

MAKING AN IMPACT

Through HCF Grants

Summer Literacy for Skill and Fun

Students in Hamilton's poorest neighbourhoods are preventing "summer slide" – the loss of key skills over the summer months. Testing shows that students in low-income families lose reading and literacy skills when school is out for the summer. In wealthier families, children maintain or increase their literacy level.

The YWCA Summer Literacy Program is tackling that challenge and it has produced dramatic results.

Students aged five to ten from north-end schools (such as Bennetto, Gibson, Parkdale, King George and Sanford) spend 15 August mornings enrolled in reading activities, games, crafts, music and drama. They have snacks, win prizes, take home a new backpack and books – and generally have a ball. They are overseen by teenaged volunteers who take a special eight-session Leadership Training Workshop in the spring. The teenagers become reading coaches for the young children and help to plan the daily program using an industry standard: the All Star Reading Program strategy.

In 2006, the sixth year of the program, 300 children and 15 teenaged volunteers participated.

The reading level of participants is tested in June and then again in the first week of school, using the DRA (diagnostic reading assessment tool) that is standard across the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board. Improvement is dramatic: more than 85 percent of the children who participate in the program maintain their June DRA level or improve by one or more levels. Their feelings about reading improve too: on a four-point scale from "hate" to "love" they move consistently toward "love."

The program can be offered free of charge to neighbourhood kids, thanks to an expanding group of partners: YWCA Hamilton, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Downtown Rotary Club, Hamilton Public Library, Welcome Inn, Wrap Around, and Hamilton Community Foundation

How HCF is Helping

- *Hamilton Community Foundation has made two Tackling Poverty Together (TPT) grants of \$25,000 from the Community Fund to the YWCA Summer Literacy program.*
- *"Literacy is one of life's basic skills," says HCF's Carolyn Milne. "But research shows that kids in low income neighbourhoods lose ground over the summer. This program turns that around and gives children the start they need to succeed in school and in life."*

Literacy in Hamilton

The connection between literacy and economic/social success is well-documented:

- Eighty percent of Canadians at the lowest literacy level have no income, or income of less than \$27,000.
- Low literacy equals high unemployment rate (26 percent).
- In 2002, every senior Kindergarten child in Hamilton participated in the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI measures how ready children are to begin learning at school, in five domains. Although Hamilton's overall scores were close to the national average, Hamilton children were considerably lower in the domain of language and cognitive development.
- Another measure shows that children who start off at a disadvantage have difficulty catching up. By Grade 3, only 49 percent of HWDSB students are reading at Level 3 and 4. (This is below the provincial average.) By Grade 10, about 22 percent do not pass the provincial literacy test.

“Summer slide” or “summer reading loss” is a well-documented problem:

- The reading skill of low-income kids declines over the school break, while higher income students improve or remain the same. The predictor of that loss or gain is whether a child reads during the summer.
- Kids in poor families often depend on school as their source of books; library branches are scarce in poor neighbourhoods; the possibility of library fines if books aren't returned may also discourage low-income families from using libraries.

One Family's Story

Amy and Jim are 7 and 8 years old. They live with their mother in social housing near Bennetto School. They are from Somalia. Mom is learning English, enrolled in ESL courses. The children have attended the YWCA Summer Literacy program for two summers.

The first year, Jim knew only 18 of the 26 alphabet letters. Amy was a bit stronger, but both were below their grade level when assessed. Their school selected them to attend the summer literacy program and, at first, they were reluctant. Mom was keen, though, both for their learning and for some summer fun.

At the end of the first week, both children were picked as All Star Readers of the Day and received a prize pack sponsored by Hamilton Public Library. This was the family's first introduction to the library. All three immediately went and got library cards – and the change was dramatic. Staff said it was as if Amy learned to read overnight. She went back to school reading two levels higher. Jim started to master the basics, gained confidence and improved three levels – but he was still five levels below his grade.

The second year, when they enrolled in the YWCA Summer Literacy Program again, Jim had gotten close to grade level and Amy was above it. They thrived in the second program and participated in every activity, making lots of new friends. When tested in September, Amy had maintained her DRA level and Jim had reached his grade level.

For Jim and Amy's mother, the program was a godsend – along with the dramatic improvement in their reading skills, it gave the children social activity and a peer group she could not have provided for them.

Who Wins With YWCA Summer Literacy Program

- *Low-income kids maintain or increase their reading skills over the summer break; their attitude toward reading improves; their self-esteem increases; they make friends and have fun.*
- *Parents see their child improve, they become more involved in their child's learning and learn themselves that reading can be fun.*
- *Teenage volunteers learn teaching and leadership skills.*
- *Schools see high-need students receive the help they need to succeed.*
- *The community benefits from a better prepared population.*