



LITERACY IS A BASIC NEED

COVID-19 has forced us to consider a new future both for our schools and more broadly the future of learning. During this time of extended school closures, we must remain focused on the basic needs of our students. In particular, early literacy support is crucial for the 5-10 year old at-risk children in their formative years. As noted in the International Literacy Association's 2019 Right to Read Campaign, "Literacy and access to quality literacy instruction and resources is an issue of equity and an issue of social justice. Being literate represents the difference between inclusion in and exclusion from society."¹ Providing quality literacy experiences to our neediest students is critical to fulfilling this basic human right. As a knowledgeable literacy partner with schools across the United States, Read to a Child is uniquely positioned to maintain and build the supportive reading environment every child deserves.

Prior to the current pandemic, more than 8.7 million low-income U.S. students in Kindergarten through fifth grade were not proficient in reading.² When school reopens in the fall, students will have missed at least 3 months of learning new concepts. The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) predicts that current school closures could result in achievement levels up to a year behind.³ In addition, end-of-year student assessment data will be missing which informed specific reading interventions for individual learners.

These barriers will compound the annual "summer slide," a loss of academic achievement gains from the previous school year that typically affects children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One study from Johns Hopkins University attributes two-thirds of the achievement gap between low- and middle-income students to summer slide, stating that this gap can make the difference between whether students set out on a path for college or decide to drop out of high school.⁴ Equitable educational goals will be compromised and the opportunity gap broadened.

Moreover, when schools reopen, students will need time to become reacquainted with structure, routine, schedules, working as a group, focusing on learning tasks, study skills, effective learning habits, and learning strategies. The psychological impacts and stressors related to the health crisis will undoubtedly contribute to these challenges.

¹ Sarah Wicht, "Advocating for Children's Rights to Read: A Manual for Enacting the Rights in Classrooms, Communities, and the World," International Literacy Association, 2019, <https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/ila-childrens-rights-to-read-advocacy-manual.pdf>

² "The Problem We Are Tackling," Reading Partners, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://readingpartners.org/the-literacy-challenge/the-problem-we-are-tackling/>

³ Beth Tarasawa, "COVID-19 School Closures Could Have a Devastating Impact on Student Achievement," NWEA, April 9, 2020, <https://www.nwea.org/blog/2020/covid-19-school-closures-could-have-devastating-impact-student-achievement/>

⁴ Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olsen, "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap," March 19, 2007, https://www.ewa.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/summer_learning_gap-2.pdf

Read to a Child's literacy and mentoring program can assist with these challenges. The early literacy services that Read to a Child provides promote joyful interactions associated with reading and mentoring. Our signature program pairing volunteer mentors with students will re-launch next school year. We expect to see a heightened need for our literacy support services in a broader segment of the student population. Additionally, we anticipate a further increased demand for our program based on the mentorship, caring interactions, and human connection it provides.

These mentor-child relationships will be more valuable than ever when students return to help them feel safe, engaged, and connected, in addition to the literacy benefits they receive from hearing an adult read to them regularly. Adult professionals—often paired with the same child through grade 4—help build students' confidence as they are exposed to positive role models from the community. Professor Jean Rhodes, a national expert on mentoring and University of Massachusetts psychology professor, proclaims, "If you talk to successful people about what made a difference in their lives, it often comes down to the involvement of a caring adult over time and during critical moments."⁵

The *Read Aloud Mentoring Program* (formerly the *Lunchtime Reading Program*) allows students to interact with the reader not only discussing the story or topic, but conversing about personal connections to the book. Cognitive neuroscience studies by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) point to the importance of adult-child conversation—and specifically, frequent conversational turns—to activate brain development that contributes to language and verbal abilities. The 2018 study's findings uncover a disparity in language skills based on socioeconomic status, and underscores the value of conversational exposure in early intervention programs aiming to close the achievement gap.⁶

Students practice active listening by asking questions, predicting what will happen next, and forming interpretations and opinions about the characters and the story. Books are read at the student's listening comprehension level rather than their own independent reading level so that new vocabulary and higher levels of comprehension are presented in context.

Read to a Child has expanded its services to include a Remote Read Aloud program with high-profile guest readers to provide children with quality read aloud experiences. Multiple online platforms invite children, parents, and caregivers access to virtual learning resources.

We are strengthening our mission to foster a love of reading, improve literacy skills, and empower underserved children by inspiring adults to read to them regularly.

By supporting early literacy you are supporting an essential requirement for children to thrive.⁷ In true partnership with our beneficiary schools, we will participate in a collective resolve to ensure that every single child has what they need⁸ to succeed in school and pursue the life of their choosing.

⁵ Larry Gordon, "Mentoring's Promise and Limits," *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/12/why-some-mentors-fail/510467/>

⁶ Rachel R. Romeo et al., "Language Exposure Relates to Structural Neural Connectivity in Childhood," *The Journal of Neuroscience* 38, no. 36 (2018): pp. 7870-7877, <https://doi.org/10.1523/jneurosci.0484-18.2018>

⁷ Harley Rotbart, "What Every Child Needs," Children's Hospital Colorado, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.childrenscolorado.org/>

⁸ Brenda Cassellius, "Boston Public Schools Adapt to Distance Learning," *The Boston Globe*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/18/opinion/boston-public-schools-adapt-distance-learning/>