

Set The Books Free: Compelling reasons why your school library should embrace summer lending as a stand for equity.

By: Kelly Johnson

The final bell rings and the sound of excited, happy voices echo down the hallways of schools across Canada marking the beginning of the long awaited summer vacation. The anticipation of freedom from routine spills out the front doors as students head out for their extended break. For many students, summer joy spells enriching opportunities: adventure, travel, summer camps, and possibilities to engage and continue to learn in a myriad of ways. Yet, for a great many students, summer break equates to long days of unstructured time with little or no access to stimulating and educational experiences (Davies & Aurini, 2013). The research demonstrates that during the summer months many children and more specifically children from lower income families, experience loss of knowledge and skill. Coined summer slide, or summer learning loss, this phenomena refers to widening achievement gaps that increase significantly over time (Munro, 2022). For our interests this slide happens particularly in the area of literacy, and we will see that this burden is disproportionately borne by families who are members of equity seeking groups.

Access and Equity

Across Canada, public libraries have sought to bridge the summer literacy gap by offering enticing free reading programs which often include fun incentives and rewards. The TD Summer Reading club, sponsored by TD in partnership with Toronto Public Library and Library and Archives Canada reaches 2,200 libraries across the country. The research solidly demonstrates, “summer reading programs in public libraries can contribute to maintaining reading progress and proficiency, and that the recreational reading that is available is available to all students regardless of socioeconomic status through the public library” (Bogel, 2012). Yet, for many families, a trip to the local public library presents a series of daunting tasks which may include long trips on public transit, and finding an adult to accompany if both parents are working outside of the home. Families may face language differences, tight finances, time constraints, and childcare juggling. For families living in rural areas, libraries may be few and far between and keep limited hours of operation. Even for urban families, entire sections of cities may be “book deserts” where the likelihood that one could find a book in these neighborhoods for purchase is very slim (Neuman & Moland, 2019), and with few or no booksellers featuring a rich selection of stories curated for kids. When we consider the idea of summer lending from school libraries through an equity lens, there are many compelling factors to support the practice.

Inquiry Question

In what ways may lending our collection of school library books over the summer impact literacy and address inequity in access to books for our students?

School libraries: applying equity

Providing books for children to practice accuracy and fluency is an imperative strategy to combat loss acquired in reading (Munro, 2022), but perhaps of even greater significance is that making school library books available to our students creates the necessary vehicle for equalizing access to books, regardless of socioeconomic factors. In his book, *How to be an Antiracist*, Ibram Kendi poses the question: “What if we realize that the best way to ensure an effective educational system is...by standardizing the opportunities that are available to all students?” (Kendi, 2023). Consider, our school library collections represent the best selection of books for all of the students in our local community. As trained specialists in literacy, teacher-librarians curate a treasury of material that is current and appealing to kids. School library collections reflect the interests and needs of their local community, they are culturally responsive and they represent the diversity of the children they serve. Teacher-librarians work to create collections that usually include thousands of books which are infinitely appealing and meaningful to children and that reflect the experience of kids today. And as the anecdotal evidence bears, kids feel comfortable in their own school library where they have skills and understanding of how the library is organized and where to locate the books they love. School library book collections are mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) and as such belong in the hands of the people who benefit the most - our students.

Everyone wins and no one loses

In the scenario of summer lending I propose, school library collections would be open for lending to students at the end of the year in June and books would be returned the following September. I posit that this fundamental shift in borrowing practice addresses several inequities, while simultaneously championing literacy for all. Opening our collections to all students levels the playing field by putting books in the hands of all students, and is of particular value to those most vulnerable to summer learning loss. “Policies determine the success of groups” (Kendi, 2023), and a summer lending policy has the potential to benefit untold numbers of Canadian students. Regardless of place of residence, be it urban or rural, book desert or not, all students would have fair access to reading material and continuous learning for the summer months. As an additional benefit, in gaining momentum for school library summer lending programs, excitement and

anticipation builds which further serves to grow a culture of reading and a love for story. The alternative and status quo offers few benefits to anyone. Thousands of dollars of precious resources sitting housed in closed schools for months at a time as they age out. A wasted resource and a squandered opportunity to apply equity in way that makes sense, is virtually free, and requires not much added effort for teacher-librarians and the library leadership team.

