

# **READ FOR SUCCESS:** Combating the Summer Learning Slide in America



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Fundamental



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# READ FOR SUCCESS: Combating the Summer Learning Slide in America

The Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) Read for Success research study set out to test and confirm the efficacy of a new model to reduce the summer learning loss that leads to the achievement gap between children from economically disadvantaged communities and their wealthier or more advantaged peers, who have greater access to learning and literacy support. The Read for Success model was tested over two years across 16 states, with more than 33,000 second, third and fourth grade students participating.

Key findings include:

- Students who participated in the study improved their reading proficiency over the summer. On average, 57 percent of those students tested showed statistically significant improvements in reading proficiency from spring to fall each year, instead of 80 percent of children showing loss in reading proficiency (the current finding).
- Nearly half of all third grade students—a critical grade for literacy skill building in academic content areas—increased reading proficiency.
- Students performing below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile in each grade—often categorized as those children having special needs—showed the greatest increase in reading proficiency.
- Even students with strong literacy skills (at or above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile) increased their reading proficiency.
- Schools with the greatest improvements incorporated a full culture change and had strong parental involvement.

This research report briefly explains the literacy crisis in America, highlights opportunities to break the cycle of illiteracy and proposes solutions for strengthening today's schools and students.

## BACKGROUND:

The United States is a prosperous country, yet many Americans are not able to realize their dreams of securing a good-paying job, buying a house and raising children who are capable of achieving their full potential. **The American Dream is at risk because millions of Americans lack the basic literacy skills to be productive members of society, the workforce and even their own families.**

### America's Literacy Crisis

America's literacy crisis has reached epidemic proportions with a never-ending cycle in sight for children and adults. More than 93 million adults in this country—**nearly half the adult population—read at or below the basic level** needed to contribute successfully to society.<sup>1</sup> Families living in poverty are especially vulnerable to crippling literacy challenges that prevent them from fully participating in society.

Learning begins at birth, and it is important for children to be engaged in storytelling and interacting with the written word through books at a young age. By the age of three, children from wealthier families have heard about 30 million more words than children from lower-income families. **For children entering kindergarten, 34 percent lack the basic language skills needed** to learn how to read.<sup>1</sup>

By the time children from low-income families enter grade school, their ability to read is already an issue.

*“Summer learning loss prevents many young people from learning how to read, contributing to the \$225 billion annual cost of illiteracy in this country. Providing high-quality summer learning opportunities for all young people is both a moral and economic imperative that we can no longer afford to ignore.”*

—Sarah Pitcock, CEO, National Summer Learning Association



Once these children fall behind in reading proficiency, it becomes especially difficult for them to catch up with their peers. Children who start out with reading difficulties or knowledge gaps are likely to remain poor readers and ultimately fall behind or fail in school. One of the reasons students drop out of school is that they are not academically successful.



In the United States, more than 8,000 students quit high school every day, limiting their economic opportunity and ability to become strong members of the workforce.<sup>iv</sup> According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study among millennials between the ages of 25-32, today's high school-only graduates earn \$17,500 less per year than those with a four-year college degree. This is not a result of improved earnings for college graduates; rather, life is becoming increasingly difficult for high school-only graduates. Unsurprisingly, for those without a high school diploma or equivalent, the earnings gap is even greater.

