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The High Plains Library District Summer Reading Adventure

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Prepared
by

Social Research Lab at University of Northern Colorado

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The Social Research Lab at UNC prepared this report at the request of the High Plains Library District. The SRL is dedicated to assisting individuals and organizations in all stages of data collection and analysis. Any questions about this report and/or inquiries about specific data should be directed to Dr. Kyle Anne Nelson, kyle.nelson@unco.edu or 970-351-2592.

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Introduction

The High Plains Library District (HPLD) contracted with the Social Research Lab (SRL) to examine HPLD's Summer Reading Adventure. The SRL is housed in the Department of Sociology at the University of Northern Colorado; this study was conducted by Associate Professor Dr. Kyle Anne Nelson and Sociology Graduate Research Assistant and HPLD Library Associate Rick Medrano.

During June and July, HPLD offers the Summer Reading Adventure to: engage the community, foster personal growth and development, prevent the summer slide, promote a passion for reading, and to support family literacy (SRA 2017 WHY WHAT and HOW). In 2017, the Summer Reading Adventure was open to all students entering Kindergarten through the 8th grade. Children were welcome to enroll regardless of overall library membership. The program ran from May 27, 2017 through July 29, 2017. Along the way children earned badges based upon meeting reading and activity requirement goals; those who completed all three tiers of the program received a free book. Other incentives ranged from community building projects (Lego® Bricks), online badges, and button-pins.

The purpose of the current study is to help HPLD identify program strengths as well as barriers to enrollment and/or completion of the SRA from the perspective of families. We conducted an online Qualtrics survey in both English and Spanish. We promoted the survey via email, via paper fliers distributed in the community and in every HPLD branch, and via Facebook and other social media outlets. The survey (included as Appendix A) begins with a few questions about library use and respondent demographics, and then focuses mainly on respondents with school-age children and their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of the SRA.

In addition to the survey, we reviewed multiple articles, books, and resources about Summer Reading Programs (SRPs). The next section of this report summarizes key findings and characteristics of SRPs to inform HPLD's efforts to maximize the value and effectiveness of the Summer Reading Adventure.

Taken together, our review of relevant literature and resources as well as our survey findings point to many excellent features of the SRA, as well as a few areas for potential improvement including: increasing outreach and promotion about the SRA especially in schools and via social media, expanding program access again to younger and older children, lengthening the enrollment period and starting immediately at the end of the school year, offering more incentives to participants, and simplifying the program's reading log process.

Overview of Literature and Resources

Appendix B presents details in MS Excel from multiple resources and studies of Summer Reading Programs. The purpose of presenting these sources, and the rationale behind collecting them, is to aid in the process of creating programming that is inclusive, effective, and efficient. The literature reviewed are meant to influence a holistic understanding of what librarians, educators, researchers, and organizations are doing in the field of summer education and literacy programs, equal access programming, and evaluation methods and findings. The sources included come from academic journals, professional associations such as Public Library Association, American Library Association, Urban Library Council, and the Young Adult Library Services Association, and literary magazines and newsprint. The resources themselves are included as PDF files and/or direct web links. Topics of interest apparent in the sources include: program structure; incentive systems; assessment and evaluation processes; recruitment; participant, family, and community engagement; and information and strategies regarding major assumptions such as the summer slide, best practices of programming, and techniques for retention and completion.

The Literature Review (green tab) is organized from left to right by: the title of the source in APA style and pertinent bibliographic information; the topic areas present in the source; the type of resource and main findings/conclusions; the main populations, organization, and fields of the resource is meant for; the subset of the population the resource focuses on; intended outcomes, objectives, and goals of the study/resource; and finally the key points and takeaways discussed in the source material. Although these sources are organized and key information synthesized in such a way, the sources themselves are valuable to future SRA planning committees. Review of these resources by planning committees could contribute to a better understanding of other strategies in SRP planning, implementation, and outreach that have been found to be effective.

The three blue tabs in Appendix B are what major library districts neighboring HPLD are doing in their SRPs. The library systems included are the AnyThink Library District, Clearview Library District, and the Poudre Valley Library District. Screenshots of the SRP webpage of each library is included (where available) including each of the program logs for each age grouping, and other handouts that the libraries produced. We were unable to access detailed information on the SRPs of the Lafayette Library, Boulder County Library District, or the Longmont Library system.

