

# The Role of Public Libraries in Children's Literacy Development

## An Evaluation Report

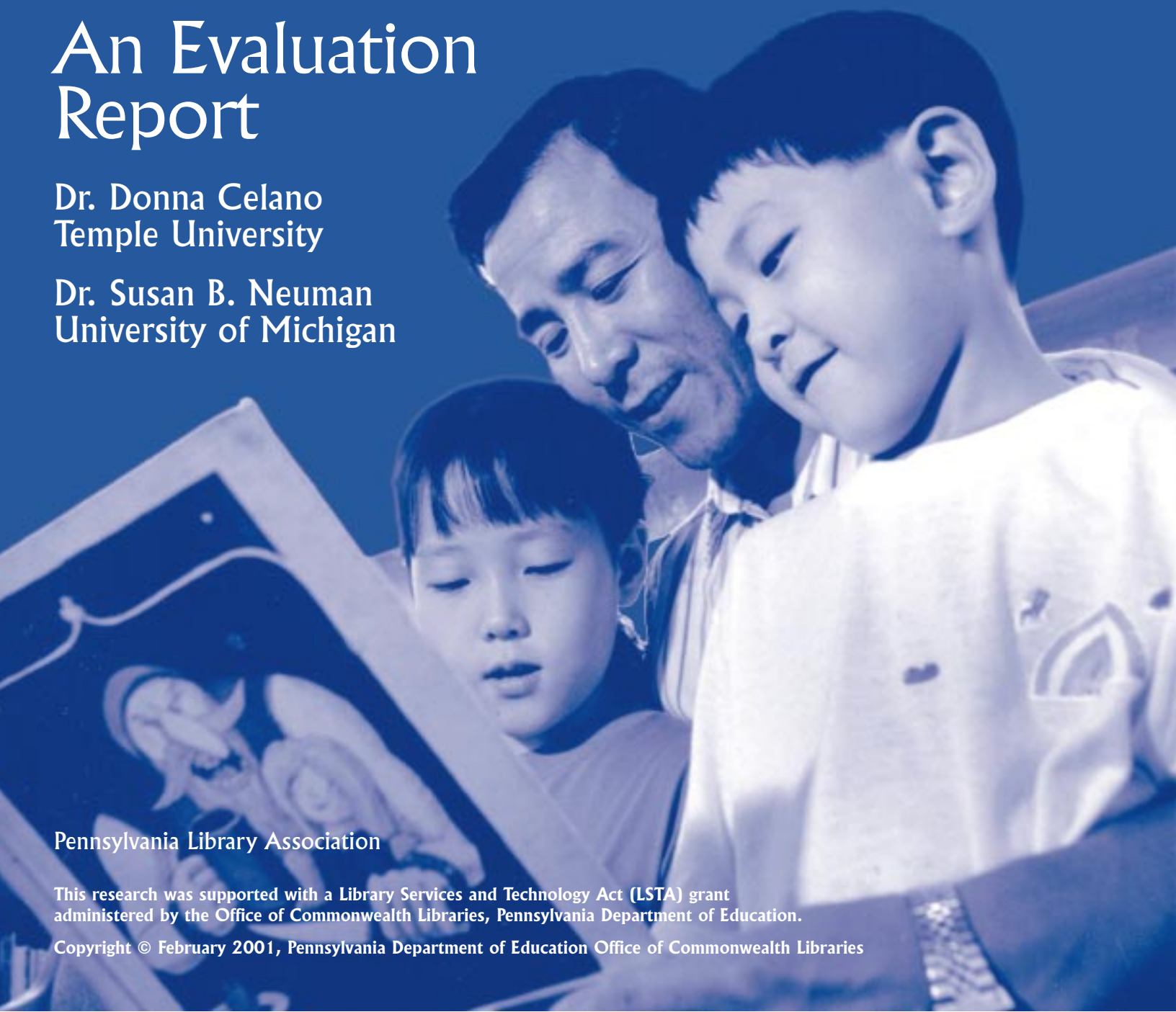
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This research was supported with a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant administered by the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania Department of Education.

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## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

The public libraries in Pennsylvania play a major role in helping children to read. Previous evaluations of libraries, however, have often bypassed the part libraries play in improving children’s literacy skills, focusing instead on the number of books circulated or patrons registered.

This evaluation examines a crucial facet of public libraries’ services: children’s summer reading and preschool programs. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this evaluation examines how children’s preschool and summer reading programs contribute to their reading skills.

A survey of recent literature reveals that libraries continue to play a major role in fostering literacy in our nation, particularly among those segments of the populations that need special assistance in developing literacy skills, such as preschool and elementary school children. Public libraries are in a remarkable position to expose children to great quantities of print and meaningful language opportunities that researchers say are crucial to reading achievement. One study found that children who had been exposed to a library preschool program showed a greater number of emergent literacy behaviors and prereading skills than did those in a control group. Summer reading programs seek to attract large numbers of children to the library during the summer, a time when reading skills often decline. Perhaps the greatest change in children’s library services has been the move among many libraries to incorporate “emergent literacy”—a more interactive, holistic approach to literacy development emphasizing the natural reading and writing behaviors exhibited by preschoolers before formal instruction begins.

A survey of Pennsylvania libraries showed that summer reading programs are flourishing, attracting large numbers of children and families to the library each year. More than one third of the libraries surveyed said their program brought in more than 200

children each summer. Forty-three percent of the libraries said that children visit the library once a week during the summer reading program, and 75% said their circulation increases between 6% and 10% during this time. The survey also found children who participate in summer reading programs benefit from the many literacy-related activities offered, which aids significantly in literacy development. Nearly all Pennsylvania libraries surveyed (94%) also offer preschool programs such as story hours; one quarter of the libraries report that at least 50 preschoolers visit each week. Researchers say that early reading experiences such as preschool story hours contribute significantly to children's reading achievement.

Observations at various libraries and interviews with parents, children, and library staff reveal that preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to spend significant amounts of time with books, a first step toward reading achievement. Observations and interviews also show that library programs encourage parents to play greater roles in their children's literacy development—another factor leading to reading achievement.

Finally, experimental methods showed that children who attend library summer reading programs read significantly better than those children who attend a camp program, suggesting that the time children spend in the library significantly enhances their reading achievement compared to other recreational activities.

Taken together, the various components of this evaluation paint a rich and colorful picture of libraries' contribution to the educational success of Pennsylvania's children. In addition, these findings underscore the important position the library plays in the reading achievement of children who lack access to books and other reading materials in their daily lives.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Although often taken for granted, the public libraries in Pennsylvania play a major role in helping children to read. Parents and teachers alike have long asserted that regular use of the local library improves children's reading dramatically.

Previous evaluations of libraries, however, have tended to bypass the part libraries play in improving children's literacy skills. Instead, most studies have concentrated on how well the institution itself runs, with emphasis placed on the number of books circulated or patrons registered.

This evaluation examines crucial, although often overlooked, library services: children's summer reading and preschool programs. These programs attract children who might not otherwise come to the library. As preschoolers, they visit the library for story hour with their parents or day-care center. As elementary and middle-school students, they are brought to the library by parents, camp counselors, or babysitters to participate in summer reading programs.

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this evaluation examines how library preschool and summer reading programs contribute to children's reading skills. A full-scale literature review illustrates recent research on how U.S. library programs impact children's literacy. A survey of Pennsylvania libraries offers insights into the scope and nature of children's reading programs. Observations and interviews in libraries in rural, suburban, and urban areas illustrate the formats and teaching methods used in such programs and the ways such programs contribute to reading achievement. An experimental study examines the difference in reading skills between those children who



attend library summer reading programs and those who participate in no formal reading program. Taken together, the various components of this evaluation paint a rich and colorful picture of libraries contributing to the educational success of Pennsylvania's children.

## ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

A survey of recent literature on public libraries reveals that libraries are more than just repositories for books. They have historically helped many segments of the population develop literacy skills. For example, librarians at the turn of the century helped the large influx of immigrants acclimate to their new life in the United States. These early librarians were “pioneers of literacy training” (Marcum and Stone, 1991), called upon to “Americanize” both adults and children.

### **The Goal: Promoting Literacy**

According to Lyman (1977), libraries have always seen literacy for all people as a major objective. Libraries throughout the country have worked over the decades to “direct educational resources, human and material, in the libraries of the country toward helping every child, young person, and adult to learn to speak, read, write and compute—in brief, to learn how to learn... to develop a community-wide literacy system.”

To achieve this legacy of literacy training, libraries have had several tasks:

- to provide services, materials, and opportunities for those who need them to develop literacy skills;
- to become part of the educational system;
- to extend traditional library functions (support and resources) to patrons with developing literacy skills;
- to try nontraditional ways of serving newly literate populations;





- to interpret resources;
- to be proactive in education, dissemination of information, and promotion of resource use; and
- to collaborate with other agencies in literacy programming.

Weibel (1992) looked at the role of the library in promoting literacy. Libraries provide access to information about culture, society, economy, and history. The librarian serves as a “reader advisor” by suggesting and interpreting resources in the library. In addition, the library offers learning facilities and materials and promotes public discussion through the resources in their collections.

Libraries have been particularly involved in promoting literacy in recent years as research has highlighted the growing problem of illiteracy in America (Lora, 1990). A growing awareness of a workforce unable to read well enough to perform jobs in a highly technological society has spurred many libraries to link with schools, businesses, and local volunteer groups to provide materials, referrals, and professional expertise on literacy.

### **The Populations Targeted**

In their efforts to promote literacy throughout the country, public libraries have focused on helping three segments of the population that need assistance in developing literacy skills: preschool and elementary school children, adults with poor reading skills, and people for whom English is a second language.

Preschool and Elementary School Children. Research shows that it is particularly crucial to develop literacy skills during the early childhood and elementary school years. Reading probably accounts for about one third of a child’s annual vocabulary growth

(Anderson, 1995; Nagy & Herman, 1987). This in turn leads to substantial and permanent learning and greater school achievement.

Children from environments lacking in rich language experiences such as reading have shown gradual and linear declines in tests of preschool educational development (Burchinal, Lee, & Ramey, 1989). Once in place, these patterns have shown unwavering resistance to change (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986). Children who start out slowly in tests of literacy skills often fail to catch up, thus falling further behind in school achievement. Exposing children to language and early literacy learning is critical to change the trajectory of academic failure that begins in early childhood and continues to spiral downward throughout later childhood and adulthood (Neuman, 1996).



Public libraries are well-positioned to expose children to great quantities of print and meaningful language opportunities during the crucial preschool and elementary school years. Research shows that children need exposure to a wide variety of high-quality books of various topics, genres, and perspectives in order to acquire literacy skills. They also need books that reflect the diverse and multicultural nature of our society—books in which they can see themselves and others like them (Neuman, 2000).

A growing body of research examines the widening gap between children who have access to reading materials and those who do not. “Access” has been given as a potential reason for differences among children’s interactions, behaviors, and ultimately, achievement in school and life. Much research into parental involvement in children’s reading achievement, for example, has focused on the individual parents’ attributes (i.e., children of low-income households, single parents, and poorly educated mothers

essentially add up to large risks for reading, and ultimately, school failure; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986). Studies suggest that, despite similar goals for their children, parents in low- and middle-class communities differ widely in the skills and resources they have at their disposal for upgrading their children's school performance (Lareau, 1989). Furthermore, Entwistle and her colleagues (1997) have suggested that children's achievement differences may be due in part to seasonal variations in educational opportunity. Children in needy areas, for example, do not have the resources they need to continue developing their literacy skills outside of school, especially in the summer.