Take courage


Leading Learning Standards of Practice for Canadian School Libraries provides measurable standards and benchmarks for success in a school library and are outlined with growth indicators as school libraries progress and develop along the path towards being powerful places of learning. These are school libraries that are leading their communities into the future. The following two standards may help to lend courage to any library leadership team considering summer lending.

STANDARD



Facilitating Collaborative Engagement to Cultivate and Empower a Community of Learners


Vision for Learning



How might the vision for the LLC help shape a wider vision of the learning community?

LLC builds learning communities and is responsive to evolving school, district and global changes.

STANDARD



Advancing the Learning Community to achieve school goals

Planning for School Improvement



How might the Library Learning Commons (LLC) leadership team drive school-wide improvement?

LLC leadership team develops and implements school improvement initiatives that are a model for future-oriented learning.

In both of these standards we can see that the practice of opening collections for summer use is well supported by our guiding documents. These standards ground our work and in this case, I propose, support summer lending as practice that improves student's lives while being responsive to the learning community: "Ultimately, the measure of the success of the school library program is the impact that it makes on the lives of the students." (Foundations for School Library Learning Commons in Canada: A Framework for Success, p5).

When asked about barriers to summer lending, teacher-librarians cite concerns about potential loss of books, how to develop efficient systems for supporting the program, time constraints, and concerns that staff and administration may not support the summer lending initiative. In 2023, three BC school teacher-librarians collaborated to introduce (or re-introduce) summer lending to their schools. Let's take a closer look at the data from Garden City Elementary in Richmond, BC, Sardis Elementary in Chilliwack, BC, and KVR Middle School in Penticton, BC.

2023 Snapshots of 3 schools

Garden City Elementary (1st year of summer lending)

K-7 dual track school of 386 students in Richmond, BC, (pop. 217,239)

585 books borrowed

56 students in grades 3-6

Total losses: 5 books (representing a total loss of .008%)

Sardis Elementary (re-starting summer lending after Covid)

K-5 Elementary school of 440 students in Chilliwack, BC (pop.83,790)

800 books borrowed

46 students in grades K-5

Total losses: 1 book (representing .001% loss)

KVR Middle School (1st year of summer lending)

Grades 6-8 Bilingual (French/English) middle school of 489 students in Penticton, BC (pop. 38,896)

110 books borrowed

Students in grades 6 and 7

Total losses: 1 book (representing 0.9% loss)

2024 Snapshot of 3 schools

Garden City Elementary (2nd year of summer lending)

680 books borrowed

66 students in grades 2-6 (expanded to include grade 2s this year)

Change in teacher-librarian over the summer makes this number more difficult to track, but new TL reports that very few, if any were lost.

Sardis Elementary (2nd year of summer lending post-Covid break)

320 books borrowed

24 students in grades K-5

Total losses: 0

KVR Middle School (2nd year of summer lending)

Transitional year for the school as they convert to K-7 so just one grade able to participate (grade 6)

37 books borrowed

Total losses: 0

These numbers provide a reassuring story of school summer lending success! At all three sites, over the span of two summer lending sessions, losses have proven statistically insignificant at less than 1%. Engagement is high among the students invited to participate, and the teacher-librarians at all three sites have committed to continue summer lending practice into the future.

Getting started

Next to concerns about book losses, teacher-librarians cited concerns about how to get started, how to develop efficient summer lending systems, how to garner support from teachers and administrators and how to engage family and student buy-in. Here are some suggestions for success from our three case study school teacher-librarians, Kelly Johnson, Christopher Hunt, and Natasha Stutz.

Gain momentum

- in the weeks leading up to summer leverage social media with messages and campaigns
- pitch to your administrative team and outline the solid reasoning behind summer lending
- present to your fellow colleagues at a staff meeting and sway them with your convincing argument that this is good for kids, good for schools, good for the collection, and an effective tool for equity and access
- Send a letter to your parents (or ask PAC to forward) that explains the how and why of a robust summer lending program

Build excitement

- talk up summer lending in your library during students' library blocks or visit class to class to explain how it will work

- consider doing a survey to gauge student interest and to invite kids' opinions about summer lending (this becomes valuable data to present to your colleagues after the summer lending initiative is complete).
 - surveys for our case study schools included questions such as:
 - Do you think borrowing books from our school during the summer is a good idea?
 - Would you participate?
 - How many books should we allow students to take home for the summer?
- invite library helpers/student leadership team to spread the word by creating posters to hang around the school and in the library display window

