

By Bill Graves



Andy Garcia-Figueroa, 7, reads with his Reading Results trained parent tutor, Yohana Hernandez. Photo by Adam Wickham

While many of his peers ride bikes, shoot hoops and take dives in the local pool, Andy Garcia-Figueroa has his 7-year-old dark eyes fixed on his reading tutor as she prepares to quiz him on the sounds of letters and the words they form.

He is getting a full hour of one-on-one reading tutoring from adults in a special reading program this past summer at Earl Boyles Elementary School in east Portland. Yohana Hernandez, a trained parent tutor for a nonprofit agency called Reading Results, flashes cards with vowels and blended sounds for Andy to pronounce. She pronounces sounds, and he writes the letters that make them, stumbling on some. He also writes simple words – tack, sack and pick; circles common sounds within words, like the “ack” in lack and sack, and reads simple sentences such as “Al (the alligator) is big. Al ran and ran.”

After a half hour, Andy moves across the library to join another tutor, Stephanie Rayburn-Tillson, volunteer with the Start Making a Reader Today (SMART) program. She simply takes turns reading with him for another half hour from a book he has chosen about an African safari. “I see zebras graze on safari,” he reads with great effort, carefully sounding out each word.

Andy is one of 23 children selected for the four-week program because they need help improving their reading. Most, like him, are headed for second grade, though four have just completed kindergarten. The Bookworm Literacy Program aims to strengthen their reading skills or at least keep them from declining over the long summer break. Andy arrived with a partial command of letter sounds – he, for example, mixes up “b” and “p” and is stumped by how to pronounce “u.” On his second day in the program, he was too shy to read at all. But now, a week later, he is reading and with great interest in the story.

“He’s getting chatty,” Rayburn-Tillson says.

The summer literacy program is one small piece, but an important one, in the broader Early Works initiative at Earl Boyles. The school’s large share of poor and minority students typically start behind their more advantaged peers in school and slip further behind as they move up through the grades, creating an achievement gap. The project aims to keep the gap from ever developing. This summer literacy program is one building block in that effort.

The four-week summer learning project for 2013, Earl Boyle’s second, gets under way on July 30. By the second day, veteran second-grade teacher Deb McGowan has coalesced her 23 students, some of whom she’ll have as students in the fall. They walk in line to the middle school next door for breakfast and then back to their classroom for some thinking and learning, all focused on improving their reading and comprehension skills.

McGowan uses seasons of the year as a theme to organize her lessons. On the classroom whiteboard she’s written a sophisticated question for 7-year-olds: How does expressing an idea in multiple ways help everyone understand the idea? McGowan has the children write their names on slips of paper, which they then stick like leaves on a colorful paper tree on the whiteboard. She then launches a discussion about fall.

The class meets from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Between 10 a.m. and noon, the children take turns rotating through half-hour tutoring sessions with Reading Results tutors, whom they see daily. Two days a week, they also read 30 minutes from the book of their choice with a SMART tutor. Over the course of the summer session, the nonprofit Children’s Book Bank also gives each student books to take home.

At 10 a.m., half the class leaves McGowan for the library, where five or six join SMART volunteers to read while the others join Reading Results tutors to work on more discrete reading skills. Among them is Nylie Serrano, 7, a reader with a good command of sounds and the ability to sound out words she doesn’t know. She is shy and reads with a whisper so quiet her tutors have to strain to hear her.

By the second week, though, she’s more relaxed and reading more, says Mary Lou Betzing, a SMART Volunteer. “Ponies come in lots of colors,” reads Nylie with ease.



William Wu-Zhen reads with a volunteer from SMART during his half hour of reading practice time. Photo by Adam Wickham

The summer literacy program at Earl Boyles Elementary was a result of the work of many partners, and it paid off. Reading Results pre- and post-test results showed gains. The tests measured 10 areas of literacy such as speed, accuracy, sound awareness and comprehension.

21 of the 23 children made gains on at least two indicators

17 students made gains in reading fluency

15 improved in comprehension

Students on average showed 2.5 months growth in grade-level reading, one month growth in grade level spelling, 6.5-word gains in reading per minute fluency, and increases in letter sound and blending sound awareness

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Nearby, 7-year-old Lila Christensen smiles as she recites the sounds for the letters that Allison Ebert, the Reading Results parent tutor, flashes before her. Lila's round face, framed by sandy short hair and fit with glasses, smiles most of the time. She keeps the smile even as she runs out of steam reading to SMART volunteer Terry Brooks. He's doing most of the reading as Lila rests on her knees in her chair and sprawls over the table with her head on the surface.