The orange tabs in Appendix B include data from the California Library Association and their statewide indices, that the California State Library requests libraries compile to evaluate programming and create usable assessment data. These measures were included to potentially encourage HPLD to adopt similar kinds of data collection that are very low impact regarding privacy laws, but could be very valuable for future assessment endeavors. The other orange tab includes information about the Summer Meal Program sponsored by the USDA. A map of Northern Colorado depicts the absence of libraries offering such programs in the area. The nearest library that offers the program belongs to the AnyThink District. This program

subsidizes meals for schoolchildren in low income areas—measured by population on free or reduced lunch programs—who are likely without reliable sources of food during the summer months. Not only does this program provide a critical need for at-risk populations, it can be used as an effective recruitment/participation tool, and can forge strong relationships within the community.

Survey Respondents

A total of 186 adults in the Greeley/Weld County/HPLD region initiated the online survey about HPLD and the SRA; in total there are 179 complete survey responses.

Approximately one third of participants report having lived in Weld County less than 4 years, while the remainder of the sample have lived in Weld County more than 4 years, with one third having lived here over 10 years.

The bulk of survey participants (84% or 157/188) report White as their race/ethnicity, while 10% (18/188) report being Hispanic/Latino(a) and the remaining 6% report other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Regarding level of education, nearly three-fourths of the survey respondents report having earned a college degree or higher. Of the remaining quarter of the sample, most had completed some college or earned an associate’s degree, while only a handful of respondents report having a level of education below high school.

Respondents are fairly evenly spread in residence across Weld County, primarily in Frederick/Firestone, Greeley, and Erie.

What is your city of residence?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Fredrick/Firestone	36.02%	67
Greeley	29.03%	54
Erie	25.27%	47
Evans	2.15%	4
Other city in Weld County	4.30%	8
Other city not in Weld County	3.23%	6
Total	100%	186

Nearly all survey respondents (97% or 172/178) use the HPLD. There is a good spread of library branch usage in the sample with 29% or 65/226 answers naming Carbon Valley, 23% or 51 naming Erie, 19% or 44 naming Farr, and 15% or 33 naming Centennial.

Which library location(s) do you use? Select all that apply.

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Carbon Valley Regional Library	28.76%	65
Erie Community Library	22.57%	51
Farr Regional Library	19.47%	44
Centennial Park Library	14.60%	33
Lincoln Park Library	4.42%	10
Riverside Library and Cultural Center	3.54%	8
Bookmobile/ Outreach	0.44%	1
Member Library	1.33%	3
Other (explain)	4.87%	11
Total	100%	226

SRA Knowledge and Participation

In total, 68% or 120/176 respondents have children or grandchildren under the age of 18 living in the home. Of all respondents, 87% or 153/176 report being aware that the HPLD has a summer reading program for school-aged children in grades Kindergarten through 8th grade.

Of those who report having had prior knowledge of the SRA, most respondents (86% or 92/107 who answered the question) first learned about the SRA from the HPLD directly. Interestingly, only 7% or 7 respondents learned about the SRA from their children’s school or teachers while 5% or 5 respondents actively sought out information about the HPLD summer reading program themselves.

A total of 71 of 115 parent/grandparent respondents or 61% had enrolled young ones in the SRA in a previous summer. However, Only 54 of the 115 respondents or 47% report having enrolled in the 2017 SRA.

Respondents who had not enrolled in the SRA in previous summers reported several reasons for not participating, with not having known about the program or not having enough information as the most common response (40% or 22/55).

Why didn't your child/ren ever enroll in the High Plains Library District's Summer Reading Program in any previous summer? Select all that apply.

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Did not have enough information	40.00%	22
Too busy with other activities or travel	18.18%	10
Child/ren not interested	12.73%	7
Time commitment issue	5.45%	3
Schedule/ work conflicts	5.45%	3
Child/ren need a break for summer	1.82%	1
Transportation issue	1.82%	1
Not a valuable use of child/ren's time	0.00%	0
Other reason (explain)	14.55%	8
Total	100%	55

A lack of information was mentioned in respondent comments a total of 42 times across the survey. Comments include:

“Not enough marketing in time to sign up.”

“[There should be] more information on social media. I have seen nothing about the programs and if it had not been for the speech therapist I never would have known.”

“[Need] more take-home information displayed openly by children areas.”

Several respondents throughout the survey report age restrictions prohibiting them from participation in the SRA in 2017, as some children are too young and others too old for the current K-8 focus. Throughout the survey, this issue was raised 52 times in respondent comments. Some respondents report that the exclusion of younger and/or older children in their families made participation difficult. One parent noted,

“It's hard to explain to one child they can participate and earn rewards but the other child cannot.”

Representative comments about the exclusion of preschool age children specifically include:

“I was disappointed to see that they no longer have a pre-school summer program. We did that level for 2 years and the kids loved it! They enjoyed the prizes and activities. The 1000 books before Kindergarten was much more cumbersome for us and felt more like a chore rather than a fun opportunity to read more.”