Public libraries are helping to close the "book gap" by providing children of all backgrounds access to high-quality reading materials and rich language experiences. According to the American Library Association (ALA), librarians work to ensure that as many children as possible—regardless of socioeconomic status—"achieve their full potential as readers." The link between libraries, children, and literacy is exemplified by the many services public libraries offer throughout the country. ALA statistics show that 94% of libraries offer study space for children, 95% offer summer reading programs, 89% provide story hours, and 83% work cooperatively with schools (American Library Association, 2000).

Spink (1989) notes that preschool children can use the library as preparation for reading in school. Libraries provide access to a variety of reading materials and other activities that correlate to books, such as arts and crafts, songs, drama, story telling, and puppet shows. Library activities expose children to a wide range of topics and provide opportunities for children to choose their own books and reading materials. Once a child starts school, the library's books, audiocassettes, videos, computers, music, and other programs continue to support learning. Librarians encourage and support these activities.

Library programs for elementary school children often focus on the problem of “aliteracy”—being able to read but lacking the motivation. This problem, which is widespread in the United States, often emerges during elementary school when negative attitudes toward reading traditionally begin (Moser & Morrison, 1998). Many libraries’ summer reading programs are specifically designed to combat aliteracy. Summer reading programs seek to attract children to the library during the summer, a time when reading skills usually decline (Barstow, 1997). A survey of newspaper and journal articles reveals that summer reading programs remain popular in many cities; nearly 45% of Denver’s 35,000 elementary school children take part in the Denver Public Library’s summer reading program, whereas more than 30,000 children take part in a program in Louisville, Kentucky.

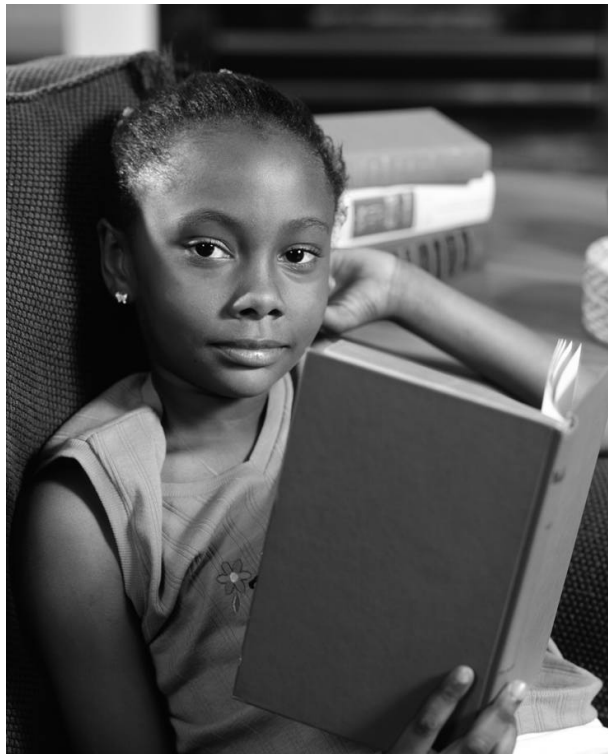
Educators often assume that library programs promote children’s literacy, but few studies have measured their impact on preschool and elementary school children (Dowd, 1997). Kupetz (1993), one of the few researchers to undertake such a study; found that children who had been exposed to a library outreach literacy training effort in preschool demonstrated a greater number of emergent literacy behaviors and prereading skills. These children also read significantly more words correctly than did children in a control group.

Other studies have concentrated on factors that are key to the success of summer reading programs. One study (Walter & Markey, 1997) found that children are no longer using the library independently; they attend with parents and other caregivers. Libraries can ensure that more children benefit from summer reading programs by adjusting their approach to the marketing and delivery of children’s services. Libraries must depend upon parents to encourage their children to use their services; therefore, libraries need to

emphasize the educational benefits of summer reading programs if they are to attract more parents to their doors.

Many libraries are working to incorporate recent theoretical changes in children's literacy development into their children's programs (Dowd, 1997). Educational researchers have recently shifted away from a focus on reading readiness and are concentrating more on "emergent literacy"—a more interactive, holistic approach to reading development which emphasizes the natural reading and writing behaviors exhibited by preschoolers before formal instruction begins. In emergent literacy techniques, children are encouraged to tell their own "stories," "write" their own ideas, and perform their own "dramas" as a way to foster their early reading skills. Dowd (1997) recounts how many public libraries have rethought their preschool programs to

incorporate emergent literacy techniques through the use of "lapsits" and community family literacy programs. In a toddler storytime, children's librarians focus less on colors, shapes, and letter recognition than on opportunities for children to talk. Dowd offers additional insights into how librarians might incorporate emergent literacy techniques: "Dial-a-story" telephone access might



encourage children to listen; children could audiotape their own stories; and a supply of crayons and markers at the end of storytime might encourage children to draw or write about their literacy experience.

Kupetz (1993) states that literacy is a continuous process that begins in infancy. Throughout the infant and toddler years, children greatly benefit from prereading experiences such as those provided by public libraries. The benefits including helping children's eyes to focus, helping them recognize objects and develop sensory awareness, reinforcing basic concepts, and providing the opportunity for physical closeness so critical to young children's emotional and intellectual development.

Kupetz (1993) also points out that public librarians can serve as essential resources for parents and teachers. First, they can assemble collections of materials appropriate for very young readers such as books of rhymes, "point and say" books, "touch and smell" books, and board books. Second, they can guide parents and child-care professionals in selecting books for very young children. Finally, librarians can help parents who feel uncomfortable reading to their children by modeling read-aloud techniques, helping parents develop their own literacy, and encouraging them to enjoy their own reading.

For example, Cerny (2000) notes a subtle shift in the services provided to families in Queens, New York. The staff has noticed that parents today lack the traditional sources of "common-sense advice," as the safety net of extended families and neighborhood networks has disappeared. To compensate, children's services have focused specifically on parents' needs. Parent/child story hours and other parent/child programs have proliferated. Parent education lectures are now within the purview of the children's rather than the adult's department.

Despite libraries' continued service to children, however, many children remain underserved (Kupetz, 1993). Prereading activities like those in Queens are not accessible to children whose parents cannot bring them to libraries in the first place. With the vast majority of children under five coming from households where both parents work, many children's library access is limited. Whenever possible, libraries have designed outreach programs to reach preschoolers who might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend a library.

Adults with poor literacy skills. Libraries' extend emergent literacy techniques in their work with adults who lack literacy skills. There are many adult literacy programs available today at libraries (Johnson & Cole, 1997; Lora, 1990; Seager, 1993; Thomas, 1993; Weibel, 1992; Zapata, 1994). Many programs focus on illiteracy, low-literacy, and reluctant adult readers; others have included discussions on "family literacy" (Fisher, 1999; McConnell & Rabe, 1999), stressing the importance of parental involvement if their children are to become fully literate. Programs such as Even Start, a family-centered education program administered by the Department of Education through local school districts, pair the library with other social agencies to deliver literacy training for parents of children ages one to seven (Padak, Rasinski, & Fike, 1997). Another program, "Creating Readers: Collaboration for Reading and Educational Success Through Libraries," brings libraries, families, schools, and local businesses together. The project asks families to sign one-year contracts with the library stating that they will foster literacy activities in the home and participate in library-sponsored activities and services (Russ, 1999). All of these programs inadvertently impact children's literacy learning by maintaining that parents are the first significant source of learning for their children (MacFarlane, 1994; McConnell & Rabe, 1999; Nespeca, 1996; Otto & Johnson, 1996).

English Language Learners. Library programs aimed at English language learners are also common. Many immigrant families use libraries to find reading/media materials in their native languages. They also use libraries (in conjunction with English as a Second Language programs) as resources for learning English and becoming proficient in reading and writing English (Marcum & Stone, 1991; Thomas, 1993; Zapata, 1994).

### **The Challenges Facing Libraries**

Public libraries' mission to ensure the literacy of our nation's children is a mighty task. Several researchers believe the success of this mission depends on libraries' willingness to collaborate with other community agencies (Lyman, 1977; Weibel, 1992). Working with outside agencies such as universities doing research on children's literacy



or outreach programs with day-care centers or preschools coincides with the emergent literacy approach that many libraries have undertaken. (Dowd, 1997; Fehrenbach, Hurford, & Fehrenbach, 1998; Gorman, 1995). For older children, public libraries need to coordinate services with local school librarians. Callison (1997) notes that public libraries are increasingly called upon to meet educational demands, while information-use instruction. This change is reflected in the nature of children's programs.

If anything, our need for libraries has increased in recent years. Weibel (1993) describes a "widening gap between the poorly educated populace and a society based on technology and quick and easy access to information." He argues for a collaboration



between libraries and literacy programs, tutors, and the community. In the same vein, libraries are addressing the issue of “informational literacy,” which includes knowing not only how to read and write but how to find information and use or evaluate it (Harada & Tepe, 1998; Salter & Salter, 1991).

Some critics, however, question how libraries see their role in literacy learning. According to Gorman (1995), librarians have been too narrowly focused on “the transition from being unable to being able to read.” By this definition, literacy is “a hurdle to be jumped, one that divides all humans into literate and illiterate.” In truth, literacy is a life-long process that begins in early childhood and continues throughout a lifetime. Since libraries work with people of all ages, from infancy through adulthood, they would do well to adopt this perspective.

