

Reading Together in the time of COVID-19

Reading Together, WEC's signature literacy program, has expanded to two additional schools this year serving a total of 1,420 kindergarten through third grade students and their families. The program consists of 4 classroom read-aloud sessions with students and families across the 7 Reading Together schools. Each visit includes a classroom activity as well as a copy of the book and a home literacy activity for each student. This year, we were able to complete three of the four classroom visits before the shutting of school buildings in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are heartened to know that these students have at least three books to engage with at home in addition to those from previous years. We are coordinating with the Worcester Public Schools to ensure the distribution of the session four books.

Complicating the ongoing work to supporting children in learning to read with confidence and proficiency is the phenomenon of summer learning loss, whereby children's academic achievement 'decays' over the 10 weeks of summer. According to research compiled, low-income students lose more than two months in reading achievement, while their middle-class peers make slight gains (Cooper, 1996, Wallace Foundation, 2011). When this pattern continues throughout the elementary school years, lower income youth fall more than two and one-half years behind their more affluent peers by the end of fifth grade. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption in education is more than doubling the amount of time students are out of school.

We are excited to report that the AbbVie Foundation, in addition to funding the Reading Together Program, has provided WEC with additional funds to support Summer Literacy Kits for all Reading Together students.

We know that children who report easy access to books also read more books. Many low-income students do not have access to high quality, age appropriate reading material in the home. Studies show the effect of reading books over the summer can have a large enough impact to prevent a decline in reading achievement scores from the spring to the fall (Kim, J.S., 2004, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk). For this reason, WEC is ensuring that all Reading Together students and their families receive a Summer Literacy Kit that includes:

- 10 engaging books featuring fictional, informational, and specialty themes
- Think Sheets for every title
- Summer Reading Journal to encourage reflection
- Colored pencils to inspire creativity and imagination
- A program guide for educators with implementation tips and family resources

We are grateful to the AbbVie Foundation and the Worcester Public Schools for their partnership in this endeavor. We anticipate Reading Together schools will be distributing the Summer Literacy Kits in early June.