

MAKING EVERY BOOK COUNT

by Maria P. Walther and Carol J. Fuhler

Supporting Summer Readers

As educators, we look forward to long summer days, visualizing a comfortable lounge chair and anticipating a pleasurable retreat into book-created worlds. Because we are readers, we understand the realms that can open up within a book. Unfortunately, each year we meet students who are either unskilled at reading or simply uninterested in it. Unlike their proficient and motivated counterparts, these children do not choose reading as a summer pastime. Thus, a reading achievement gap begins to develop. Reading expert Richard Allington informs us that children who do not read during the summer months experience a “summer reading loss.” The two groups of children most affected are struggling readers and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. (To learn more about summer reading loss, go to Dr. Allington’s Web site at www.teachersread.net.)

Think about the children in your classroom, school, or community who might fit this description. How can we allocate resources and use our expertise to lure such students into the world of books? In this column we suggest several ways to reach these children and their families in hopes of decreasing that summer reading loss.

Recommendations from Kids

Many of us have compiled or collected lists of suggested summer reading titles to share with children. While these are certainly a helpful resource, a personalized child-

created list may be more inviting to reluctant readers. In her book *The Reading Zone*, Nancie Atwell suggests having students create their own Kids’ Recommend Pages and post them on the school or library Web site. (You can view her students’ Kids Recommend pages at www.c-t-l.org.) To create the list, ask students to suggest 10–12 beloved books that they believe will spark a reluctant reader’s interest in reading. Maria has done this with her first-graders for the past few years. Repeatedly these recommendations include titles that are part of a series. This makes sense for beginning readers. Why? Because, after reading one book in a series, children have spent time with the characters and are comfortable with the author’s writing style. This gives them the background knowledge and vocabulary needed to support them as they continue to read.

The titles that avid young series readers recommend year after year include Mo Willems’ hilarious Elephant and Piggie books; the Fly Guy series by Tedd Arnold; and Cynthia Rylant’s Henry and Mudge, Poppleton, and Mr. Putter and Tabby books. The Pinkerton series by Steven Kellogg and James Marshall’s books about the “two good friends” George and Martha also pop up continually. Not to be missed are books about the one-of-a-kind pig, Mercy Watson, created by Kate DiCamillo, and the odd bird, Tacky, by Helen Lester. Megan McDonald’s Judy Moody and Stink books round out an entertaining list.

Super series abound across genres for intermediate-grade readers. For mystery lovers reading at the third-grade level, try the Cabin Creek Mysteries by Kristiana Gregory. Readers at the fourth- and fifth-grade levels can actively problem-solve their way through Kathryn Lasky’s Starbuck Twins books. Those intrigued with fantasy might sample the Mistmantle Chronicles by M. I. McAllister, Toby Abbott’s exciting Secrets of Droon titles, or the Sluggers series about the “Travelin’ Nine” by Phil Bildner and Loren Young. Realistic fiction lovers will enjoy Ann M. Martin’s Main Street series, about friends in Camden Falls, along with Marissa Moss’ popular Amelia titles. Partner these with some of your favorite series for enticing summer reading fare for reluctant readers.

Innovative Access to Books

Many students do not have a public library card or transportation to the public library during the summer. If you



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Allington’s Web site at www.teachersread.net.)

are working in a school with available funds to support struggling readers, suggest using those funds to hire interested staff members to open the school library once a week or even once a month for teacher-guided book checkout. To further enhance the experience, consider spending the first 10–15 minutes of each session book-talking appealing summer reading titles.

A few titles that will grab young readers who enjoy humorous books include Susan Orlean's *Lazy Little Loafers* and *No! That's Wrong!* by Zhaohua Ji and Cui Xu. For space enthusiasts, share *Boy, Were We Wrong about the Solar System!* by Kathleen V. Kudlinski or Dianna Hutts Aston's *The Moon over Star*. Sports fans will cheer for *Willie and the All-Stars* by Floyd Cooper, while children preparing for a road trip can trace the travels of *Adèle and Simon in America* by Barbara McClintock.

Several options for intermediate grades are *Clementine's Letter* by Sara Pennypacker and *Go Long!* by Tiki Barber and Ronde Barber. For lovers of nonfiction, promote Nic Bishop's *Frogs* and *Spiders*. Dog lovers will perk up their ears when they hear you read from Lois Duncan's *News for Dogs*, and imaginations will kick in when you read a bit from *100 Cupboards* by N. D. Wilson. Whatever you read, it would be wise to have several copies available to meet the demand.

Those of you who are classroom teachers or who work with small groups of students know that there is no better parting gift than a book you've selected with a child in mind. To fund the purchase of books, submit a request to your school's parent-teacher organization or a business partner. Investigate the literacy grants that are available through companies like Wal-Mart and Target. If you order books from a book club, set aside bonus points from each order to accumulate enough points to "purchase" one book for each of your students. Slip a preprinted, self-addressed postcard inside each one. On the front of the postcard print:

I thought you would enjoy this book. After you read it, jot me a quick note to let me know what you think. Happy summer reading!

Fondly,
Your teacher

Consider giving up a morning at the beginning of summer vacation to have a "Meet Me at the Library" event. Collaborate with your public librarian to arrange a time when your students and their parents can meet you at the library for an hour or so. At this time, you can assist students and their families as they register for library cards,


select appropriate books, and begin the summer reading program. Because you've already established a relationship with these families, your invitation might be just what they need to begin a summer filled with books and library visits.

One additional idea to send home with a list of those student-recommended books is a suggestion that parents try to make that library time extra special. Carol's grandchildren often have a "date night" with one of their parents. It is a special occasion where the parent and one child spend a couple of hours together, just the two of them. A frequently requested destination is the library, where they browse together to find wonderful books to read at home. Capping the "date" off with a cup of hot chocolate or lemonade on the way home makes this a memorable time between parent and child.

Promoting Books Online

When budgets are tight, inform parents of safe options for reading online. If students have access to the Internet at home, investigate www.magickeys.com for a selection of free stories that can be read online. If you click on "Award Winning Links," you can find additional sites with numerous stories to read, from beginning reader levels through young adult.

For a fabulous site where children can read beautiful international books, try <http://en.childrenslibrary.org>. There are excellent books available here in a number of languages, a boon to second-language learners.

As the summer draws near, inform parents through your class newsletter of the importance of reading throughout the summer. Reinforce the fact that continued reading will maintain skills. Gently nudge them to involve their children in reading, reluctant or not, through irresistible book lists, online sources, and time spent at the library. A periodic reading morning at school would surely keep the interest levels high. Next fall wouldn't it be uplifting to listen to *all* of your students chatting about the great books they discovered over the summer? 

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