“Hard for my soon to be preschooler to have a different log then his sister. I like the 1000 books before kindergarten program for throughout the year but wish there was something that aligned more with the bigger kid’s summer program for my almost 4 year old. He feels left out and discouraged that he has to read 'more books' to get a prize.”

“Very disappointed it was discontinued. Did not use the library much this summer. Went with a friend to Boulder County library where a preschool reading program was offered. My child is beginning to read.”

Aside from a lack of information about the SRA and the program’s age restrictions, the more commonly reported barriers to enrollment relate to the dynamics of the family summer and work/travel schedules. In one exemplary quote a parent notes,

“This summer I am just too busy with work and travel to get them to the activities and encourage them to participate in the program. We are all still reading at home though.”

In addition, parents report a lack of interest on the part of their children in participating. As discussed in more detail below, the lack of interest in the SRA appears to stem not from a lack of interest in reading, but perhaps is connected more to the incentives of the program which many respondents believe to be lackluster. Very few respondents report that the SRA is not a valuable use of time, however, in the face of other competing forces for children’s attention over the summer, the perception that incentives are not strong enough to participate may be hindering enrollment.

What- if any- of the following barriers do you think could prevent your child/ren from participating in or completing the SRA this summer or in the future?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Child/ren not interested	21.48%	29
Other summer activities or travel	16.30%	22
Not enough information about program	13.33%	18
Schedule or work conflicts	11.85%	16
Time commitment issue	6.67%	9
Not a valuable use of child's time	3.70%	5
Child/ren need summer break/ don't want to overburden	3.70%	5
Transportation issue	3.70%	5
Perceived language barrier	0.00%	0
Other (explain)	19.26%	26
Total	100%	135

Perceptions of the SRA

Nearly all survey respondents whose children had participated in the SRA reported that the experience was positive or very positive (91% or 64/71).

How would you characterize your past Summer Reading Adventure experiences?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Very positive	36.62%	26
Positive	53.52%	38
Negative	7.04%	5
Very negative	2.82%	2
Total	100%	71

Parents' interest in maintaining children's reading levels and children's interest in enrolling are primary motivators (combined total of 88% of responses or 87/99) for SRA enrollment among survey respondents whose young ones had participated in the SRA. Very few respondents report school requirements or recommendations as motivators (combined total of 7% or 7/99 responses) which could signal the potential for increasing outreach and partnerships with schools to boost enrollment.

Why did your child/ren enroll in the Summer Reading Adventure in any previous summer? Please check all that apply.

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
In effort to maintain/increase reading ability	47.47%	47
Child/ren's interest in enrolling	40.40%	40
Recommended by school/teachers	6.06%	6
Required by school	1.01%	1
Recommended by friends/family	1.01%	1
Other (explain)	4.04%	4
Total	100%	99

Respondents who had participated in the SRA in the past select multiple answers describing what they liked about the program. The most common answers include helping children build the love of reading, the goals and intent of the program, the incentives, and the accessibility of the program.

Based on your experience with the Summer Reading Adventure, what-if anything- did you like? Select all that apply.

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Helping child/ren build love of reading	23.00%	49
Goals and intent of the program	18.31%	39
Incentives (awards) upon completion	17.37%	37
Accessibility, ease of participation	17.37%	37
Design and structure of the program	10.33%	22
Opportunities to socialize	6.57%	14
Specific program events (explain)	4.23%	9
Other aspects (explain)	0.94%	2
None (comments?)	1.88%	4
Total	100%	213

When asked to expand in their own words on what was positive about the SRA, respondents highlighted the program’s success in building a love of reading and giving children goals and motivation mixed with interesting programming. Representative comments of praise include:

“It was fun [for my children] to go to the library for books and summer programs. It kept them reading over the summer with motivating incentives.”

“Fun activities and goal prizes keep my child's interest peaked for the whole program.”

“Both of my kids... love filling out the forms and they especially love getting to choose a brand new book to keep from the book cart. They truly treasure these books, and remember which ones they picked each year (starting as soon they were in old enough to participate).”

“I like the additional focus on other healthy behaviors (such as active outdoor play) and I like that some of the activities encourage interacting with the librarians, writing, etc. I like these aspects because they are in line with our values as a family. We embrace learning and healthy behaviors, and it's nice when those values are reinforced in the community.”

“It is a good free activity for them that builds reading skills.”

“All three of my children enjoy reading and the reading program give them some suggestions about what to read when they run out of ideas.”

Nearly three-fourths of the respondents (82/112) who answered the question as to whether their children would or have enrolled in the SRA for 2017 responded that yes, they would likely enroll or have enrolled already.