## ***A SURVEY OF PENNSYLVANIA LIBRARIES***

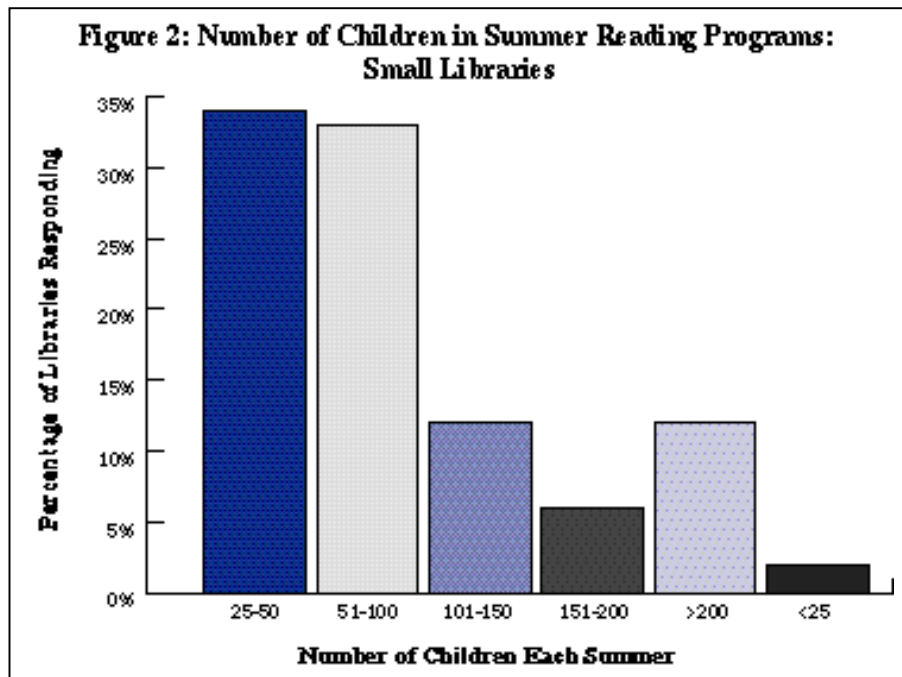
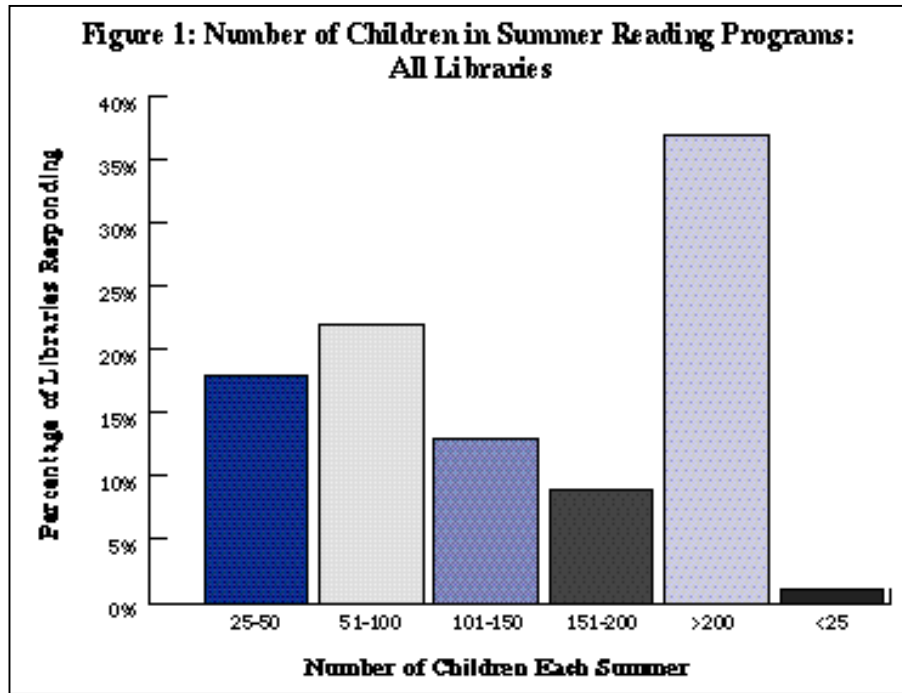
To understand the scope and nature of summer reading and preschool library programs throughout the state, we designed a large-scale survey. We considered a random sample to be the most accurate statistical measure; therefore, we sent surveys to every third library outlet listed in the directory of Pennsylvania libraries (227 surveys). Of those sent, we received 204 responses—an amazingly successful response rate of 90%. The responses came from all over the state and reflected Pennsylvania’s geographic diversity—urban, suburban, and rural library outlets were all represented in the survey. For the purpose of analysis, we divided the libraries according to the population in their service area, with 43% of the library outlets serving populations under 10,000 (we refer to them as “small” in this report); 28% serving populations numbering 10,000 to 20,000 (“medium”); and 28% serving populations over 20,000 people (“large”).

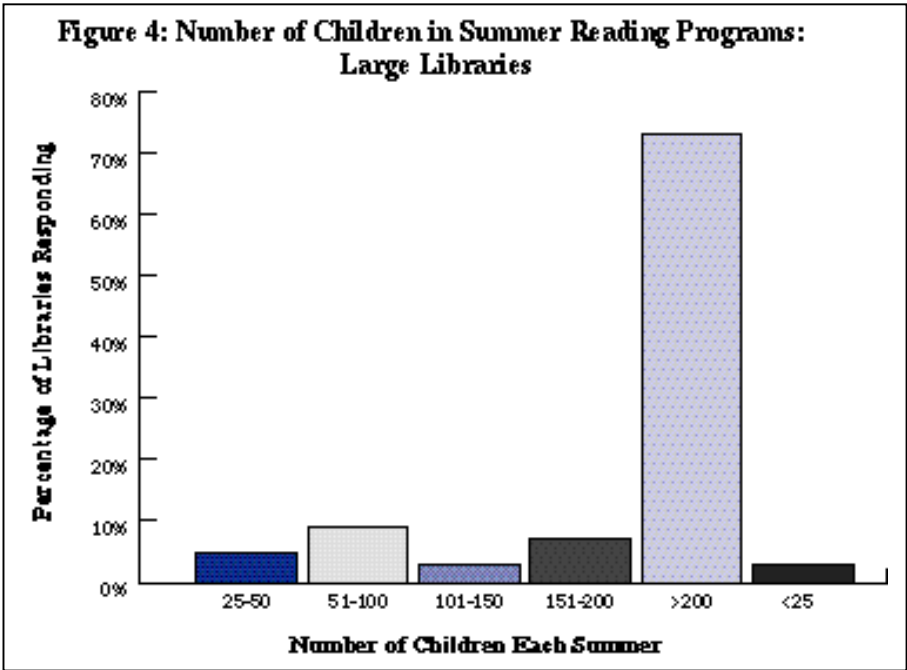
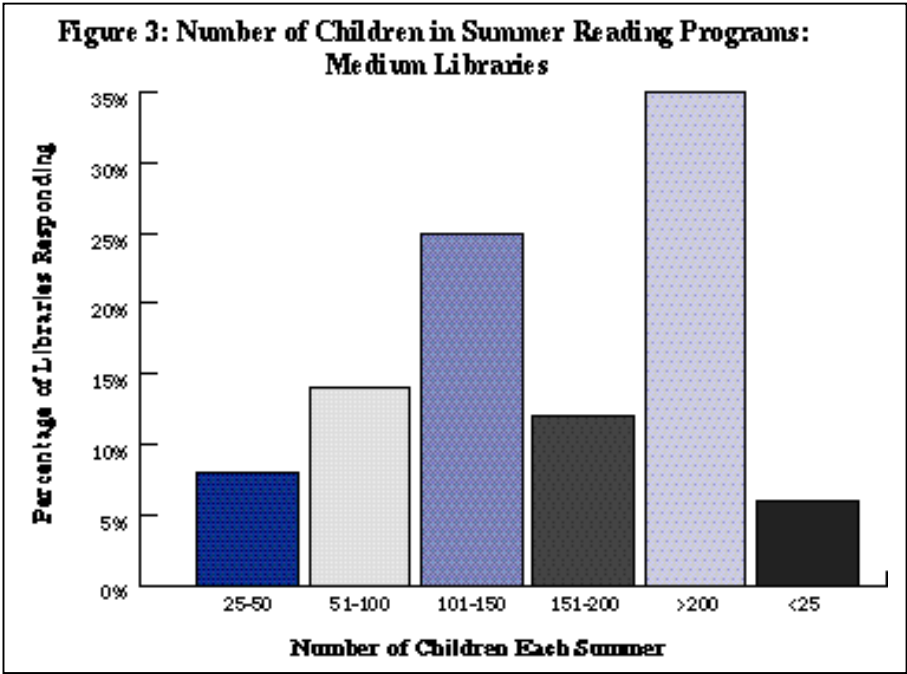
The first part of the survey focused on the scope and nature of summer reading programs; the second part focused on preschool programs.

### **Summer Reading Programs**

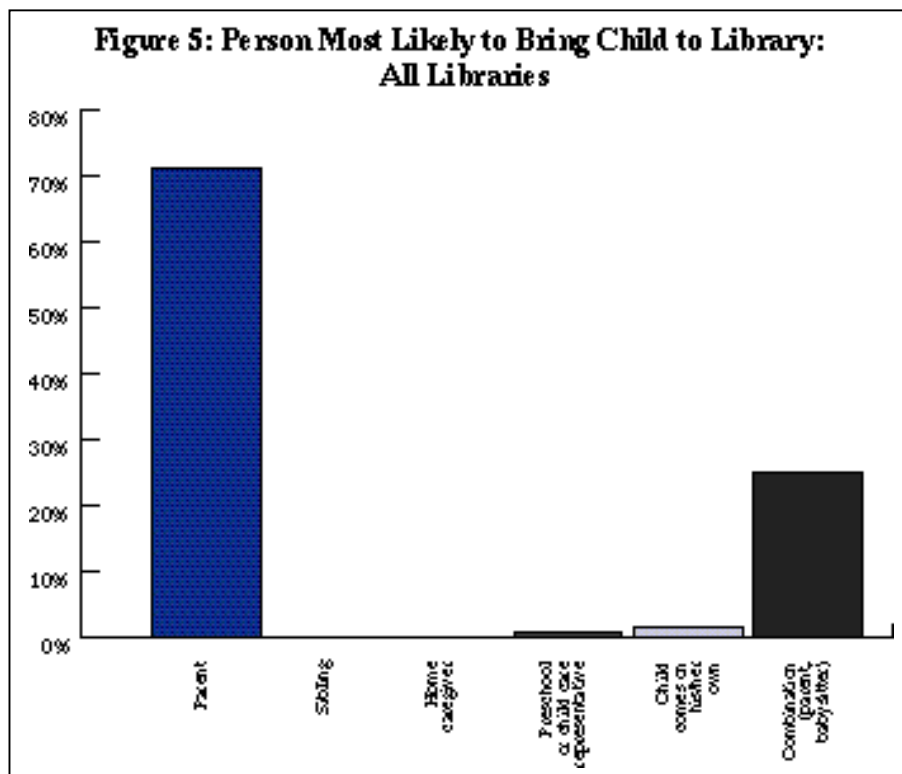
Number/age of children. For many Pennsylvania children, visits to the local library during the summer are as common as visits to the pool or the park. More than one third of the libraries (37%) said their program attracts more than 200 children each summer (see Figure 1). Twenty-two percent said their program serves 51 to 100 children. The size of each library’s summer reading program corresponds to the size of its service area. For example, 34% of the libraries serving fewer than 10,000 people said they attract between 25 and 50 summer reading program children. In libraries serving more than 20,000, however, 73% of respondents said their summer reading clubs attract more than 200 children (see Figures 2-4). Many of these larger libraries reported summer reading

programs numbering well over 1,000 children; a few mentioned attracting more than 2,000 children.





Who brings the children? Parents are most likely to bring children to libraries (see Figure 5). More than 70% of all libraries report that children are brought to the library for the summer reading programs by their parents. In about 25% of libraries, children come to the library via a variety of methods: with siblings, babysitters, or child-care representatives, or on their own. This finding suggests that outside influences or children themselves can provide the impetus for a library visit.



Program length/frequency. Although the lengths of library summer reading programs vary, the overwhelming majority (66%) report that their programs last between four and eight weeks. Another 30% said their programs last from nine to 12 weeks. Taken together, nearly 86% of libraries offer programs running more than a month in length. Program length did not vary greatly according to the size of library population served. Those serving small populations (under 10,000) are slightly less likely to have

summer reading programs lasting more than eight weeks. Only 26% of small libraries offer programs lasting longer than eight weeks, compared with 35% of medium libraries and 33% of large libraries. According to these figures, nearly all children in Pennsylvania have access to summer reading programs lasting between four and eight weeks.