### Summer is the time that students either leap ahead or fall behind

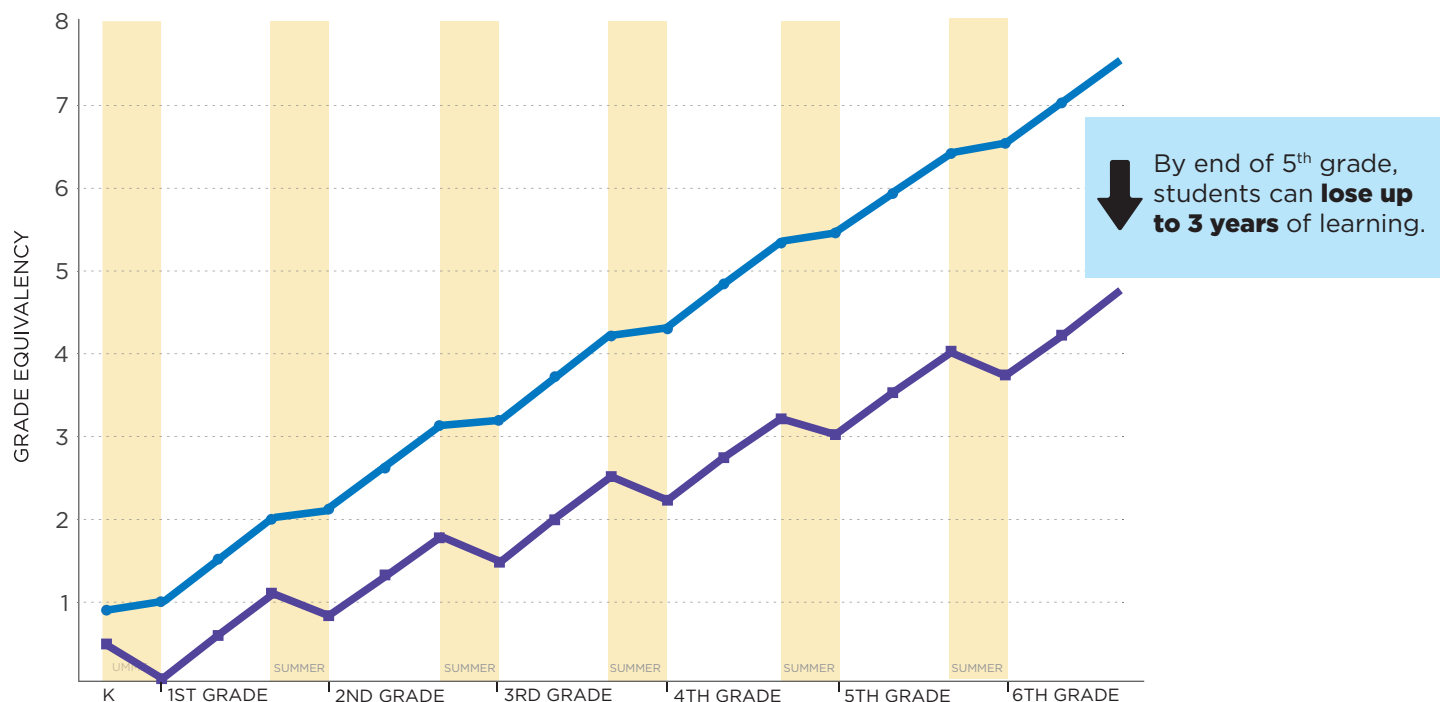
In the summer months, all children are at risk of losing some of the learning obtained during the school year. This is especially true for children from low-income families. **More than 80 percent of children from economically disadvantaged communities lose reading skills over the summer** because they lack access to books, learning resources, ongoing conversations with their families and enrichment opportunities such as trips to the library, bookstore, or museum.

Students who lose reading ability over the summer rarely catch up. Over time, **this loss over the summer can add up to the equivalent of three years of reading loss by the end of fifth grade.** If left unattended, the gap in reading achievement can widen to four years of reading loss by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade for those students who have not already dropped out of school.

### SUMMER READING LOSS

More than 80% of children from economically disadvantaged communities can lose one to three months reading skills over the summer.

- Summer
- Students from favored economic backgrounds
- Students from poor economic backgrounds



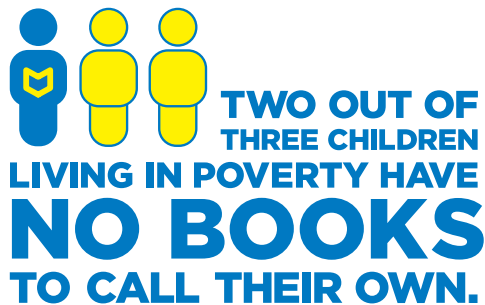
Source: Alexander, K.L., D. R. Entwisle, and L.S. Olson. 2007. "Lasting Consequences of Summer Learning Gap." American Sociological Review 72 (4): 167-80; professional presentation by Dr. Alexander, February 12, 2015.