The goal of the Summer Reading Adventure is to maintain or advance children's reading progress while school is out of session. How likely is it that your child will enroll in the Reading Adventure Program this summer or in the future?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Extremely likely	43.75%	49
Somewhat likely	20.54%	23
Already enrolled	8.93%	10
Somewhat unlikely	10.71%	12
Extremely unlikely	16.07%	18
Total	100%	112

In addition to sharing their perceptions of the strengths of the SRA, survey participants were also asked to report about aspects of the SRA that they do not like. One fourth of respondents (20/78) noted that there were NO aspects of the SRA that they dislike. Of the remaining 58 responses, incentives were the most common answer followed by design/structure of the program.

Based on your experience with the Summer Reading Adventure, what-if anything- did you dislike? Select all that apply.

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Incentives (awards) upon completion	23.08%	18
Design or structure of the program	19.23%	15
Accessibility or ease of participation	8.97%	7
Specific program events (explain)	5.13%	4
Opportunities to socialize	3.85%	3
Helping child/ren build love for reading	1.28%	1
Goals and intent of the program	0.00%	0
Other aspects (explain)	12.82%	10
None	25.64%	20
Total	100%	78

When asked to expand on the aspects of the SRA that respondents dislike, the bulk of the comments addressed the incentives. While 36 comments throughout the survey cited the book prize as a good incentive for SRA completion for their children, 41 other comments noted that the smaller prizes were not good enough incentives. Below are examples of the negative feedback about the incentives.

"I LOVE the book reward, but I'm not a fan of the junky toys... (cups, frisbees, bags, buttons, etc.)...The books are the only incentives that they treasure for the long term."

“You should have seen my kids’ faces drop when they learned they could earn one Lego piece for reading an hour.”

“[My children] do not see the direct incentives. Earning an online badge does nothing for them. They should offer a printable chart with stickers or something to encourage the littles.”

“Neighboring reading programs have better community partnerships and prizes- Boulder and Broomfield.”

“Bring back the little treat incentives (ice cream cone at McDonalds, rec day pass, etc.)!”

“Offer incentives that can be used in the community (pizza coupon, free ice cream from DQ, free visit to the rec center)”

Regarding aspects of the design/structure of the SRA that participants dislike, many respondents noted that the online system is cumbersome and many desire a paper process that their children can complete themselves. Comments included the following:

“Completely inaccessible and confusing. Onerous entry system. Unclear purpose or incentive.”

“Unless they are interested in the program reward it's a waste of my time to keep track and log progress. I also would be more likely if there was a paper they could actually bring to the library instead of it being all online.”

“An ideal program would be simple, streamlined, easy for the child to complete on his/her own and motivating.”

“It seemed too much of a chore to log through the Beanstalk website and child often reads in smaller than 1 hour increments.”

Most of the respondents who had children who formerly participated in the SRA report that their children completed the full program (76% or 54/71).

For the remaining 17 participants, 4 were unsure as to whether the program was completed or not, and 13 (18% of those who enrolled) answered questions as to why the program wasn't completed. The top response from survey participants whose children did not complete the SRA was a lack of interest for the children, time commitment issues, and a lack of information about the SRA process. These answers could relate to other comments throughout the survey about unappealing incentives and issues with the online reading log process.

Why did your child/ren not complete Summer Reading Program once enrolled?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>
Child/ren not interested	30.77%	4
Time commitment issue	23.08%	3
Did not have enough information	15.38%	2
Other summer activities or travel	7.69%	1
Transportation issue	0.00%	0
Schedule or work conflicts	0.00%	0
Not a valuable use of child's time	0.00%	0
Other (explain)	23.08%	3
Total	100%	13

One issue discussed by participants was the timing of the SRA. Respondents mention that the time that SRA runs for is too short or misses some significant portions of the summer. Several think that registration should occur right when school gets out or while school is still in session. See the included literature (Slater 2015) for ideas on in school programming and why such programming is an effective tool for engaging students and “selling” parents SRA. Responses as to why some participants did not complete the SRA after being enrolled include the following:

“It finishes too soon. I would like it if it ran through mid-August.”

“We get very busy and vacation in the summer months. The program should extend into August to allow more time for completion.”

“Would like program registration to begin prior to school ending.”

One final area of critique of the SRA to note addresses issues of inclusion of the programming for children with differing needs and abilities. A few respondents pointed out the noise level and types of activities at SRA events that may result in exclusion of some children. One parent noted,

“Please add sensory safe activities... A ton of kids are being left behind.”

Recommendations

Given the features of summer reading programs we observed in our review of relevant literature and given the perceptions of survey respondents, we offer recommendations to bolster the Summer Reading Adventure.

