting endeavor. For instance, to help our students develop their literacy and comprehension skills, we embed literacy through our program's thematic instruction. Right now, our students are learning about cultures around the world. Students are able to choose which countries they would like to learn more about and staff help them find out more about the country. Students are reading about different cultures all over the world, discovering what the different school systems look like, writing to a student in the country and sharing their findings with others in the program. During the summer, we are able to use a thematic camp approach and extend our project-based learning. One summer, our theme was "Road Trip USA" and each week concentrated on a geographic region of the U.S. The first week students took part in "Go West, Young Person!" where they learned about camping, wagon trains and westward expansion. The public library provided books centered around the Old West, special

Redhound Enrichment

Location

Corbin, Kentucky

Average Number of Students Served During the School Year

77

Average Number of Students Served During the Summer

131

Year Started

1991

Main Sources of Funding

- 21st Century Community Learning Centers
- Foundations/Non-profits
- Private Donors
- Program Fees

guests delivered storytelling and tall tales popular during the time period, and students went on a field trip to a local dude ranch. These experiences bring the subject matter to life for our students and create the buy-in and connection to school and learning.

What do you think is most helpful to your program’s ability to provide literacy supports to your students?

Our program’s strong relationship with our schools is key. Redhound Enrichment is viewed as a part of the school, rather than a separate entity. Our staff are in regular communications with our students’ school-day teachers, which helps us match our students with the individualized supports they need. We know which students need extra help and what curriculum is being covered in classes.

What do you think has helped Redhound Enrichment’s sustainability in your community?

The community partnerships that Redhound Enrichment has are what make our program fly! In addition to the partnership we have with our schools, our community partners help us provide our students a variety of activities and resources—from field trips to speakers who can talk to our kids about college and career readiness. A sampling of the groups that we work with include the Parks and Recreation department, library, local museums, police department, animal shelter, senior center and local university. Strong community partnerships are extremely important for an afterschool program located in a rural community. Without them, we would not have been able to grow from a program serving 100 students per year at one site to a program that serves more than 1,300 students at three separate sites.

How will Redhound Enrichment use the \$10,000 Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Award?

We plan to put the Dollar General Afterschool Literacy Award toward professional development in literacy instruction for our staff. Investment in a program’s staff is incredibly important, and we want to make sure that our staff are supported. This award benefits our staff, our kids and our program as a whole.

Afterschool in Action

Programs that provide the extra support students need to develop their reading, writing and critical thinking skills and find fun and engaging ways to get students excited about literacy year round can be found in urban and rural communities alike, from Seattle, Washington to Corbin, Kentucky.

Providing project-based learning to foster long-term student engagement.

Throughout the school year and summer months, students in **Simpson Street Free Press's afterschool program** hone their literacy skills by researching topics, writing articles and editing one another's work for five different student newspapers published across Dane County, Wisconsin. The year-round program retains almost all of the same students in its afterschool and summer learning programs, with 95 percent of the students served during the school year also participating during the summer. Simpson Street Free Press credits its high retention rate to treating students as journalists, running the afterschool program like a newsroom, publishing students' work and creating a pipeline for students to advance from reporters and writers to editors and instructors. The project-based approach of the program—where students are given ongoing assignments that include reading, synthesizing, writing and publishing newspapers book reviews, book trailers, and blogs that they can share with their friends and family—encourages students to stay involved in the program.

At the end of 2015, Simpson Street Free Press, which was previously awarded the Coming Up Taller award, now known as the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, found that 91 percent of its students improved their overall GPA. Additionally, approximately 80 percent of its students showed improvements in their school-day attendance within two semesters.

Building and sustaining strong partnerships to bolster activities and services offered.

Located in Boston, Massachusetts, the **Red Oak After School and Summer Program** (Red Oak) boasts a bevy of strong partnerships with schools and the local community to help ensure that its students have the resources and supports they need to do well. In addition to being housed in the Josiah Quincy Elementary School, Red Oak works closely with schools to align its programming with the academic goals and curriculum taught during the school day. Community partners also play a large role in Red Oak's offerings, helping the program to provide field trips and workshops, among other activities, for its students. Partnering with a wide variety of local community programs, including the Museum of Fine Arts and Big Sisters and Big Brothers, and local universities such as Tufts University, Emerson College and Northeastern University, Red Oak has been able to offer students an array of activities, including learning the history of rock and roll with

daily reading about the lives of musicians and linking health related topics to research and presentations by students. In the upcoming year, the program plans to collaborate with Northeastern University’s mural club and Masters of Fine Arts program and combine students reading art-focused stories with painting murals based on those works.