## Books play an essential role in child development and learning, but many don't have access to books

From stimulating the brains of babies and toddlers to helping older children better understand the world around them, books provide critical educational building blocks. Good books with illustrations explain and visually connect content to words on a page. Reading helps spark the imagination and provides basic tools for future success in school and beyond. People who develop a love of reading are more productive throughout their lives and help create stronger communities.

Recent studies suggest that three factors may be key to reading achievement:

- **Access to a lot of good, high-quality books**
- **Book ownership**
- **Child's choice in selection.<sup>v</sup>**



Unfortunately, **of the 16 million children living in poverty in the United States, two-thirds do not have books in their homes.**<sup>vi</sup> It's hard to imagine a childhood without books, but this is a sad reality for many children. The situation can become even worse during the summer, when access to schools and libraries is limited. Even visits to libraries presuppose that families have transportation, gas money and time to travel.

Across the country, not all counties have libraries, especially in rural or remote areas. For counties that do have libraries, some reduce hours in the summer, making them harder for parents and children to access.

### Socio-economic realities

Most parents want their children to have books, but impoverished families are often forced to make tough choices when determining which non-essential items to purchase for the home. For many, books are a luxury that they cannot afford.

However, if the United States is to be a competitive player in the global marketplace, we must ensure that all children have access to essential literacy tools. There are currently **more than 4 million job openings in our country attributable to a lack of sufficiently educated workers.** According to employers looking to fill jobs in 2014, the areas in which they experienced the greatest challenges finding skilled candidates included computer and mathematical occupations (71%), architecture and engineering (70%), management (66%), and health care (56%). Overall, **literacy problems cost American businesses more than \$225 billion** in lost productivity each year.<sup>viii</sup>

*“Pamlico County is fortunate enough to have a library, but it is 35 miles away from some of the families that live in the far end of the county. Working parents have to have the time and the money to get there, and often they must make a choice between gas for work or gas for books. Unfortunately, these issues from the daily lives of our parents limit children’s access to books.”*

—Wanda Dawson, Superintendent,  
Pamlico County Schools

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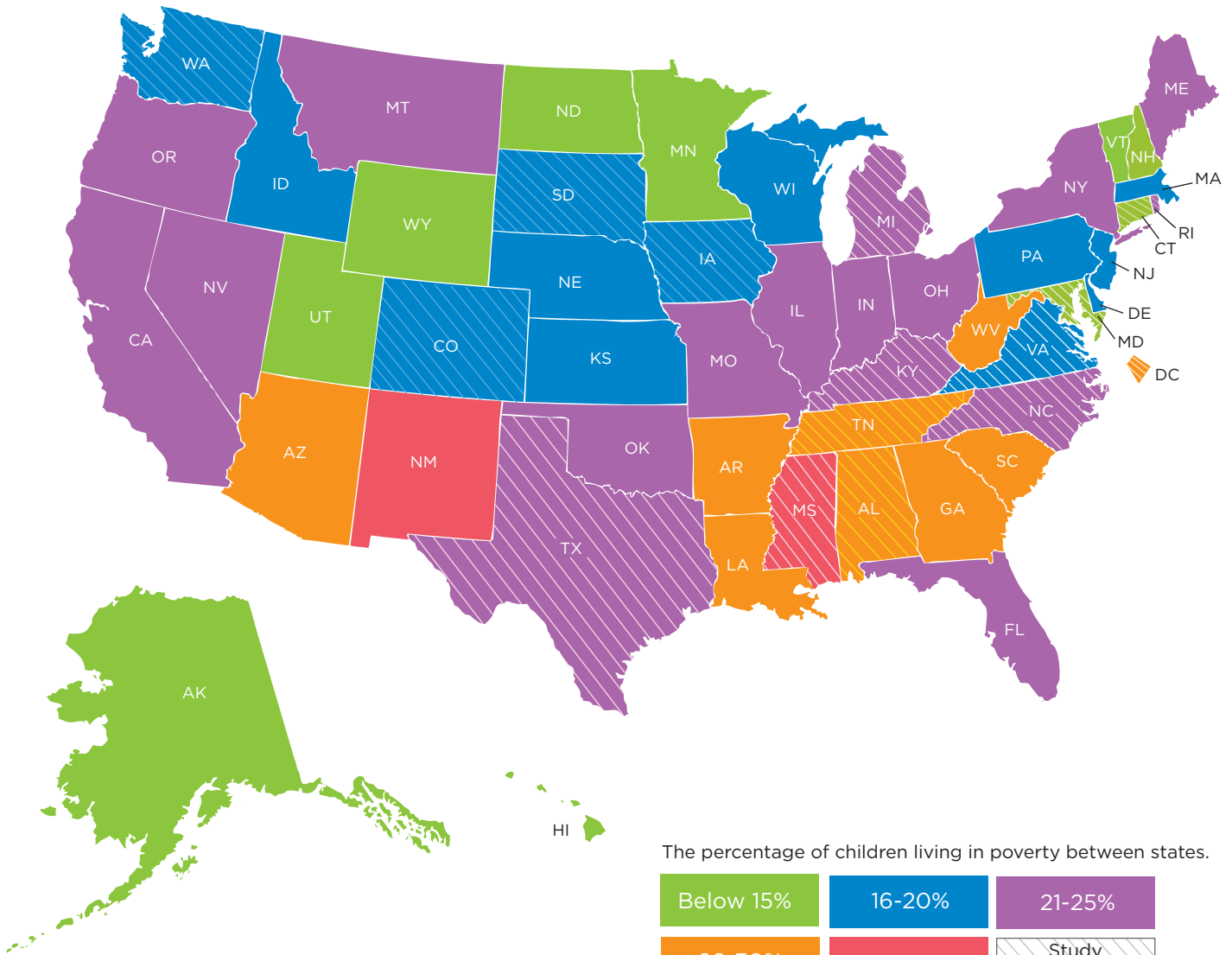
**But perhaps the greatest cost to us as a society is one that can't be measured—the lost opportunity for thousands of children who go through life without the ability to read well. If we don't act now, children from economically disadvantaged communities will always be at risk, and so will America.**