Create agreements

- each of the test schools sent a 'super-duper official' contract home for families to sign and return. This gave our TLs a higher level of comfort knowing that families had agreed to care for the books over the summer and return them during the first week of school. One TL entered a note in Destiny to record summer lending in each of the participating students' library accounts

Set the date

- select a date or dates for open library lending time just before the end of school. In our three test sites, the libraries had completed their year-end tasks prior to the re-opening for summer lending
- advertise your dates and times in your daily announcements and keep the momentum building

Collect data

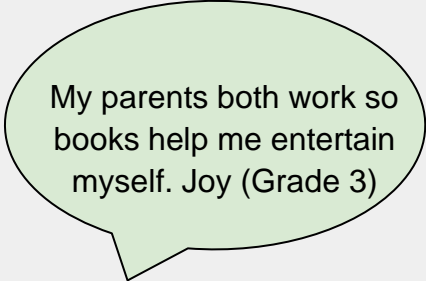
- keep track of the number of loans and any trends you find interesting as kids begin to borrow books for the summer. Our test sites collected data on percentage of books borrowed per grade as well as anecdotal quotes from kids
- Garden City library requested students to complete an electronic survey as the kids returned the books. Some of the questions included:
 - how many books did you borrow? How many of the books that you borrowed did you read (all, most, none)? Did you read any of the books more than once?
 - did you borrow books from the public library or participate in any other reading programs?
 - would you borrow books again next summer?

Share the results

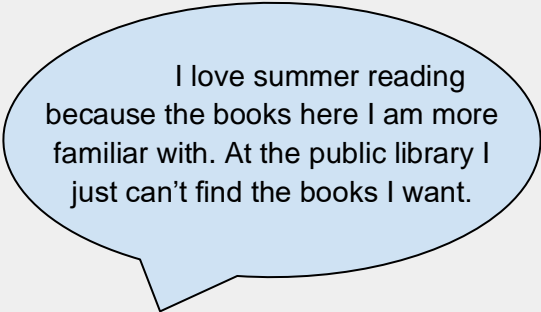
- follow up with colleagues and administration team the results of your summer lending program. An infographic is a great way to share results in a statistic-friendly way

What do the kids say?

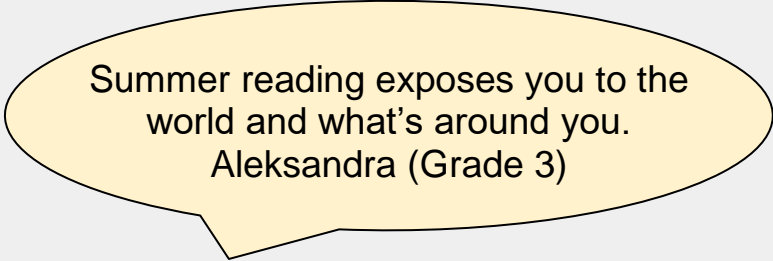
Some of the data that our three test schools collected was in the format of anecdotal evidence. Students were asked, “What do you like about being able to borrow books for the summer?” Here is a sampling of their replies.



My parents both work so books help me entertain myself. Joy (Grade 3)



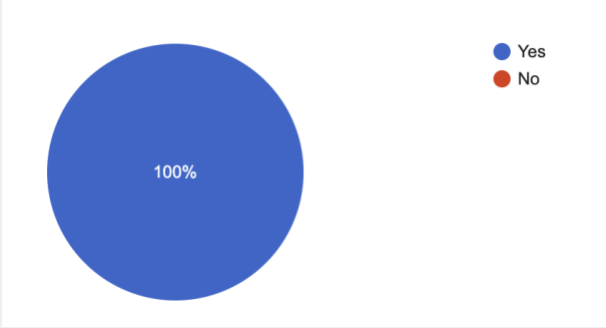
I love summer reading because the books here I am more familiar with. At the public library I just can't find the books I want.