By week three, Cyndi Hagey, the literacy coach at Earl Boyles, has replaced McGowan in the classroom and has advanced to spring in the ongoing study of the seasons. Lila is showing improvement both in reading and spelling, says Ebert. Nylie is now speaking up more and reading better, too.

Vontre'Vious Lamy, 7, also is showing more confidence as a reader. Working with Hernandez of Reading Results, he correctly says sounds as she flashes cards before him. He reads the words she shows him, all of them: cord, lord, from, short, storm, fork... She pronounces sounds, and he writes the corresponding letters or groups of letters. "a," "e," "ous." After the last sound, he slaps his pencil on his desk and proudly proclaims: "Done!"

"Great job," says Hernandez with a hint of a smile.



Vontre'Vious Lamy, 7 (left) and McKenzie Kelch (right) identify letter sounds while working with their Reading Results tutor for a half-hour daily in the library. Vontre'Vious is reading more at home, says his mother Victoria Lamy. *Photo by Adam Wickham*

As the 2013 summer literacy program draws to a close, Andy is having his final sessions with tutors. He whizzes through the sounds of letters Hernandez flashes before him and he writes words: Jack, both, quilt, map. He reads: "The pig hid in the pit."

In the beginning, he couldn't say many sounds or read all of a short story, Hernandez says. "Last time, he read the whole book by himself," she says.

Andy joins SMART volunteer Doug Spangle to read about dinosaurs, letting Spangle do most of the reading.

"I don't think he's learned to read," says Spangle. "He is learning to read. His analytical skills are good. He likes to discuss. His learning skills overall are not bad. He is very personable. If he gets help to keep learning, I think he will do fine."

Logistical lessons learned from the first summer program helped this one run far smoother, says Meghan Gabriel. Gabriel is the SUN/Metropolitan Family Service Site Coordinator at Earl Boyles. This SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Community School is a partnership of the City of Portland, Multnomah County, David Douglas School District and non-profit organizations. MFS is the contracted SUN lead agency at Earl Boyles.

Early Works' challenge ahead is to find resources to scale up the summer program for all Earl Boyles children, not just the most needy.

Jessica McIntyre, Lila's mom, was pleased with her daughter's progress.

"She seemed to get caught up on where she was behind," McIntyre says. "She did well because of the individual attention as opposed to the large group setting. It was easier for her to learn with the more direct attention. We're a little more on the ball in terms of reading at home than we have been."

Nylie's mom, Malisa Serrano, says she hopes the program will help Nylie, who is shy, be more open in school. She read well and often at home, even before she entered the program, Serrano says, but "would not show her teacher her true reading skills."

Andy is reading better and "is more excited now about going to school," says his mother, Maria Garcia. And he would have a smoother transition into second grade because McGowan would be his teacher. She knew about him and his reading skills the first day he walked into class.

Vontre'Vious is reading more at home — 30 minutes every day, says his mom, Victoria Lamy. "I see him sounding out the words," she says. "He's willing to pick up a book without being so frustrated."

On his final day with Hernandez, Vontre'Vious is reading a short story: "This is where grandpa used to tell me stories when I was a little boy," he reads smoothly, though flatly.

Hernandez clocks him at 97 words per minute, more than twice the speed he was reading four weeks earlier. Test results will show he made significant gains in letter sound recognition, speed, accuracy and comprehension. Hernandez gives him a certificate of completion and a red sticker that says Reading Counts.

Vontre'Vious stands up to move over to his SMART tutor, where he will soon be immersed in the book, *Cinderella Penguin*. He pauses and gazes pensively across this room filled with books and readers.

"I don't want to leave," he says.



Yessenia Garfias, 7, enjoys a funny moment at Earl Boyles Elementary where she and 22 other students worked four weeks on their reading skills. All of them made some gains in the program that was designed to stem summer learning loss. *Photo by Adam Wickham*

By Bill Graves

Gaps in schooling lead to gaps in learning, especially for disadvantaged children.

