



BRIGHT SPOTS

QUAD CITIES, IOWA/ILLINOIS

A program to stem the summer learning loss that can slow at-risk children's academic progress did not succeed overnight in Rock Island County, Illinois. It took time.

"They've retooled it every year," says Alex Kolker of United Way of the Quad Cities Area, which leads the grade-level reading campaign in several Illinois and Iowa communities. "One lesson here is that one test run is not enough. If we had made our decision based solely on outcomes for years one and two, we wouldn't have funded year three."

The Summer Enrichment Program (SEP) began showing promise in year four — summer 2014. The free, six-week program served 295 elementary school-age children from low-income families, most identified as needing academic support. Educators led literacy and math activities infused into preexisting summer camps in Rock Island and Milan.

An assessment comparing SEP students' performance before and after the 2014 program — and comparing SEP and non-SEP students — found that:

- SEP students had an average increase of 9.3 percentage points in their literacy score while non-SEP students showed no significant change.
- SEP students were 53 percent more likely to show improvement than students who attended sites that had educators but not SEP.
- Concern that attendance would dip if summer camp included educational activities was unwarranted. Attendance was better for SEP students than non-SEP students. (SEP also employs attendance and retention strategies.)

These strong results will spur an SEP expansion into other Illinois and Iowa communities by 2016, plus the hiring of a year-round coordinator who works to secure additional local funders to support that expansion, says Kolker. "A 9.3 [point] average increase is amazing. And what I like most is having control groups," he says. "We were interested in replicating but we couldn't make the case until we had solid data showing the program is working."

"We were interested in replicating but we couldn't make the case until we had hard solid data showing the program is working."



Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Led and funded primarily by the Doris and Victor Day Foundation of Rock Island, SEP's five-hour day includes about 75 percent educational components (primarily literacy) infused into activities such as a basketball game or craft project. Educators design activities to meet their specific students' needs.

"The model is based on a philosophy rather than a curriculum, which allows each site to keep its uniqueness while incorporating enrichment activities," says David Geenen, the Day Foundation's executive director.

One activity, for example, involved older students writing plays and performing for younger students who were then asked questions about the play. "It's about being up, moving, creative, offering hands-on ways to get kids involved and forming good connections so education isn't as intimidating for struggling learners," says Katie Colbrese, summer enrichment coordinator for the local Child Abuse Council, which oversaw SEP.

"We're able to trick the kids into learning during the summer months when they want to be out playing. If the educators are tied to the school building and standards, they can't be as innovative."

Certainly, other communities can learn from the Quad Cities' experience — and possibly save some trial-and-error time. The annual retooling changed the program model, which has been documented in a new best practices guide. Changes include:

- Educators now focus more on teaching, rather than chores such as serving lunch.
- They are told in advance about camp activities so they can better plan educational components.
- Each educator now works with a small group of 10 students.
- The educators also took over the assessment so children are evaluated in a way that better isolates and gauges the effect of SEP.

Another key to success has been a strong collaboration that includes: school districts, which identify students in need; funders; and camp programs, which buy in to new staff and activities. Assessment also needs to be ongoing, which may spur more retooling. "We will have to do many more years of testing," says Kolker. But so far so good. About the 2014 results, he says, "My socks were blown off!"

For more information, contact Alex Kolker at 563-344-0339 or Alex@unitedwayqc.org.