Program administration. When it comes to running a successful summer reading program, libraries find they must integrate their own ingenuity with available outside resources. Our survey found that:

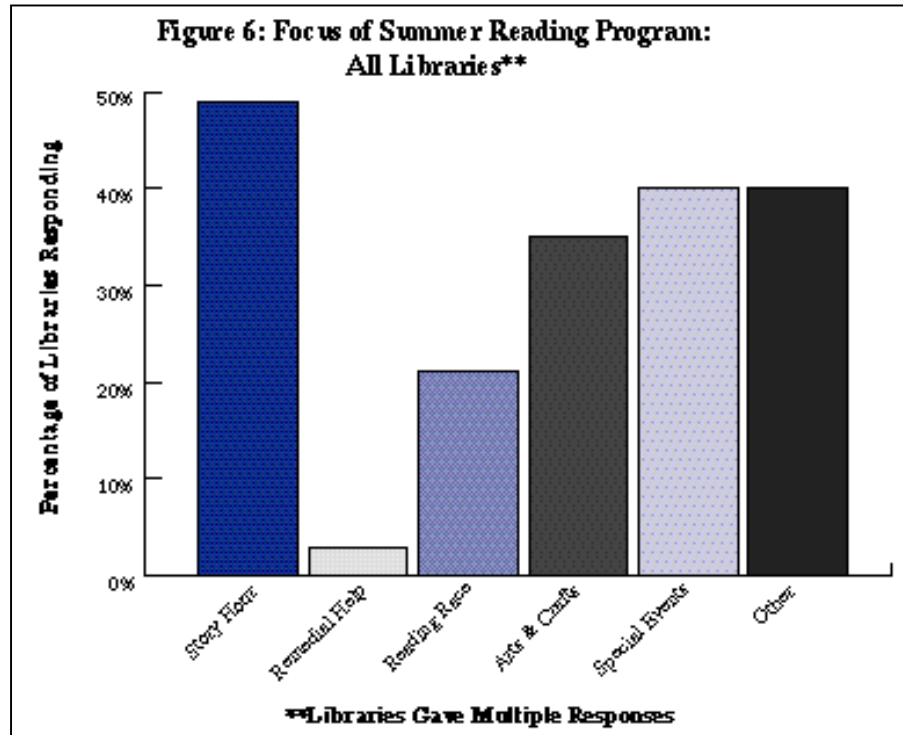
- Most often, the children's librarian runs the summer reading program. The survey showed that in 43% of the libraries, the children's librarian organizes the program. Another 17% reported that the head librarian runs the program.
- Many libraries depend on outside sources to ensure the success of their summer reading programs. According to the survey, 65% of the libraries report that community agencies assist them with the summer reading program, whereas 30% reported no such assistance. Libraries receive this assistance from a variety of sources. For example, community organizations such as the Rotary Club or Kiwanis Club may donate money, supplies, food, or prizes. Local merchants (e.g., bookstores, grocery stores) may offer money, in-kind services, or gift certificates. McDonalds, Burger King, and Pizza Hut may sponsor programs and workshops and make monetary donations. Finally, government programs, including Even Start and Americorps, may lend long-term volunteers.

Many libraries are using the Internet to communicate about their summer reading programs. At least 47% of the libraries responding said they use a web page to describe the summer reading program; 45% said they do not.

Benefits for children's reading. Without a doubt, children who participate in summer reading programs reap the benefits of greater literacy exposure. The survey showed that:

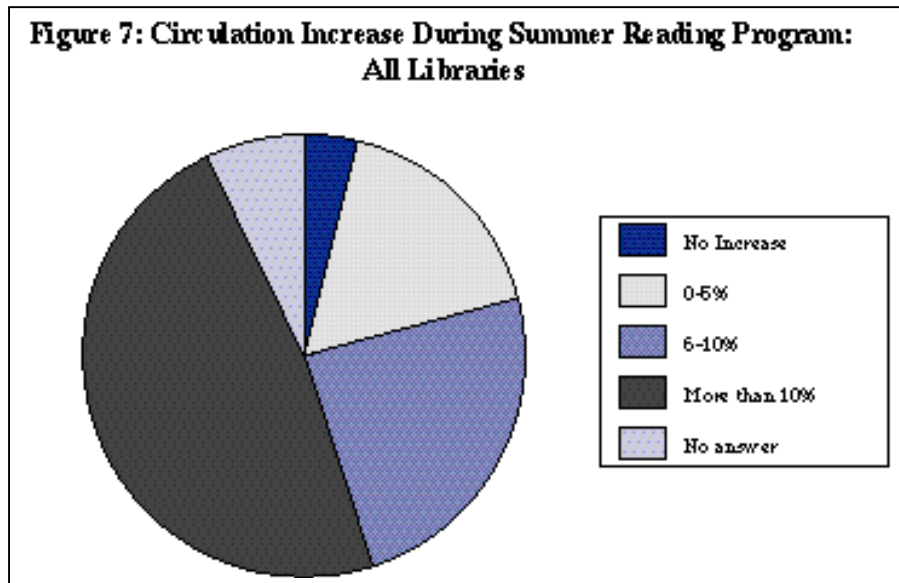
- Summer reading clubs encourage children to visit the library during the summer months. Forty-three percent of the libraries reporting said that children visited the library once a week as part of the summer reading program. Another 26% of the libraries said that children meet at the library two or three times during the week. These figures are fairly consistent across small, medium, and large library populations. Large libraries are slightly more likely to offer programs at least once a week that bring summer reading program members into the library. Eighty-seven percent of the large libraries offer programs at least once a week, compared with 70% of medium libraries, and 68% of small libraries.
- One of the most understated benefits children receive from participation in summer reading programs is the literacy-related activities they take part in. When asked to articulate the major focus of their summer reading programs, most libraries answered with multiple responses (see Figure 6). Only 20% see the major focus of the summer reading program as a “reading race” (i.e., a contest that stresses reading the most books in a certain amount of time). On the contrary, most libraries use the summer reading club to provide literacy activities similar to those children encounter in school. Nearly half of all libraries reporting see “story hour” as a major focus of their summer reading program; 40% mentioned offering “arts and crafts” activities as a

primary goal; another 40% reported “special events” as their prime area of concentration. Library size was not a factor in predicting what types of activities are offered.



- Summer reading clubs also encourage children to check more books out of the library than they would during the school year. Nearly 75% of all survey respondents said that their circulation increases between 6% and 10% during summer reading time; almost 49% of the libraries see their circulation jump by more than 10% (see Figure 7).





Librarians were asked to elaborate on the greatest benefits that summer reading programs provide children. Although nearly all replied that these programs encourage children to “read more,” “develop the reading habit,” or “learn to love reading,” many librarians dug a bit deeper and offered additional thoughts.

Many librarians recounted special events that inspired children to explore the mechanics or topic featured in more depth. “For example,” one wrote, “kids have taken out books on puppetry, ventriloquism, and animals [following special events on these topics]. Some have found that stories opened their eyes to new cultures and countries. After a session about how illustrators work and then another from an illustrator, some budding artists tried their hands at illustration.”

Others claimed that summer reading programs underscore the need for the printed word. “In this video generation,” explained another librarian, “we work hard to keep books and the written word in front of kids. For example, all winter a mother came in with her child and they took out videos—never any books because the mother thought they were old-fashioned. When we began to display the mini- and grand prizes this

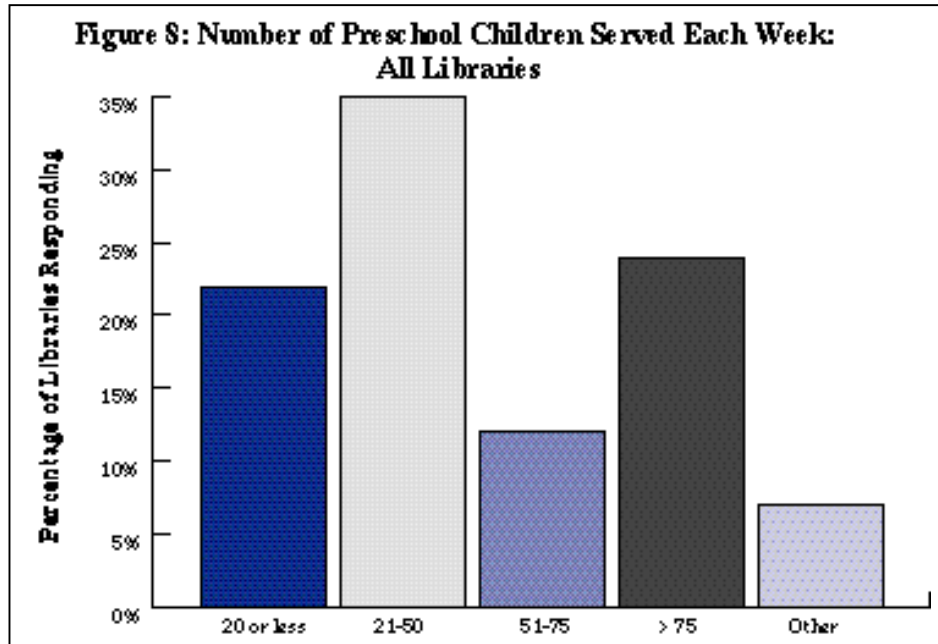
summer, the little girl saw things she liked and wanted. Now, the mother is reading 10 books per week to her daughter; they are attending story hour and the special programs, and the little girl loves to pick out her books.”

Still others said that participating in summer reading programs has been proven to improve reading skills. One librarian reported, “Parents have told me that their children’s reading skills often improve over the summer months. Teachers have also told us that they can tell when children have participated in the reading club because they don’t have to reteach what they learned last year.”

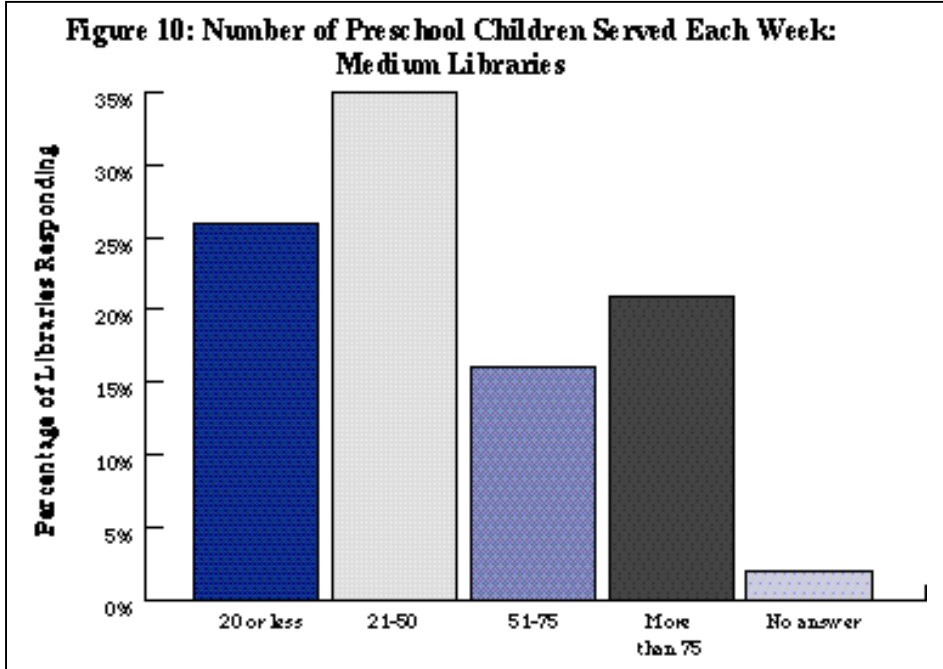
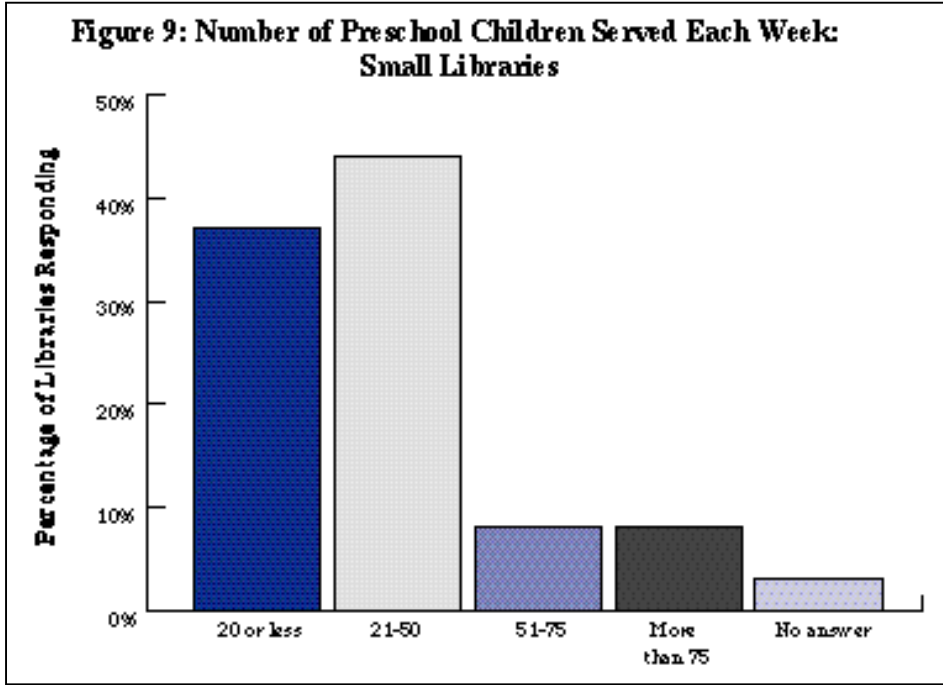
Several librarians believe that summer reading clubs help children become more familiar with librarians. “Children have the chance to develop a more personal relationship with library staff members. Children who have attended the summer reading program are much more apt to stop and talk when they borrow a book than those who only know the staff on a more impersonal basis.”