One of those gaps comes every summer, when low-income children lose two to three months in reading achievement while their middle-class peers gain a month. The result is a three-to-four month gap that accumulates from year to year, leaving low-income children two years behind by grade nine and accounting for 80 percent of the achievement gap, according to Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, editors of the recently published book, *Summer Reading: Closing the Rich/Poor Achievement Gap*.

Schools and districts across the country are

recognizing the steep price low-income children pay for their long summer breaks and are launching summer learning programs. Among them is Earl Boyles Elementary School in east Portland, where 84 percent of the 430 students come from low-income homes, 63 percent are minority and 30 percent speak English as a second language. With help from the Children's Institute and other nonprofits, Earl Boyles has offered a summer reading program to reduce or eliminate the achievement loss for some of its students.

The Children's Institute considers the summer literacy project an important part of

a broader initiative called Early Works that it launched more than two years ago at the east Portland school. Early Works is pooling the resources of Earl Boyles, the David Douglas School District and other organizations to build a coherent comprehensive educational program for all children from pre-birth to age 8 in the Earl Boyles attendance area.

Early Works' first summer literacy program in 2012 grew out of a meeting of representatives of the county's SUN program, which helps low-income schools connect with their communities; the Portland Reading Foundation, which has changed its name to Reading Results; Start Making A Reader Today (SMART); and the Children's Book Bank, which provides free books to school children.

The team had gathered to explore ways to address the serious reading and language deficit among Earl Boyles children that was showing up in research conducted by Portland State University.

The group agreed to set up a summer session focusing on improving literacy for a select group of 22 rising second- and third-graders deemed most in need of help. It applied for a \$10,000 grant from the Oregon-based Nike to cover the costs, which included paying the classroom teachers,

buying books and hiring Reading Results and SMART tutors.

The following spring, in April 2013, the summer literacy team, seated on small child chairs around a table in the Earl Boyles library, discussed how it would offer for a second summer a reading program it would call the Bookworm Literacy Program.

The team included Meghan Gabriel, the Metropolitan Family Service SUN coordinator at Earl Boyles who would coordinate the summer literary initiative along with several other summer programs; Molly Day, Early Works Site Liaison for the Children's Institute; and Ericka Guynes, principal of Earl Boyles. Representatives of SMART, Reading Results, the Children's Book Bank and Metropolitan Family Service also joined the table.

For this year, the Children's Institute had won grants from AT&T and the Juan Young Trust of Oregon to run a summer reading program. Day figured it would cost about \$14,165 to offer everything they would like, but the team eventually settled on a \$12,339 plan that included \$1,000 for SMART, \$5,900 for Reading Results, \$2,900 for a teacher and a SUN assistant, \$1,988 to buy books through the Children's Book Bank to give to kids, and \$551 for curriculum development and training of the teachers. The Institute hopes the program gradually becomes self-sustaining, preferably with public money.

"Last summer, I thought, was a great first year," said Day. "As a collaborative partnership, it worked pretty darn well."

The group concluded the focus for 2013 should be only on children headed for second grade and no third graders as in the previous summer.

"We are trying to target a group and track cohort data," said Guynes. "The earlier you intervene, the less you have to remediate."

The group also agreed to put more emphasis on attendance.



Lila Christensen, 7, works studiously in the classroom while about half her classmates get one-on-one tutoring in the library as she will too. "She seemed to get caught up where she was behind," says her mother Jessica McIntyre. Photo by Adam Wickham

Plenty of research shows children benefit dramatically from summer reading programs. In a 2011 study, for example, RAND Corp. researchers, drawing on reviews of numerous studies on summer loss, concluded: "Low-income students lose substantial ground in reading during the summer, while their higher-income peers often gain."

During a conference call with reporters in June, Gary Huggins, chief executive officer for the National Summer Learning Association (summerlearning.org), echoed the conclusion of Allington and McGill-Franzen by stating summer learning loss accounts for as much as two thirds of the reading achievement gap seen among students by ninth grade.

RAND also looked at studies of effective summer learning programs and interviewed 60 summer learning leaders in five cities. Nearly all types of summer learning programs can reduce or eliminate the summer loss, researchers said.