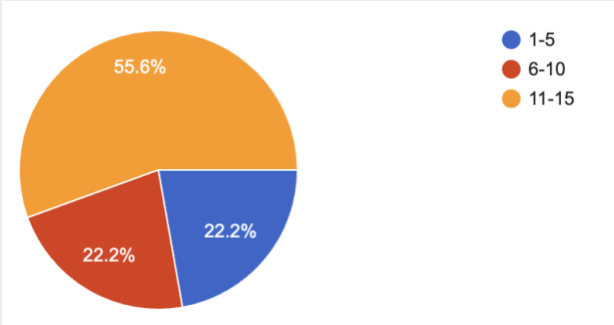
Summer reading exposes you to the world and what's around you. Aleksandra (Grade 3)

In a post-summer reflection survey (sample size admittedly small), kids responded to several questions about summer lending:

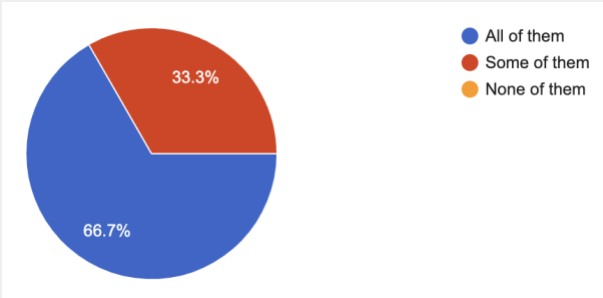
Did you like being able to borrow books for the summer?



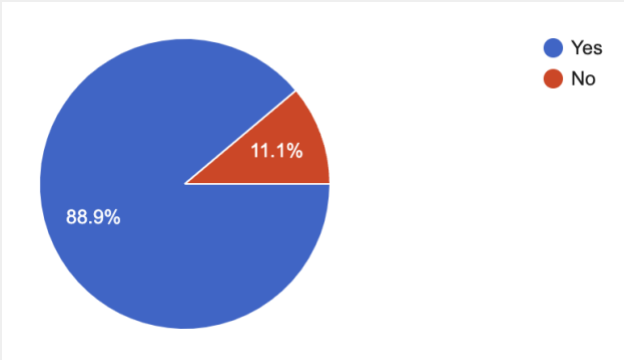
How many books did you borrow for summer reading?



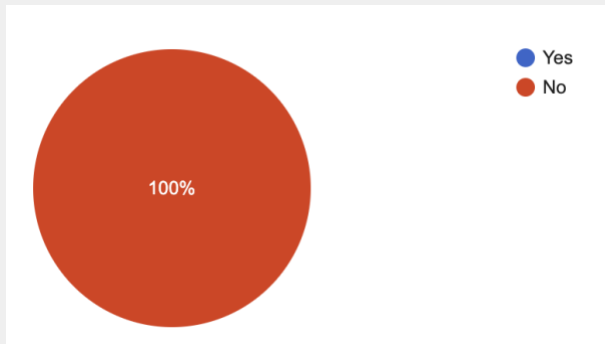
How many of the books that you borrowed did you read?



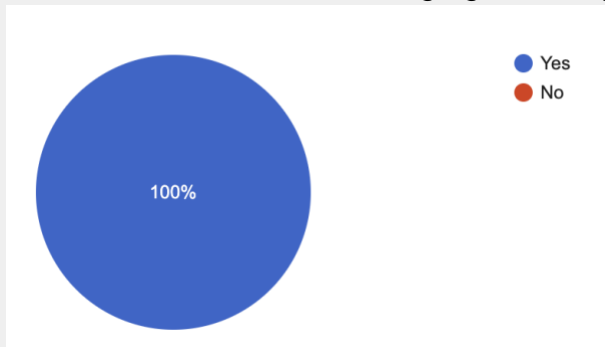
Did you read any of the books you borrowed more than once?



Did you lose any of the books?



Should we do summer lending again next year?



What do our teacher-librarian colleagues say?

As the news of summer lending spread among teacher-librarians in our school district through social media and word of mouth, the practice is beginning to spread. In the spur of the moment, two teacher-librarians decided to join us in opening their collections for summer lending. Here's what they had to say:

teacher_malin It's our 1st ever Summer Lending Program at Hamilton Elementary! Woot! Woot! Thank you @teacherkjohnson for all of your guidance and support with this program. The students were so excited today. We have one more opportunity left for our Gr 3-6 students - THIS THURSDAY AT 9am. Don't forget to bring your 'Super Duper Official Contract' signed by you and your parents! And don't forget a reusable bag. I have lots of different books set out for you such as how to cook, build things with cardboard, make origami and even books that have been turned into tv shows and movies. Come check them out. Looking forward to seeing you in the Library ❤️ Ms. Malin #setthebooksfree
16w

teacherlibrariantales Way to go!!! It's so exciting for the kids!
16w 1 like Reply

teacherkjohnson 🍌🍌🍌 hurray Hamilton Hawks! What a great way to start the summer ❤️
16w 1 like Reply