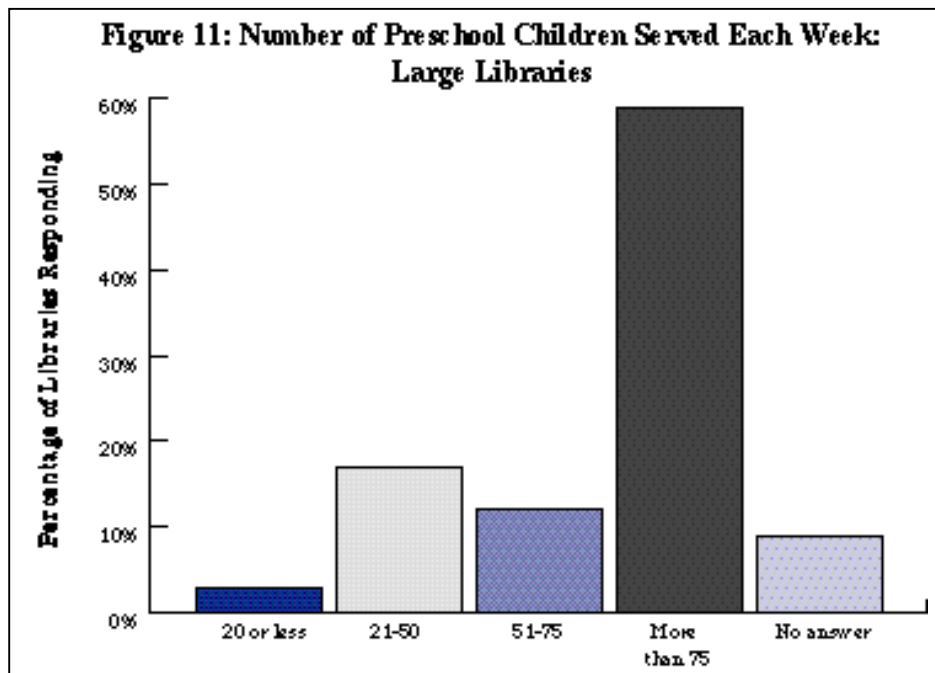
### **Preschool Programs**

Number/age of preschoolers. Nearly all of the libraries (94%) said that they offer programs or activities specially designed for children ages zero to four years; only 5.5% offered no preschool programs. The number of preschoolers served varies by library. At least 35% of the libraries responding said they have between 21 and 50 preschoolers come to their facility each week; 22% serve 20 or less (see Figure 8). Twenty-four percent report that between 51 and 75 preschoolers come each week either for programs or to select books.



The number of preschoolers served corresponds to the size of the population served by the library (see Figures 9-11). In small libraries, 34% said they serve fewer than 20 preschoolers a week; another 44% said they serve between 21 and 50 preschool children. In medium libraries, the numbers are more evenly distributed. Large libraries, by comparison, are much more likely to serve greater numbers of children. Almost 60% of large libraries serve more than 70 preschool children a week.





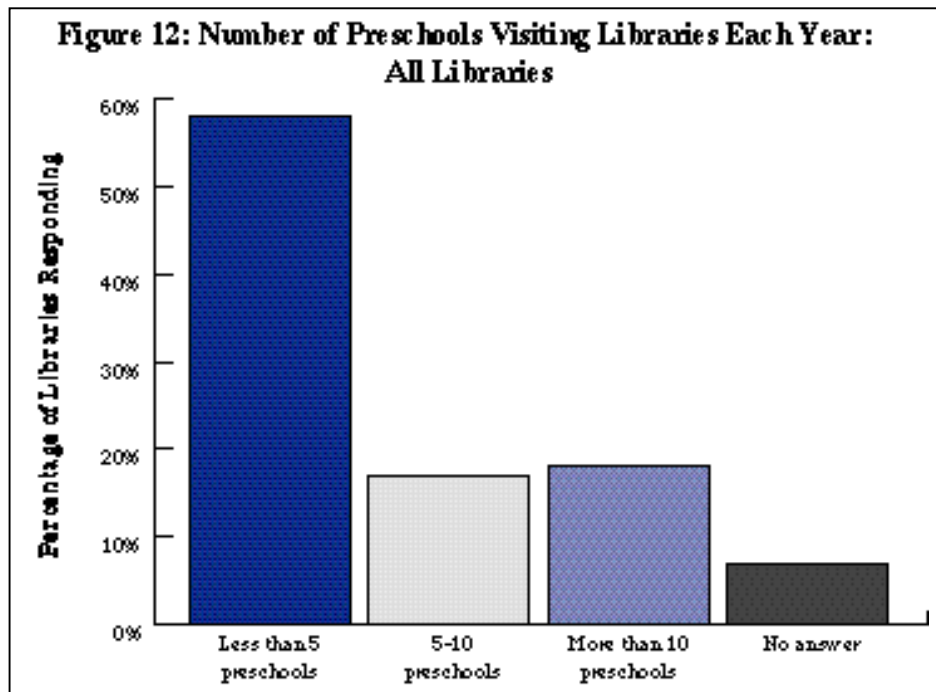
These figures indicate that libraries are working hard to accommodate the needs of children in their areas. Libraries have certainly found a niche with preschoolers and contribute greatly to children’s literacy development during those crucial early years. One librarian from a large working-class town substantiates this claim:

“Our infant story hour is drawing 70+ parents and children each week. Toddler story hour is drawing 31 parents and children each week. Public preschool story hour is bringing in 14 parents and children each week. Story hours for preschool groups by appointment here and on location are averaging 31 participants each week.”

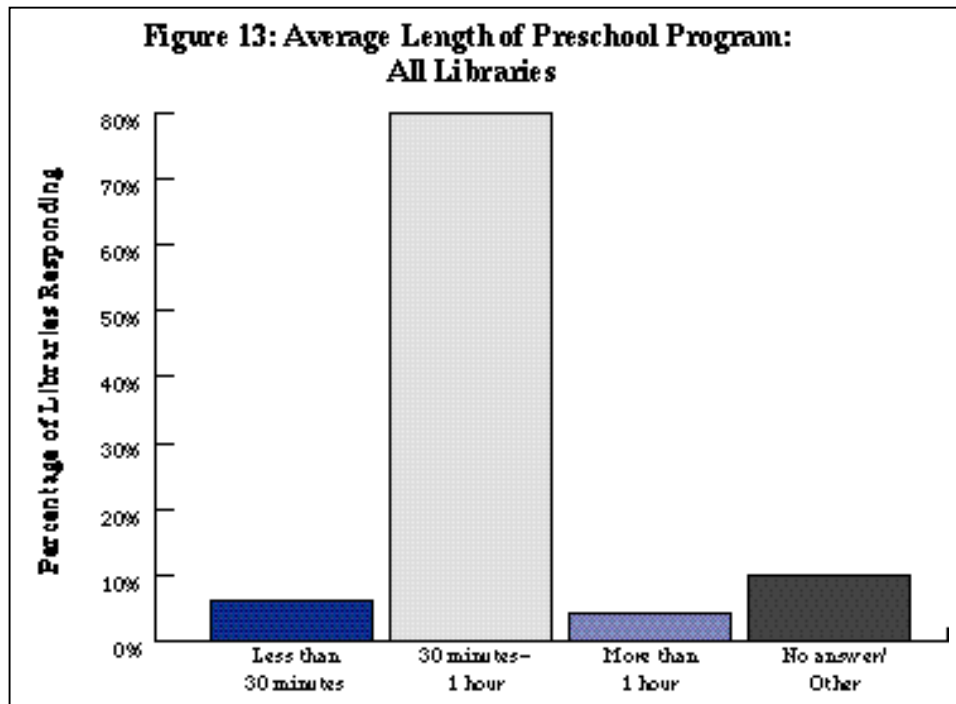
Who brings the preschoolers? Parents are most likely to bring their preschoolers to the library. The numbers, however, are not as high as they are for the older children. Sixty percent of libraries say a parent most often brings the preschooler to the library; this contrasts with 70% for the summer reading programs. Twenty-two percent of the libraries

say that a babysitter or preschool representative is as likely to bring preschoolers to the library as parents are, suggesting that many people consider a visit to the library to be an important part of a preschooler's week.