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# POVERTY IN THE U.S. BY STATE

The share of children under age 18 who live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. In 2013, a family of two adults and two children fell in the "poverty" category if their annual income fell below \$23,624.\*



## RIF study participants by state

- |                      |                |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Alabama              | Mississippi    |
| Colorado             | North Carolina |
| Connecticut          | Rhode Island   |
| District of Columbia | South Dakota   |
| Iowa                 | Tennessee      |
| Kentucky             | Texas          |
| Maryland             | Virginia       |
| Michigan             | Washington     |

\* Source: KidsCount.org

## SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH FINDINGS:



Students from Forest Hills Elementary School in Danville, VA measure bubble gum bubbles following the reading of POP! The Invention of Bubble Gum. The exercise is part of the STEAM enrichment activities used in the research.

The Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) Read for Success research study set out to test and confirm the efficacy of a new model to reduce summer learning loss in children from economically disadvantaged communities.

For the study, RIF used the reading section on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). This test is valid, reliable and nationally normed. The score on this test provides a reading level (in the case of this study, a Lexile) with which books can be matched. The ITBS also has different iterations that test the same skills, so it is easy to measure growth over time. The testing for this study occurred in spring and fall, measuring the reading ability level over the gap of the summer for two years.

The hypothesis of the study was that summer learning loss in reading proficiency could be cut in half—from 80 percent to 40 percent—by providing books and literacy materials for both the classroom and for children to take home and keep, as well as professional development for teachers, tools to enhance

parental involvement and other enrichment opportunities for children and their families. Improvement in reading proficiency was not part of the study's expectations.

### Students who participated in the study improved their reading proficiency over the summer

On average, 57 percent of those students tested showed statistically significant improvements in reading proficiency from spring to fall each year. Instead of 80 percent of children showing loss in reading proficiency (the current finding), use of the RIF model helped reverse the trend with stunning gains.

### Students in third grade—a critical grade for literacy skill building—increased reading proficiency

Nearly half of all third grade students tested improved their reading scores. This is especially significant, as millions of American children get to fourth grade without learning to read proficiently,<sup>ix</sup> which puts them at increased risk of dropping out of high school and minimizes their lifelong earning potential.