➤ Increase outreach and promotion of SRA

Lack of information about the SRA was a common theme in our survey findings. Many families are simply not aware of the SRA and other HPLD programs to support learning and family time. Working with multiple social media platforms and partnering more closely with schools and school-based libraries could enhance the spread of information about the SRA and boost enrollment.

➤ Consider including younger and older children in the SRA

Many respondents indicate disappointment with the changes in age range of SRA. Consequently, some families did not participate because some kids were left out, or it wasn't something the whole family could do together. Additionally, there have been many studies that argue that children become more engaged in programming if they have peer, family, or parent support, those included in this review of literature include Compton-Lilly et al. (2016), de Groot (2012), Mraz & Rasinski (2007), Pagan and Sénéchal (2014), and PLA (2015, 2017). PLA argues that the best way to include and engage parents is to offer either adult or family SRP. This allows the child to work alongside their siblings or parents to achieve goals. Additionally, this could motivate parents to enroll their children in SRP because this can be a great tool to increase family time and tie family values to activities. de Groot (2012), as well as Mraz & Rasinski (2007) highlight the role personal assumptions, individual experience, and the socially constructed nature of knowledge and information have on the formation of educational habits. On the other hand, Compton-Lilly et al. (2016) and Pagan and Sénéchal (2014) argue that effective program structure with addition of parent engagement and directed parenting techniques are the most effective ways to build intrinsic motivation. The overarching thread of these sources, however, indicates the key role that parents (possibly teenage siblings) may have in overall reading retention and summer reading program completion. We recommend that HPLD reevaluate the age ranges and also consider a family SRP approach including all children and adults.

➤ Open enrollment for SRA in May and extend program from end of May to August

Several respondents to the survey indicated that the timing of SRA was not long enough. We recommend the timing for SRA be extended to coalesce better with the school year. Slater (2015) offers strategies to tie the end of the school year directly into SRP to shore up participation, offer a free venue of advertising, and to get children excited about the SRP in effort for conversations between kids and parents about SRP. Simisaye and Quadri (2010) argue that SRP could be tied into teacher curriculum through guided book reports or by recognizing the highest performing participants in front of students, teachers, or parents either in beginning of the school year assemblies, or end of summer "party" programs. Finally, Tucker and Moreillon (2015) propose partnerships between schools, universities, and libraries to create

high motivation in children to complete reading goals with support. These partnerships must flow from the end of the school year into summer and then into the next school year somewhat seamlessly. We suggest HPLD could reach out to area schools to determine how existing ties could deepen to boost SRA participation and completion.

- Offer a broader range of more meaningful incentives for SRA participants.

Though the book awarded upon completion of the SRA is reported as a good incentive for children, however, many survey respondents report being frustrated with the SRA incentives including online badges and Lego pieces. Project Outcome (PLA 2015, 2017) and Graff and Bahlmann (2010) suggest that the libraries that utilized small incentives such as fee waivers, ice cream/ food vouchers obtained through community partnerships, or special invitation only programs collected more in-depth and valuable feedback from patrons. Additionally, PLA suggests these kinds of small incentives be utilized by libraries as a reward for signing up for SRP or as a first-tier prize. Several included studies indicate the only factor motivating some participants to sign up/continue/complete a SRP are the potential prizes (Graff & Bahlmann 2010; PLA 2015, 2017), especially for programs that include teens or older children (YALSA 2017). For children who do not already have an intrinsic value for reading, or parents and teachers who require participation, there is no motivating factor for engagement. The 2017 Project Outcome webinar highlights how PPLD in Colorado Springs moved toward offering a drawing for large prizes. This reduces overall incentives budgets while keeping motivation high.

- Simplify the program reading log process.

Survey respondents report challenges with the online reading log system. Several participants request paper logs and forms that are not only convenient, but offer a tangible presence for children to track their own reading progress. Conversely, many families are intimidated by the in-person programming offered by the SRA and are not aware that the program can largely be completed online. A possible fix is to offer streamlined programs that families with less time or ability to visit HPLD branches could benefit from- even if these are just reading recommendations, family learning activity ideas, or a one-sheet overview of HPLD's remote services, this could help bring these folks into the fold.

This report offers information and ideas to support the SRA. While there are suggestions for improvement which are worthy of consideration, the SRA is a highly valued and very positive experience for many families and children. Future research efforts may wish to: focus on specific neighborhood, school, or branch populations; test effectiveness of marketing materials and outreach; and/or seek out more in-depth perspectives from non-participant families who are not current library users in order to boost the reach of the HPLD and the SRA.