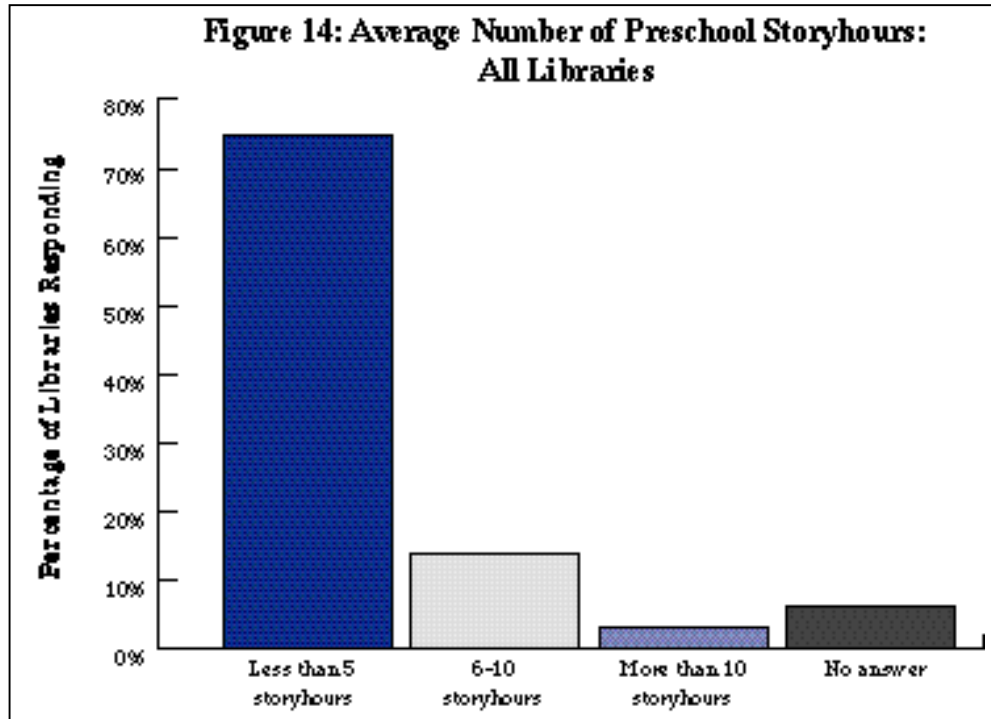
The number of preschools regularly visiting libraries varies throughout the state. Most libraries (58%) said that fewer than five preschools are frequent visitors each year. Only 16% have five to 10 preschools routinely visiting; 18% count more than 10 preschools among their frequent visitors (see Figure 12). These figures vary according to library size. Seventy percent of the small libraries and 61% of the medium libraries receive regular visits from fewer than five preschools throughout the year; the larger libraries have more preschools coming in on a regular basis. For larger libraries, 36% received regular visits from fewer than five preschools; 40% counted five to 10 preschools as regular visitors, and 17% had more than 10 preschools visiting consistently.



Program length/frequency. The amount of time libraries devote to preschool programming is fairly consistent across all libraries. Most libraries provide preschoolers with 30 to 60 minutes of programming a week (see Figure 13). Only 5% averaged less than 30 minutes and 4% offered more than one hour.



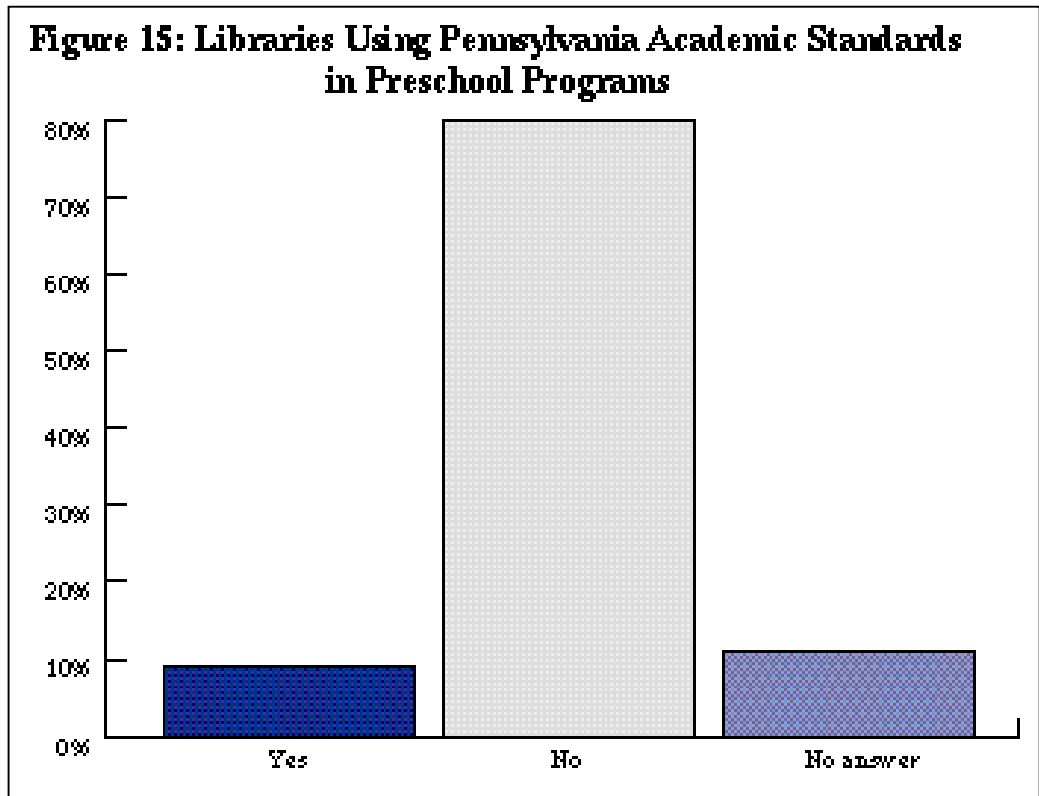
The number of story hours was also consistent throughout the state. Most libraries surveyed (74%) offer fewer than five story hours a week (see Figure 14). Another 14% reported holding six to 10 story hours a week for preschoolers. Only 3% of libraries surveyed said they hold more than 10 story hours each week.



Program administration. Although libraries often look to outside resources for assistance with the development and management of summer reading programs, they are slightly less likely to do so with preschool programs. The survey found:

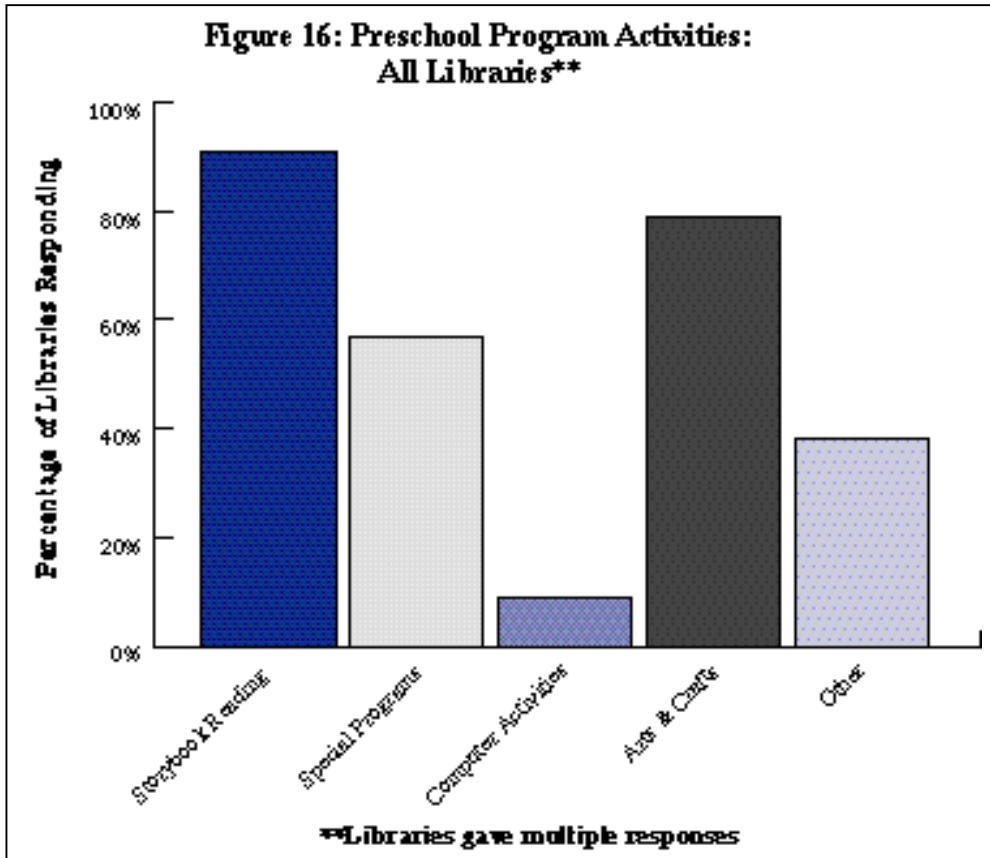
- Sixty-five percent looked to community agencies for assistance with preschool programs, a figure consistent with the data for summer reading programs;
- Only 9% of libraries reporting referred to Pennsylvania academic standards in planning preschool programs. The overwhelming majority (80%) did not consult standards (See Figure 15);
- Only 31% used online sources for program materials and ideas, while 53% did not;
- Ninety-three percent got the word out about preschool programs by making their own in-house posters and brochures.





Benefits for preschooler’s reading. Pennsylvania preschoolers have access to a wide variety of literacy activities at their local libraries. When asked what activities their preschool program involved, nearly all libraries answered with multiple responses (see Figure 16). These responses varied across library size and location, indicating that many libraries tailor their programs according to their population’s wants and needs.

Nearly all libraries (91%) offer storybook reading for their preschool clientele. A significant percentage of libraries also offer other activities to extend the literacy experience. These include arts and crafts (79%), special programs such as puppet shows and singers (56%), and a variety of other literacy-related activities (38%).



Librarians were asked to elaborate on how their preschool programs benefit children’s interest in and ability to read. Although many responded that preschool programs help to “interest/motivate/stimulate” children to read, others responded with more elaborate answers that describe what takes place when children come to story hour.

“Children are encouraged to ‘read along’—i.e., fill in missing words through repetition. This repetition provides associations with words and pictures. The youngest ones associate stories with movement and visual cues.”

“With the use of ‘big books,’ children can ‘climb’ onto stories—getting close to the shapes of letters, words, and pictures.”

“Reading picture books helps stimulate preliteracy recognition of action vocabulary, sounds, colors, etc. Fingerplays assist in developing motor skills and vocabulary.”

And finally:

“Every story the child hears is a seed planted. It’s simply a matter of the more exposure, the more payoff down the line. Children who are read to a lot don’t necessarily learn to read earlier, but once they do learn, they jump from the “go, dog, go” stage to a higher level [of] reading more quickly than others do. AND I think they can read more fluently and with more expression.”

## ***OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS***

In an effort to better understand the impact that preschool and summer reading programs have on children's developing literacy skills, we made on-site visits to libraries in different parts of the state. We selected 25 libraries throughout the state, using data gathered from the survey to focus on the most popular teaching methods and program formats. Our sample included rural libraries in Lancaster County, suburban libraries in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas, and urban locations in the Philadelphia and Scranton areas.

The goal was to select libraries that reflect the diversity of Pennsylvania's population, ranging from the small to the large, the grand to the unassuming. We visited the stately Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood, frequented by families of professors from the surrounding prestigious universities; a small trailer in Quarryville, where children of Amish farmers come each week by horse and buggy to select their books; and the Bushrod Branch in northeast Philadelphia, a central meeting place for the many children of immigrant families who reside there. In all locations, we found preschool and summer reading programs offering children the best that Pennsylvania libraries has to offer: the chance to explore, dream, and discover through the world of books.

### **Method**

In each library visited, we observed preschool and summer reading program sessions. We analyzed them for particular teaching methods and formats used and observed how children responded to such instruction. We also interviewed librarians and collected relevant materials (e.g., story extension materials, summer reading folders), which aided in our analysis. Finally, we interviewed scores of parents throughout the

state. These interviews centered on how their children responded to preschool and summer reading programs, how many books the children read, and how they felt the programs affected their children's reading skills.

## **Findings**

We found that library programs do more than encourage a "love of reading." They offer priceless opportunities for children to develop literacy skills. These opportunities, we discovered, were sometimes planned and obvious, and sometimes subtle and unplanned.

1. Programs encourage children to spend time with books. A common theme among parents of children attending preschool and summer reading programs was that their children spend an increased amount of time with books. These children not only read books; they browse in the stacks, listen to stories read by parents and librarians, and participate in activities surrounding book topics.