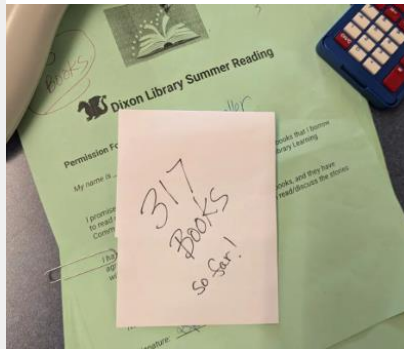
teacherlibrariantales First summer reading books checked out! 📖👧 So much excitement! Today, students checked out their first batch of summer reading books, with up to 15 books allowed per student. Many came prepared with bags and bins to carry their treasures. So far, a total of 317 books have found eager readers. Good to know they'll be enjoyed over the summer instead of gathering dust on our library shelves. ✨ To keep everything organized, I stored all checked-out books in the library office for the day, and students picked them up after school. Looking forward to another round of enthusiastic summer readers tomorrow!

#setthebooksfree

#teacherlibrariansofinstagram

Edited · 16w

teacherkjohanson This is just awesome. I am including your library as an exemplar at the @bctlaofficial in October. Keep those stats coming! 🙌



Student engagement and joy is high, teacher-librarian enthusiasm is high! Both LLCs will continue the practice next summer.

Conclusion

I refer to the practice-grounding document, Foundations for School Library Learning Commons in Canada: A Framework for Success: “The library program must make a difference to the lives of students in terms of learning, cultural understanding and well-being” (p.16 para.1). Our school libraries offer an excellent opportunity to address inequity in access to books over the long summer break of the Canadian school calendar. The resources are at our fingertips, the process does not need to be complicated and the outcomes benefit all children - and most especially those from who are most at risk of summer learning loss in literacy. With a shift to summer lending practices, we enhance the opportunity to make a measurable difference in our student’s lives.

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Welcome - Staff Site - TD Summer Reading Club. Accessed at <https://www.tdsummerreadingclub.ca/staff/home>

More quotes from kids on lending day:

Do you like the summer reading program? Why?

“Because I can borrow and read at home as much as I want. The library has the books I like so I can borrow what I like to read.” (R. grade 4)

“When I look at all these books, I’m like drooling.” (V. grade 4)

“Because the books here I am more familiar with and at the public library I just can’t find the books I want.” (K. grade 4)

“Cuz you can read.” (C. grade 4)

“All these books staying on the shelves collecting is a bad idea. I give summer lending a 5 star review.” (J. grade 6)

“You can take books out. They keep me entertained.” (E. grade 3)

“My father says don’t play video games all day and so I can read books.” (T. grade 6)

“If I don’t read at least 5 books I might just die of boredom because I can’t play video games all day.” (L. grade 5)

“I only can video games for half an hour so I have nothing to do so I will read.” (J. grade 6)

“I like it because I get to read more books and try more books every year.” (E. grade 3)

“I can borrow lots of books and read lots in the summer and I don’t forget how to read.” (A. grade 4)

“You can borrow lots of books and interesting books whatever books you want. If you like books you can read different kinds of books and it helps you know if you like different kinds of books.” (S. grade 4)

“I won’t just play all day - I can read, if I want to. Or when I’m a little bored, I can read.” (J. grade 4)

“You can borrow books and you can read them when it’s the summer which can stop me from being bored because I have a ton of free time.” (H. grade 3)

“My parents both work so books help me entertain myself.” (J. grade 3)

“When you get bored in the summer you can always read and not just watch tv or look at your ipad.” (C. grade 4)

“Over the summer if you feel bored you can read the books to make you smarter instead of playing technology.” (E. grade 3)

“Honestly it’s because you can go home and relax and you can borrow as many books as I like and I don’t have to go the public library.” (Z. grade 6)

“This is the time of year when we get to borrow so many books and they keep me distracted when I’m feeling stressed or sad and bored.” (A. grade 4)