

THE DUKE ENDOWMENT SUMMER LITERACY INITIATIVE

QUESTIONS MATTER AND METHODS SHOULD MATCH

HELEN I. CHEN

The Duke Endowment's Summer Literacy Initiative is an unusual multi-year collaboration between a supporting funder, rural churches that operate summer reading programs, local schools and districts, evaluators, and other stakeholders. The Summer Literacy Initiative is designed to help United Methodist congregations improve early childhood literacy in North Carolina's rural communities. The programs combine six weeks of literacy instruction with enrichment activities, family engagement, nutritious meals, and wrap-around services for rising first- through third-graders who read below proficiency for their grade level.

The Duke Endowment (TDE) has supported the initiative's development and implementation—starting with one pilot program in 2013 and expanding to fifteen communities across the state by 2020. Along the way, TDE has invested in formative evaluations to assess student outcomes and to build evidence that can inform its efforts to continuously improve the program model and expand the initiative's reach.

Today, seventeen church-based sites serve about 250 students annually, most of whom are from low-income families and about half of whom are Black, Latinx, or Native American. As a funder, TDE has made a long-

term commitment to supporting this initiative by building a learning agenda, making evidence-based decisions around funding, and incorporating program evaluation as a key component in sustaining and scaling it.

TDE played a unique role as both the funder and the programmatic “home” of the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative (SLI). The Rural Church team worked with program staff, the evaluation team, and external partners in its efforts to build an evidence-based summer literacy model that leverages the strengths and resources of rural churches. Partners include local United Methodist churches, local school districts and schools, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI), United Methodist Conferences in North Carolina, independent researchers and evaluators, and other community partners.

While TDE initially defined the learning agenda and evidence priorities, teachers and site directors were critical in shaping learning questions each year, in particular around assessments and best practices for reading instruction. School districts and DPI provided student data and shared assessments, and partnered in learning questions about which children were served by TDE camps and which were served by district-sponsored camps.

USING EVIDENCE TO INFORM A SCALING STRATEGY

The expansion of the SLI program has been accompanied by the development of a program model, guiding principles, logic model, evidence roadmap, plans for a multiyear research design and accompanying implementation protocols, and a myriad of other considerations.

2013–2015: Laying the Foundation for a Program Model

In 2013, TDE’s key questions centered on the feasibility of the church programs to produce positive student outcomes and the supports and learnings needed to do so. TDE asked two sites to use formative reading assessments to track student progress over the summer. After three years, TDE and churches had anecdotal evidence of positive student outcomes as well as informal formative assessments given by teachers. To confirm these gains, in early 2016, TDE engaged an external evaluator, Dr. Helen Chen, in what was to become a multiyear process of building and measuring evidence.

2016: Bringing in Outside Evaluation

Dr. Chen noted that the initial two sites were each committed to student reading outcomes, but functioned independently. If TDE was to launch a “program,” it needed a program model and guiding principles. Dr. Chen developed principles and protocols for implementation; surveys for stakeholders; and a plan for measurement and evaluation with the church directors to answer their questions.

2017–2018: Building the Framework for Rigorous Evaluation

In 2017, Dr. Chen conducted an implementation analysis to confirm that the guiding principles accurately represented TDE’s vision for the reading camps, and to assess how well sites adhered to these principles. Her recommendations focused on standardizing data collection and instruction (with input from teachers); improving student recruitment; and identifying the landscape of reading camp options available in each district. In addition, feedback from the churches indicated challenges with the use of the pre- and post-assessment tool, which led to a change in the assessment in 2018.

In 2018, the key evaluation question was whether the summer reading programs produced intended outcomes in student reading, as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT), weekly teacher-administered formative assessments selected by teachers themselves, and expanded qualitative measures. The TDE team elicited input from site pastors, directors, and teachers, which impacted evaluation efforts in a way that was empowering to teachers, effective for measurement, and helped bring consistency and fidelity to implementation.

2019: Additional Evaluation Resources

By 2019, twelve churches were queued up to host summer reading camps, and TDE needed a comprehensive roadmap, given their goal of a large-scale impact study to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Summer Literacy Initiative. Project Evident was brought in to develop a strategic evidence plan that aimed to leverage practitioner and community voices and advanced actionable knowledge needed by TDE and its partners to make decisions about how to scale the SLI to best serve its communities.

The year 2019 also saw a new partnership with North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI), in which DPI endorsed TDE’s reading camps, giving churches credibility as they recruited. The partner-

ship also involved a shift in assessments used, adding to DPI's database so they could track student progress beyond the school year.

In 2019, based on Project Evident's evidence roadmap, evaluation focused on how the program might be scaled and adapted for a broader range of rural communities. There was great variability across the twelve sites in North Carolina, with differing local contexts, community demographics, and needs and agendas of partner districts. Teachers and site directors proved to be sophisticated and thoughtful partners in examining the data, asking how the assessments and classroom instruction were aligned. To better understand differences across sites, Dr. Chen added classroom observations to rate across three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

2020: Toward a Large-Scale Impact Study

In early 2020, TDE added the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to the evaluation team, to support the work of building evidence and moving toward a large-scale summative study. Over the years, TDE's leadership team had expressed a preference for a randomized control trial to establish evidence of SLI's impact. Pushback from church partners and DPI, concerned about students not receiving an intervention they might need, helped reshape TDE's expectations. Project Evident and AIR proposed several research designs that address stakeholder concerns while offering rigorous, evidence-based studies that can show the effectiveness of the SLI. The evaluation team anticipates an impact study in the next couple of years, with all stakeholders working toward a research design that will, ultimately, serve the greatest number of students.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

In order for the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative to successfully build actionable evidence, several aspects of the work required special attention.