It is difficult to quantify the amount of time children spend with books; however, our observations and interviews revealed that children participating in summer reading and preschool programs spend a substantial amount of time reading.

- Children in the Mount Lebanon Public Library in Allegheny County compiled a paper chain of 3,500 links that wrapped around the entire children's section. Each link held the title of a book a child had read that summer.
- In Scranton, parent interviews revealed that elementary school children in the summer reading program read an average of 22.4 books. Preschoolers averaged over a hundred picture books in the summer months.
- In rural Quarryville, where reading is often the only diversion for Amish farm families, parental reports of children reading 10 books per week were very common.

As these findings suggest, summer reading clubs encourage children to read, and to read often. Research has shown that the amount of time children spend with books is crucial to reading achievement, and ultimately, to school achievement in general. Parents, children, and librarians report that the goals and structure of the summer reading program are very conducive to promoting reading. Nearly all of the parents said the incentives offered by the summer reading program are very attractive to children. A simple coupon for ice cream can often encourage the most reluctant child to read. As one parent of a seven-year-old boy said, “After reading eight books, he got a McDonald’s coupon, pencils, and stickers. After 10 books, he got a certificate to a coal mine tour. He was thrilled! ‘And all I had to do was read books,’ he said.”

2. Events get people into the library. Not only do preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to spend more time with books, they also entice children and their caregivers into the library. As part of the summer reading programs, many libraries offer special events throughout the summer. Our visits to various libraries showed a diverse array of events, only limited by librarians’ imaginations: arts and crafts sessions, balloon sculpting, picnics, magic shows, singers, animal visits, fire safety demonstrations, and games. These special summer events combine with the many preschool story hours and other regular yearly programming to encourage children and their families to visit the library.

Merely visiting the library encourages children to spend more time in a literacy-enriched atmosphere, thus setting up the opportunity for them to browse and check out books and other materials. These events, however, often take what children learn through the books and extend it into a richer literacy experience. Our visits reveal these examples of how special events extended a child’s reading experience:

- In the Mount Lebanon Public Library, more than 50 children attended a presentation by a representative from the Pennsylvania Trolley Museum. The speaker brought pictures depicting early days of the trolleys in Pittsburgh, as well as artifacts such as a real trolley bell and collector's token belt. She talked about the history of the trolley, let the children take turns ringing the trolley bell, and gave each a real trolley token. Afterwards, she pointed out some posters and other literature to read about trolleys and led the children in coloring their own paper trolley.
- In the Free Library of Philadelphia's Bushrod Branch, a favorite game played each week is "Human Tic Tac Toe." Questions center on popular children's books (Q: In the book "Molly's Pilgrim," who is Molly's Pilgrim? A: Her mom). Children are divided into Team X or Team O and take their places on the "board" after a correct answer.
- In Leola, singer Bill Frye led almost 100 children in songs that explored the world of numbers. With an enthusiastic delivery and simple stories and songs, he encouraged children to find numbers in the world around them, encouraging children and parents to explore numbers through books in the library.

3. Activities extend the reading experience. Preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to read books themselves and hear books read aloud. In addition, many programs offer activities that enrich the child's reading experience. These activities are often the same exercises found in elementary school reading classes and in preschools throughout the country. In some libraries, for example, children are required not only to read a book but also to write a short paragraph summarizing the book's main points. Other libraries require at least one art project, such as a diorama, painting, or sculpture, that illustrates a book the child read. These types of literacy-related activities have been

shown to enhance a child's reading experience by giving greater meaning to the written word and extending a child's understanding of the story.

The typical preschool story hour also offers valuable literacy experiences. By reading books, telling stories, and reciting rhymes, librarians offer children a "leg up" in developing emergent reading skills, as we saw in this story hour at the Oakland branch of the Pittsburgh library:

Patty Kelly, a children's librarian with 20 years of experience, is leading the assembled toddlers in "The More We Read Together." Sticking with the summer reading program's theme (math), she picks several counting books ("Mouse Count" and "One Crow"). She then takes a poetry break ("Keep a poem in your pocket") and a final book ("Martha Counts Her Kittens"). "Let's see if we can count the kittens in the book," she asks the audience, who count along as one child lifts the flaps and finds the kittens around the house.

4. Programs encourage parents to become involved in children's reading. A less obvious though immensely important way that preschool and summer reading programs impact children's literacy is by helping caregivers get involved in children's reading habits. This theme was articulated in interviews with parents, grandparents, camp leaders, and nannies; parents especially said that they spend more time reading to their younger children as a result of their participation in the summer reading program. In addition, many report that they spend time having their older children read to them.

Other responses indicate that parents involved in library programs are quietly, yet strongly, engaged in their children's achievement. "I see what they are reading and sometimes try to read it first to see what it is about." Other responses, such as "I help them read tough words," suggest that parents are offering valuable assistance to their children in decoding words as they read. Another common refrain was "I help them pick



out books.” Guiding children in selecting books is an invaluable aid in their early efforts to read.

Finally, it appears that summer reading and preschool programs help parents by displacing other activities in which children might engage. When asked what children might be doing were they not involved in library programs, parents were quick to say the library offered more than the alternatives: “video games,” “television,” “hanging around the house,” “fighting,” and, last but not least, “driving me crazy!”

### **Conclusion**

For many children, parents, and caregivers, preschool and summer reading programs offer pleasant, structured activities to engage children when they are not in school or preschool. Many parents also appreciate the library’s efforts at encouraging their children to read. However, preschool and summer reading programs offer more than just a way to fill time. Our visits to libraries throughout the state show that these programs help develop strong reading skills in Pennsylvania’s children. The programs encourage children to enjoy reading and give them opportunities to spend lots of time with books—a first step toward developing strong reading skills. Children also benefit from the rich literacy experiences afforded by the many special events and organized programs the library offers. Finally, parents of children engaged in preschool and summer reading programs appear to be strongly invested in their children’s reading achievement. For thousands of children throughout Pennsylvania, preschool and summer reading programs offer a strong step up in their climb toward reading achievement, and ultimately, success in school.

## ***EXPERIMENTAL STUDY***

Although library summer reading programs have been the staple for many Pennsylvania children for decades, and teachers and parents have attested that these programs improve children's reading, few empirical studies have examined how these programs benefit children. At the funder's request, we tackled this issue, hoping to shed some light on the connection between library summer reading programs and children's reading achievement.

Our research took us to several urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia, to areas where books are often scarce and children's reading levels are consequently often low. The libraries in these communities are lively, vital centers full of



books, caring professionals, and eager children. Working parents from these neighborhoods have few child-care options when school is out. The library's summer reading program is an inexpensive way to keep children busy and engaged in purposeful activity throughout the summer. In reality, keeping these children out of trouble is these parents' first priority; improved reading achievement is an added bonus.

### **Method**

We conducted the study at four sites throughout the city of Philadelphia. At each of two locations, a group of children regularly attended their library's summer reading programs. Both libraries are located in highly urban areas; one is in North Philadelphia and the other is closer to Center City. The libraries featured active summer reading programs, each with about 150 children signed up for an eight-week program. The

programs offered several special events as well as the usual gifts and giveaways for reading a certain number of books. Librarians at both locations were among the city's best, offering years of experience along with enthusiasm for helping children from needy areas.

The other two groups of children attended day camps situated near their respective libraries. The day camps featured normal activities for summer camp programs—swimming, arts and crafts, field trips—but no reading programs of any sort. None of these children was involved in a library summer reading program.

The children in all four groups came from similar backgrounds. All came from low-income families. All of their parents needed to work, but most families had relatively limited options for child care during the summer.

The sample size for children in the library program was 105; the sample size for children in the camp program was 89. Gender of the children was divided nearly equally. From the libraries, we identified 60 males and 45 females. From the camps, 40 males and 49 females. Children in both programs were primarily African American. In the library programs, 76 children were African American, 20 were Asian, and nine were White; in the camps, 70 were African American, four were Asian, and 15 were White.

Testing began after children had been in their respective summer programs for a few weeks. After asking their grade levels in school, we gave them the following tests:

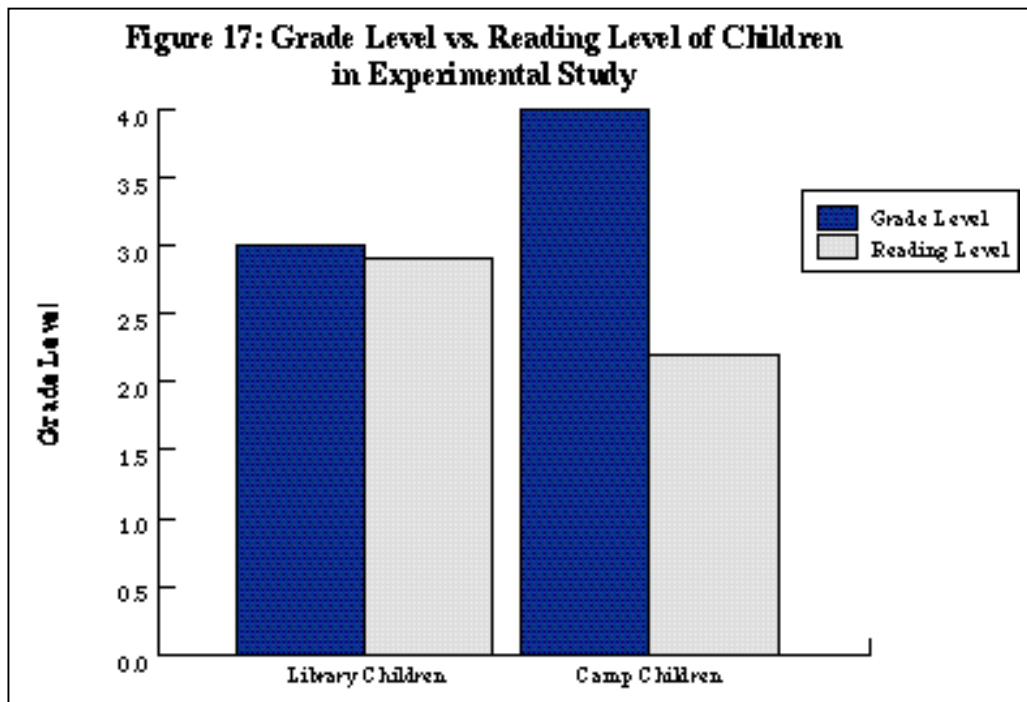
- Johns Reading Inventory Test (1990): a measure of a child's reading ability which pinpoints a child's instructional level in reading; and
- Author Recognition Test: a measure of how familiar children are with children's literature. Subjects are asked to recognize famous authors and titles of children's books appropriate to their age group.

We attempted to conduct posttests using similar measures, but had little success. The majority of the children in these programs did not attend either setting on a regular basis. Many would come to the library or camp at various times during the summer, but few were available at the end of the programs to complete posttests. For example, many of the children signed up for library summer reading programs at the beginning of the summer and attended regularly for a few weeks; they would then come more sporadically at the end of the summer. Children rarely attended the day camps for the whole summer; they would come for a few weeks at a time, take off for several weeks, and then return for a few more. Since very few of the children completed either library or camp program, results were impossible to correlate.