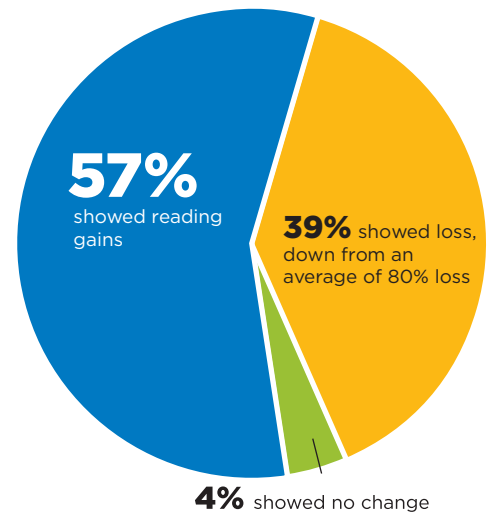
### Students in each grade performing below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile—often categorized as those children having special needs—showed the greatest increase in reading proficiency

- Second graders: 74 percent met or exceeded expected reading scores
- Third graders: 81 percent met or exceeded expected reading scores
- Fourth graders: 72 percent met or exceeded expected reading scores

### Even students with strong reading proficiency (at or above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile) showed gains, indicating that the Read for Success model is appropriate for all children.

## STUNNING GAINS

The RIF Read for Success model helped reverse the trend of summer learning loss for more than half the children in the study.



## Schools with the greatest improvement incorporated a full culture change and had strong parental involvement

Schools that experienced full participation in all six aspects of the RIF model enjoyed higher gain scores. In addition, teachers who used the classroom books and incorporated them into the grade-level curriculum—using them as the “informational texts” which are so pivotal in learning the content areas of math, science and social studies—saw greater gains. When schools were transformed into a literacy-rich environment, students achieved greater results. (Based on individual state assessments, some schools reported that children also showed improvements in math and science—an unanticipated corollary gain.)

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

### Schools and classrooms provide access to and choice of high-quality books

Providing access to books that children can choose on their own is a critical component of the Read for Success model. When children have books readily available to them, they are motivated and empowered to read even more than what is required, helping improve overall outcomes and success in school. In addition, new, current books to use in a classroom allow teachers or media specialists to extend learning in key academic content areas.

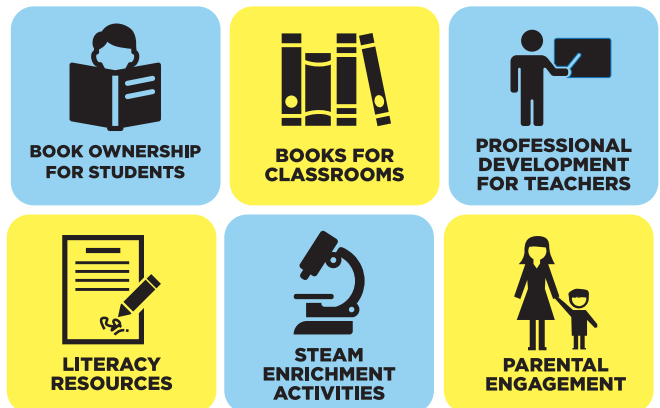
### Schools consider use of the model as a Response to Intervention requirement

Students whose Lexile reader measures were in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile or below saw significant gains during the research study. To improve test scores and motivate students to learn, school systems can employ the six-part Read for Success model described below as an inexpensive way to address intervention.

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**The Read for Success model's six components all relate to informational texts in science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM) themes**

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### School systems use Title 1 funds to implement best practices and improve scores

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), the purpose of Title 1 funding is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.”

A basic principle of Title 1 states that schools with large concentrations of low-income children—determined by the number of students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs—will receive supplemental funds to assist in meeting students’ educational goals.

Already, school districts who participated in the Read for Success study have applied for and been granted the use of Title 1 funds to continue to employ the model in select communities.

### RIF needs to conduct additional research:

Although the initial two-year study showed positive results, additional testing is needed to answer questions based on sample, individual schools and length of intervention.



## ABOUT THE RESEARCH:

Launched in 2012 as part of a U.S. Department of Education Innovative Approaches to Literacy grant, Read for Success was designed to determine how schools and communities in the poorest and/or most rural areas could address summer learning loss—and ultimately the achievement gap—through access to opportunity, books, and learning resources.