Research Design that Balances Rigor with Stakeholder Needs

TDE places a high value on randomized control trials. However, pastors, site directors, and teachers were very concerned about the possibility of excluding any students who needed support. The partners continue to explore designs that will best serve key stakeholders (for example, a quasi-experimental design option in which SLI students would be compared to

state DPI administrative data). Interestingly, 2020's COVID-19 restrictions offered opportunities to make variations to programs such that some sites offered a condensed four-week camp and still saw increases in student reading at the end of the summer. This planted the idea of offering back-to-back four-week reading camps, with half of the students assigned to the first session and half to the second. In the first session, AIR would then have a control group of students who had not yet received the intervention.

Fidelity versus Flexibility

As site numbers have increased, what program elements must be adhered to strictly, and where can we allow for differences in local contexts and extenuating circumstances? TDE has approached this with the recognition that practitioners know their communities best. For example, churches were allowed to admit the occasional “extra” student (who might fall outside eligibility criteria) who receives the full range of instruction, enrichment, and wrap-around services but does not participate in evaluation activities. Another site, with a student population that is 100 percent Native American, asked to close reading camp during an annual homecoming week celebrated by their entire community. TDE saw both these cases as acceptable variations that respected the norms of the community, and in both cases, data were collected, evidence built, and practitioners' judgments validated.

Bringing in the Lenses of Trauma-Informed Instruction and Cultural Humility

Church congregations and the populations they serve in the SLI often come from very different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. The TDE team introduced trauma-based approaches to instruction and cultural humility into the training of site teams and church volunteers. Some sites began to lay the groundwork for forming parent advisory councils to incorporate parent voices in the summer reading program. Other sites responded by making sure their summer camp materials were translated into languages used by their families, and one site intentionally adjusted some of their teaching practices to meet the tactile learning styles they learned might meet the learning preferences of their Native American students.

RESULTS

The Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative has resulted in stronger student outcomes as well as greater engagement among stakeholders.

Student Outcomes

Evaluation findings indicate statistically significant student reading growth, positive changes in student attitudes and behaviors related to reading, and positive changes to the child's home literacy environment.

- **2016:** Three months of reading comprehension growth as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS); increases in reading accuracy and speed as measured by running records; positive effects on student reading behaviors and attitudes.
- **2018:** Statistically significant gains in raw scores and National Percentile Rank across all sites and all grade levels; weekly gains in comprehension, fluency, and decoding; positive effects on student reading behaviors, attitudes, and intrinsic motivation, as well as increases in parental engagement with their children around literacy activities.
- **2019:** Statistically significant gains in Reading Success Probability and its component domains as measured by the Lexia RAPID assessment; gains on the DIBELS formative assessments; positive effects on student reading behaviors, attitudes toward reading, intrinsic motivation, and home literacy environment; increases in parental support of their children around reading activities.

Strengthening Partnerships

Each year, TDE shares aggregate findings in a large-group meeting and a site-specific "data card" with each site specifically. In addition, TDE puts together a public-facing document that each site can share with school and district partners as well as their congregations. Churches are keen to use these findings each year to improve engagement, their instructional practices, and their wrap-around services. This incremental approach to building evidence and making transparent the research goals has reaped big benefits in stakeholder buy-in as well as funder commitment to the SLI. Practitioners believe their contributions are not only welcome but valued, and new learning questions are generated each year in a collaborative way. TDE continues to invest in building actionable evidence, understanding that a long-term commitment is needed to yield results that will lead to a sustainable, scalable program.

REFLECTIONS

The Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative is an innovative approach that leverages the infrastructure and social capital of United Methodist churches to support families with literacy. Building evidence of student outcomes and using evidence for continuous improvement has been at the core of the initiative's evolution. The Rural Church program area took an R&D approach—a continuous process for testing, learning, and improving—that is often rare in the education and social sector. In addition to investing in regular evaluations, TDE worked with Project Evident to develop robust evidence tools—a theory of change, a learning agenda, and a strategic evidence plan—to drive a more intentional and disciplined approach to building evidence, grounded in strategic priorities for the initiative.

Most importantly, TDE centered its grantmaking strategy and evidence building efforts on improving outcomes for children and families, and it empowered churches and practitioners to equitably participate in the evidence building and learning process. As TDE's Robb Webb said:

All questions ultimately lead to: How do we make this better for the students? How can we make this more impactful? That clarity and that focus is driving this work. The evolution of the Summer Literacy Initiative and how we've strengthened our evidence over the years has been remarkable. And the churches have wanted to come along for the ride because they care deeply about how they are impacting students, and they want to have an impact. It's been an incredible learning journey for us as a department and for the churches we work with.¹

The Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative is a prime example of the "Next Generation of Evidence"—one that centers on community needs and voices, embraces continuous improvement, empowers practitioners, and prioritizes collaborative learning and accountability among funders, researchers and practitioners.

NOTE

1. The Duke Endowment and Project Evident, "Mobilizing Rural Churches to Improve Early Childhood Literacy in North Carolina," 2021, <https://www.dukeendowment.org/resources/mobilizing-rural-churches-to-improve-early-childhood-literacy-in-north-carolina>.