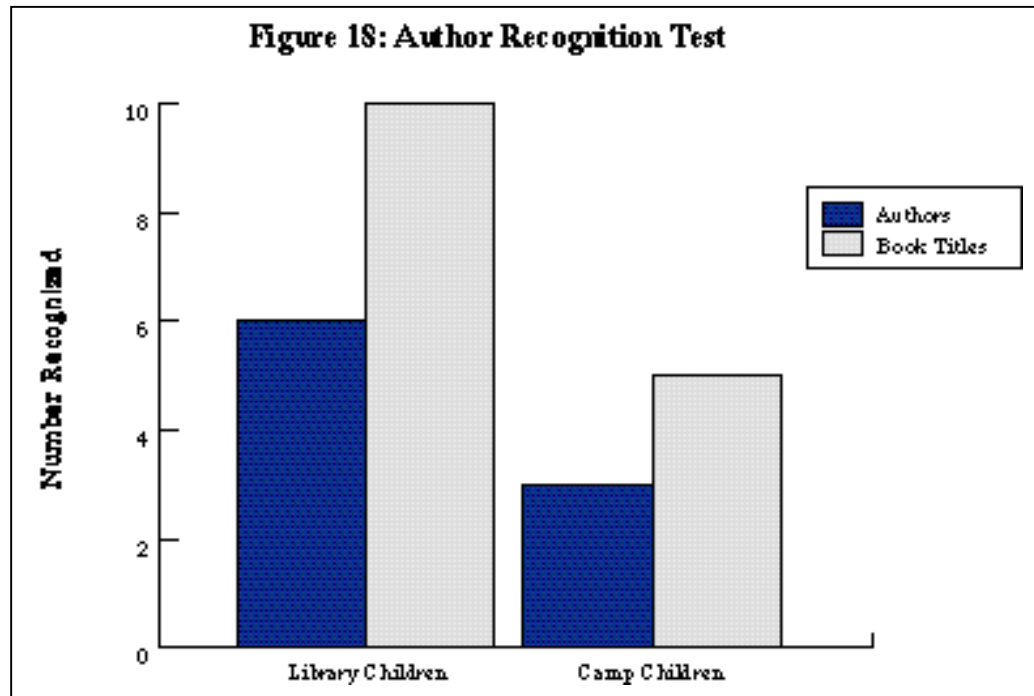
### **Findings**

Despite the lack of posttest measures, our findings point to great success for children who attend library programs. Even if children only come for short periods, those who attend summer library programs read on a higher level than those who do not come at all.

On the whole, children attending the library program were reading closer to their grade level than the control group (see Figure 17). The average grade level of children attending library summer reading programs was third grade; their average reading level was 2.9, showing that these children read nearly at their grade level. The children attending the camp programs, however, read even further below grade level. The average grade level for the camp children was fourth grade. The camp children's average reading level, however, was only 2.2, showing a significant difference between their reading ability and grade in school.



Children in both programs did not recognize many children’s book authors or titles (see Figure 18). Once again, those attending the library programs performed significantly better than did children in the camp programs. “Library” children recognized an average of six authors and 10 titles out of the 25 authors and titles measured on the Author Recognition Test. Camp children could only identify three authors and five titles.



### Discussion

The lack of posttest measures means that we could not measure the differences between the two groups over time. The differences we found in initial measures, however, show statistically significant differences in reading ability and other indicators of reading achievement between children who attend summer reading programs and those who do not. Summer library activities, therefore, are associated with reading achievement more than camp activities are. This suggests that children’s time spent in the library significantly enhances their reading achievement, compared to other recreational activities.

These findings are particularly important considering the characteristics of the population studied. All of these children came from low-income working families. Their reading levels are not high—even the library children were not reading up to grade level. The camp children had particularly low reading scores. Their exposure to books at home

may be limited, considering the economic burden of buying books. The library, then, could be the sole resource for these children's reading material. As our findings show, children from needy neighborhoods who tend to visit the library are higher achievers and are exposed to books more often than those in alternative programs.

Further research is needed before we can determine whether the differences between the two groups represent natural selection (i.e., children who are greater achievers tend to go to the library) or a factor that relates to the activities in the summer reading program. The findings do show, however, that children who attend summer reading programs read significantly better than those who attend no formal summer reading program. The public library is important to the reading achievement of many children, particularly those children who lack other reading resources.

## *CONCLUSION*

As this evaluation suggests, public libraries have long fostered literacy skills in our nation's children. In Pennsylvania, public libraries have taken up this mission with zeal. Children in this state benefit from a broad array of preschool and summer reading programs designed to enhance their reading skills. In particular, our research showed the following benefits for Pennsylvania's children:

- A survey of Pennsylvania libraries showed that summer reading programs are flourishing, attracting large numbers of children and families to the library each year. More than one third of the libraries surveyed said that their program brings in more than 200 children each summer; another 22% said their program involves 51 to 100 children. The majority of these programs offer activities for children lasting between four and eight weeks. Forty-three percent of the libraries said that children visit the library once a week during the summer reading program, and 75% said their circulation increases between 6% and 10% during this time.
- Children participating in summer reading programs benefit from the many literacy-related activities featured. In addition to reading books, children in summer reading clubs participate in story hours, arts and crafts, and special events designed to extend literacy experiences gained while reading books.





- Preschool children are equally well served. Nearly all Pennsylvania libraries surveyed (94%) offer preschool programs. Nearly one quarter of the libraries report at least 50 preschoolers visiting each week; 35% serve between 21 and 50 children each week. Nearly 60% of large libraries say more than 70 preschoolers visit their facility each week.
- Preschool literacy activities are a significant focus for most libraries. Nearly 91% offer storytime for preschoolers each week, 79% have arts and crafts, and 56% schedule special events.
- Observations at various libraries and interviews with parents, children, and library staff reveal that preschool and summer reading programs encourage children to spend significant amounts of time with books—a first step toward reading achievement.
- Observations and interviews also indicate that library programs encourage parents to play greater roles in their child’s literacy development—another factor leading to reading achievement.
- Finally, experimental methods showed that children who attend library summer reading programs read significantly better than those children who attend a camp program, suggesting that time spent in the library significantly enhances children’s reading achievement when compared to activities more purely recreational in nature. This finding underscores the important position the library plays in the reading achievement of all children, particularly those who lack access to books and other reading materials in their daily lives.

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## Appendix 1

### ***SURVEY INSTRUMENT***

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Temple University has been funded by the PA Department of Education, Library Division to conduct a survey and would greatly appreciate your cooperation.

At the request of the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, we have been asked to investigate preschool and summer reading programs offered by public libraries throughout Pennsylvania. Although millions of children have benefited from these programs over the years, we hope to gauge how these programs influence children's reading achievement and their ability to meet academic standards as defined by Pennsylvania.

In light of this, kindly complete this brief questionnaire below. You may type your answers beside the questions, and then merely reply to this email. The survey should not take you more than 15 minutes to complete.

Your response will greatly assist us in achieving our goals for the project and of serving the children of Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

The Temple University Library Project

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#### ***I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION***

1. What is the Library Name?
2. What is the Library Location Number?
3. What is the Total Population in the Service Area?
4. What is the Child Population in the Service Area:
5. As the Contact Person completing this survey, please give us your Name and your Position/Title?

#### ***II. SUMMER READING PROGRAM***

1. About how many children are involved in summer reading program?
  - a. 25 to 50
  - b. 51 to 100
  - c. 101 to 150
  - d. 151 to 200
  - e. More than 200

2. What are the ages of the children participating in the summer reading program?
  - a. 0 to 4 years
  - b. 5 to 12 years
  - c. 12 to 18 years
  - d. Other (Please Specify)
  
3. Who is the person most likely to bring the child to the library?
  - a. Parent Representative
  - b. Sibling
  - c. Home Caregiver (babysitter)
  - d. Preschool or Child Care Center
  - e. Child comes on his or her own
  
4. How long is the summer reading program?
  - a. Less than 4 weeks
  - b. 4 to 8 weeks
  - c. 9 to 12 weeks
  - d. More than 12 weeks
  
5. How frequently do the children meet as part of the program?
  - a. Once a week
  - b. 2 to 3 times a week
  - c. No scheduled time
  - d. Other (please specify)
  
6. Who is the person responsible for organizing summer reading program?
  - a. Children's librarian
  - b. Head librarian
  - c. Other (please specify)
  
7. What is the major focus of summer reading program?
  - a. Story hour
  - b. Remedial help
  - c. Reading race
  - d. Arts and crafts
  - e. Special events (please specify)
  - f. Other (please specify)
  
8. What is the percent of circulation increase from June 1 as a result of the summer reading program?
  - a. No increase
  - b. 0 to 5%
  - c. 6 to 10%
  - d. More than 10%

### ***III. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS***

1. What makes your program special? What do you do that may be different from other programs that you may be familiar with?
2. Do other community agencies assist with the summer reading program? Please name the agencies and describe how they assist you.
3. How does your summer reading program benefit the children involved? What do they gain from their participation? Please give us specific examples (e.g., child borrows more books from the library every week).
4. Do you have a web page that describes your summer reading program? Please indicate the appropriate URL address.

#### ***IV. PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS***

1. Does your library have any programs or activities specially designed for preschoolers (children ages 0 to 4 years)? If yes, please list them and provide a short description if the name might not be self-explanatory.
2. What is the number of preschool children served in an average week?
  - a. 20 or less
  - b. 21 to 50
  - c. 51 to 75
  - d. More than 75
3. What is the number of preschools that visit on a regular basis during the year?
  - a. Less than 5 preschools
  - b. Between 5 and 10 preschools
  - c. More than 10 preschools
4. Who is the person most likely to bring the preschooler to the library?
  - a. Parent
  - b. Sibling Representative
  - c. Home Caregiver (babysitter)
  - d. Preschool (or Child Care Center)
5. What is the average length of the program?
  - a. Less than 30 minutes
  - b. 30 minutes to 1 hour
  - c. More than 1 hour
6. What is the number of story hours for preschool children in an average week?
  - a. Less than 5 story hours
  - b. 6 to 10 story hours
  - c. More than 10 story hours
7. What activities does your program involve? Please note all that apply.
  - a. Storybook reading
  - b. Computer activities
  - c. Arts and crafts
  - d. Special programs (i.e., puppet shows)
  - e. Other (Please specify)

#### ***V. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS***

1. Do other community agencies assist with the preschool program? If yes, please name them specifically, and tell how they assist you.
2. How do your preschool programs benefit children's interest in reading and their ability?
3. Do you use/refer to the Pennsylvania academic standards in your program planning at any age level?

4. How do you get the word out about your programs? Do you use in-house posters/brochures? Advertising?
5. Do you use any online sources as sources for program materials or ideas? If yes, please include the web sites (URL address)

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!

## Appendix 2

### ***SITES VISITED***

#### Allegheny County

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh -- Oakland Branch  
Mount Lebanon Public Library

#### Chester County

Chester County Library

#### Lackawanna County

Scranton Public Library

#### Lancaster County

Quarryville Library  
Leona Library

#### Montgomery County

Montgomery County/Norristown  
Conshohocken Library  
William Jeanes Library, Whitmarsh Township  
Whitpain Township Library  
Springfield Township Library

#### Philadelphia County -- Free Library of Philadelphia:

Andorra Branch  
Bushrod Branch  
Cecil B. Moore Branch  
Eastwick Branch  
Falls of Schuylkill Branch  
Holmesburg Branch  
Kensington Branch  
Kingsessing Branch  
Lehigh Ave. Branch  
Nictown/Tioga Branch  
Northwest Regional Branch  
Northeast Regional Branch  
Queen Memorial Branch  
West Oak Lane Branch