The program found, through the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO), that its students saw improvements in critical life skills such as perseverance, behavior and reflectiveness from the start of the program to the end. For example, during the baseline assessment, approximately 1 in 10 students (13 percent) received a score of a 4 or 5 in “persisting on tasks even when experiencing difficulty” and “showing consideration for peers” but by the final assessment, 63 percent of students received a 4 or 5 in persistence and 75 percent of students received a 4 or 5 for showing consideration for peers.

Incorporating a workshop format to embed literacy in programming.

Afterschool and summer learning programs that incorporate a workshop component into their programming have the ability to scaffold activities and lessons from the school year into the summer months. For example, during the school year **Deep Center** in Savannah, Georgia, offers the Young Author Project. The Young Author Project is made up of creative writing workshops that connect middle school students with local authors, poets and journalists who serve as creative writing mentors for students over the course of 11 weeks. The project culminates with the publication of students’ work in a bound anthology, a live reading and book launch. Students who complete the Young Author Project are then able to advance to Deep Center’s Block by Block program—an intermediate-level program with a focus on community engagement. Students research the history of their community, interviewing family members, neighbors, leaders, seniors

“I felt abandoned and unwanted all my life. My only way to defend myself was to fight everyone, but I didn’t think how fighting would affect me in the long-run. I joined Deep and found out things about myself I never knew. I can write poetry. I released my emotions in my writing, and I felt free. I began to write poems about how I felt. Deep changed my life.”

- Andre, Deep Center student

and others in the area that can help them to piece together a narrative of the community. The Block by Block program continues through the summer, building off of the projects started during the school year. Students revisit interviews, identify key interviews, and develop content to put together in a broadcast or podcast format. Deep Center evaluated its students' English language art (ELA) grades and found that 60 percent of students saw an improvement in their ELA grades after completing the program's Young Author Project.

Engaging underserved communities and bridging cultural divides through a culturally sensitive approach to literacy.

The **Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) Youth Program** brings academic and culturally relevant programming to low-income, refugee, immigrant and English language learner students living in Seattle, Washington. ReWA was first established as an organization to help refugee and immigrant women find community, gain independence and navigate their new home in the U.S., but has since expanded its services and launched its youth program in 1999. The organization's beginnings as a cultural hub—focusing on culture and community—can be seen through the supports provided in its youth program. For example, ReWA Youth Program employs multilingual staff to offer students reading support in their native language, with more than half of program staff speaking multiple languages. ReWA staff also lead parent education workshops on best literacy practices to use at home and offer activities to encourage parents' involvement in their child's education. During the summer, ReWA Youth Program changes gears and engages students in a long-term literacy specific project, providing a five-week long Young Author workshop to middle and high school students. Students participating in the program's 2015 summer workshop studied folktales and short stories, incorporating what they read about and discussed into their own original pieces of short fiction.

The youth program has grown from serving 15 refugee and immigrant students in 1999 to more than 550 students from 16 Seattle public schools in 2014. Through a partnership with the Seattle Public Schools, ReWA Youth Program is able to monitor the academic progress and disciplinary records of its students. Based on the most recently available 2014 data, among students participating in ReWA Youth Program's afterschool program, 78 percent of students made gains in their standardized English language arts test scores and 80 percent of the program's elementary English language learner students advanced a level on their English language proficiency exam. Among ReWA Youth Program's summer school students, 92 percent increased their fluency levels and 93 percent increased their reading comprehension levels.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear that much more needs to be done to make certain that all students, in particular students in low-income families, are given the necessary tools and skills to increase their literacy proficiency. With just 1 in 3 U.S. students reading at or above proficiency, there is no doubt that there is much room for improvement. Programs that offer afterschool and summer learning opportunities can deliver the additional literacy supports that students need, taking advantage of the hours after school and during the summer months. Throughout the school year, these programs are able to align programming with their students' school-day lessons. During the summer months, programs are able to expand upon activities and keep students engaged in learning during a time that often results in the "summer slide." The flexible and adaptive nature of afterschool and summer learning programs allow them to teach reading, writing and critical thinking skills in fun and creative ways—including hands-on projects and meaningful opportunities for students to have a voice in activities. Together with schools, afterschool and summer learning programs are integral partners in ensuring that students possess the literacy skills that help them reach their full potential in school, career and life.

Endnotes

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