But programs that included individualized instruction, parental involvement, small class sizes, high attendance – all features of the Earl Boyles program – got the best results. RAND said high-quality programs should operate five days a week for five or six weeks with three to four hours a day focused on academics.

The Bookworm Literacy Program at Earl Boyles fell short of that, operating four hours a day four days a week for four weeks with an intense two-hour focus on reading. But five or six-week programs cost between \$1,100 and \$2,800 per child, RAND said. The summer learning team at Earl Boyles offered its program for only \$536 per child.

Lauren Gilbert, vice president of Building Education Leaders for Life or BELL, said during the conference call in June that society needs to stop treating summer learning loss as an acceptable norm. “It is not OK to let these kids regress over the summer,” she said.

Though the Earl Boyles summer literacy program was shorter than ideal, early indications show children benefited. Reading Results administered pre- and post-tests during both summer sessions.

In 2012, children received 14 days of instruction, though only five of the second-graders and two of the third-graders showed every day. Most of the second-graders missed only one or two days, but five of the third-graders attended about half the time or less.

Still, a reading fluency test showed the summer school children made modest gains over their peers who did not attend.

The more meaningful results, however, were how well children held their own or improved in their ability to understand what they read. One measure of that is the state reading test, which



Nylie Serrano, 7, spends a half hour reading with her SMART tutor. As Nylie became more immersed, she read with more confidence as the summer learning program unfolded.
Photo by Adam Wickham

the third-graders later took in the spring of their 2012-13 school year.

Keeping in mind that all 13 third-graders were selected for summer literacy because they were struggling readers, it is significant that two of them exceeded proficiency standards on the state test, four met standards and four nearly met standards. Only three fell well short of standards.

Reading Results pre- and post-test results for the 2013 summer session also showed gains. The tests measured 10 areas of literacy such as speed, accuracy, sound awareness and comprehension.

Twenty-one of the 23 Bookworm children made gains on at least two indicators; the other two students were absent for the final test. Seventeen students made gains in reading fluency; 15 improved in comprehension.

The 21 students on average showed 2.5 months growth in grade-level reading, one-month growth in grade level spelling, 6.5-word gains in reading per minute fluency, and increases in letter sound and blending sound awareness.

Amy J. Potter, program director for Reading Results, said it was impressive how much progress children made in just less than four weeks of “direct, explicit, strategic instruction.”

Clearly, the summer reading program made a difference.

Children's Book Bank
Early Works, a Children's Institute initiative
Metropolitan Family Service/SUN
Reading Results
Start Making a Reader Today (SMART)

Alliance for Early Success
AT&T Corporate Foundation
The Bill Healy Foundation
The Collins Foundation
Ford Family Foundation
Juan Young Charitable Trust
Jubitz Family Foundation
Lora L. & Martin N. Kelley Family Foundation
Maybelle Clark Macdonald Fund
Meyer Memorial Trust
Northwest Health Foundation
Oregon Community Foundation
Oscar G. & Elsa S. Mayer Family Foundation
Rose E. Tucker Charitable Trust
Silver Family Foundation
United Way of the Columbia-Willamette
US Bank
Wells Fargo
W.K. Kellogg Foundation



Andy Garcia-Figueroa follows along with a finger as he practices reading with a SMART volunteer. *Photo by Adam Wickham*

The Children's Institute envisions an Oregon where every child is prepared for success in school and life. We move research to action by promoting cost-effective public and private investments in our youngest children pre-birth through third grade. Visit us at early-works.org to learn more.



Early Works is an initiative of the Children's Institute that demonstrates how aligning the early years with the early grades can help ensure school readiness and future success for children. Our goals are to provide high-quality services starting pre-birth, integrate these programs with elementary schools, and evaluate and document the process to inform policy change. Find out more at early-works.org.

The Children's Institute is part of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which focuses on reading proficiency by the end of third grade, a key predictor of high school graduation and a milestone missed by fully 80 percent of low-income children. There are 140 communities from 37 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands working to help more of these children become successful readers by tackling three major challenges: starting school already far behind, falling further behind because of chronic absenteeism and then losing ground over the summer, the "summer slide" addressed in this report. Lane and Willamette Counties are among those tackling the reading challenge. We work with them and three communities in Washington to provide support and connection. For more information on the GLR Campaign, please visit gradelevelreading.net.