**The RIF Read for Success model reached a sample of 33,000 second, third and fourth grade students from 173 schools in 41 school districts across 16 states. More than 760,000 books,** almost all of which had strong emphases on STEAM themes, were distributed to children, classrooms and media centers. In identifying books appropriate for the summer distributions, some of the books were field-tested among children with similar demographics of the study sample. Because books at the lowest reading levels often seem too “childish” or “babyish” for elementary school aged children, second, third and fourth graders were asked to serve as an “editorial board,” identifying which books they would “never” read or carry around. In this way, even the lowest level books had been chosen not only by experts but by children themselves.



### SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS\*

URBANICITY		POVERTY LEVEL	
40%	Urban	77%	High
29%	Rural	22%	Mid-high
32%	Other	1%	Mid-low
		n/a	Low

STUDENT POPULATION	
34%	Hispanic
28%	White
19%	Black
14%	Other
5%	American Indian

\*2014 Test Results

Lexile reader measures were obtained in the spring and fall over a two-year period using the reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Of the student population who participated in the study, 5,527 children were tested over the entire two-year study (four “matched” scores) and more than 10,000 children had both a pre-test and a post-test (two “matched” scores).

The Read for Success model provides a year-round intervention to help supply educators, students and families with resources to ensure that students are reading interesting books with rich academic content and vocabulary at their approximate reading levels during the school year—for read-alouds in the classroom/media center or independent reading as directed by the teacher/media specialist—and also during summer months. Given the success of the study, RIF believes students from school districts that employ the Read for Success model have the potential to reduce their summer learning loss, as well as immerse themselves in the academic content and language needed for future success in school and beyond.

In addition to placing an emphasis on books that incorporate STEAM themes, this model gives an increased focus on informational texts with strong non-fiction ties, both for those books used in the classroom as well as those that children choose to read over the summer. These types of books feature material that sets the stage for learning in areas children are introduced to around third grade—when they are reading to learn as opposed to learning to read. Books with clear pictures or illustrations help children associate “hard,” infrequently-used words with concepts or ideas; these kinds of books aid learning in developmentally appropriate ways.

Whether Common Core or state Content Standards are used, the books, materials, and activities that promote and support learning about academic content areas are critical to younger children. They provide the context and background for the more complex academic content as it presents itself in middle grades and high school—in science, math and social studies. The 8,000 plus number of children who drop out of school every day are more often than not the poorer readers who never learned that academic content vocabulary. **It is much easier to play catch up in the early grades before that gap widens, and stemming summer learning loss is a giant step in that direction.**

The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Education.



## ABOUT READING IS FUNDAMENTAL:

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) is the nation's oldest and largest children's literacy nonprofit, dedicated to motivating young readers by working with children, parents, teachers and community members. Since 1966, RIF has provided 412 million books to 40 million children in need.



RIF addresses the nation's literacy crisis through an evidence-based approach to book ownership tied directly to positive outcomes in motivation, performance and reading frequency.<sup>x</sup> As a sustainable organization with five decades of expertise, RIF has used the scope and scale of its work nationwide—along with relationships with more than 100 publishers—to deliver an effective, efficient, inexpensive and easily replicable model of book distribution.

RIF is leading the way with advanced research and programming to ensure that children have the ability to develop strong literacy skills that will lead them to educational attainment, social engagement and economic sustainability.

***“Placing books in the hands of children to develop an interest in reading is critical. Placing targeted, high-interest books with STEAM focus in the hands of children is brilliant.”***

—Patrick Pope, Principal, Friendship Technology Preparatory Middle PCS, Washington, D.C.

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- i. NAAL, 2003.
  - ii. Coalition for Literacy, 2013.
  - iii. For a full definition of literacy, see NCTE.
  - iv. *Ed Week*, 2011; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007.
  - v. Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013.
  - vi. National Center for Children in Poverty, 2013.
  - vii. Careerbuilder Poll, March 2014.
  - viii. U.S. Department of Labor.
  - ix. Annie E. Casey Foundation, *2010 KIDS COUNT Special Report*.
  - x. Lindsay, 2012.



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