

The Canadian School Libraries / Eric Walters School Library Summer Lending Program: Findings from the research

By *Anita Brooks Kirkland*

Snapshot

Our regular Canadian correspondent, Anita Brooks-Kirkland, describes the Canadian School Libraries and Eric Walters collaborative effort to create the School Library Summer Lending Program in Canada. Brooks-Kirkland also outlines the research that explored the resulting highly successful program highlighting the factors of access, choice and trust.

As I write this, we are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. With sudden school closures, many students have found themselves at home for an indefinite period of time without access to their school library. Many school librarians did their best to get books into the hands of those students before they departed, and we are also witnessing unprecedented efforts to connect kids to books, authors and reading online as the pandemic progresses. But the fact remains that many students are being deprived of books for the foreseeable future. Arguably, the importance of independent reading has never been so widely understood.

For Canada's students it seems likely that schools will remain closed for the remainder of the school year: it's spring here, with summer vacation commencing at the end of June. That may then extend the book drought for two more months. Within this context, the research conducted by Canadian School Libraries about its 2019 summer lending project may provide additional insight into the importance of the school library in supporting readers every day of the year.

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Canadian school libraries: Supporting summer reading

Summer in Canada. For elementary and secondary students across the country, an idyllic two months' vacation from school to enjoy the fleeting warm weather, all manner of outdoor activities, family vacations, and a chance for leisurely reading. For many children the summer is full of opportunity, stimulation, and growth. However, a body of research indicates that for many children who do not have access to books and reading, the summer may leave them ill-prepared for the new school year. Even the most avid readers may find it challenging to find enough choice in reading materials to keep them engaged over the summer.

School libraries in Canada have collections developed particularly to engage young readers, yet Canada's elementary and secondary students have no access to these resources over the summer. To many, including the editors of the Canadian School Libraries Journal, this made little sense.

Keep them reading, thinking and making.

For two successive years the CSL Journal published accounts of successful initiatives to support summer reading and promoted the idea with our tag line, *Keep them reading, thinking and making*. 'Is there more we can do from the library learning commons to get more books into the hands of students and also spur them to keep on learning over the summer break?' was the question put out to readers across Canada.

The Summer Lending Challenge is born

In the spring of 2019 best-selling Canadian author Eric Walters got involved with his CSL Journal article, 'School Is Out for the Summer and Your Books Should Be, Too'. He put out a challenge to schools across Canada to get books in their libraries out over the summer, into the hands of the students who wanted and needed to read. Walters' call provided a wonderful opportunity for Canadian School Libraries to investigate whether summer lending programs in Canada's school libraries could be successful, and if so, what factors would contribute to that success.

Reaction to the article on social media was huge, and before we knew it, over 150 schools had signed up. Walters sought and received endorsement from Canadian Children's Book Centre (CCBC) and the Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers (CANSCAIP) and both organizations actively promoted the idea via their own channels. He also received generous support from Orca Book Publishers, who agreed to provide program incentives. And so the Eric Walters Summer Lending Challenge was born.

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Findings from the research

Through a detailed survey, the researchers sought to answer the questions:

Can summer lending programs in Canada's school libraries be successful, and if so, what factors would contribute to that success?

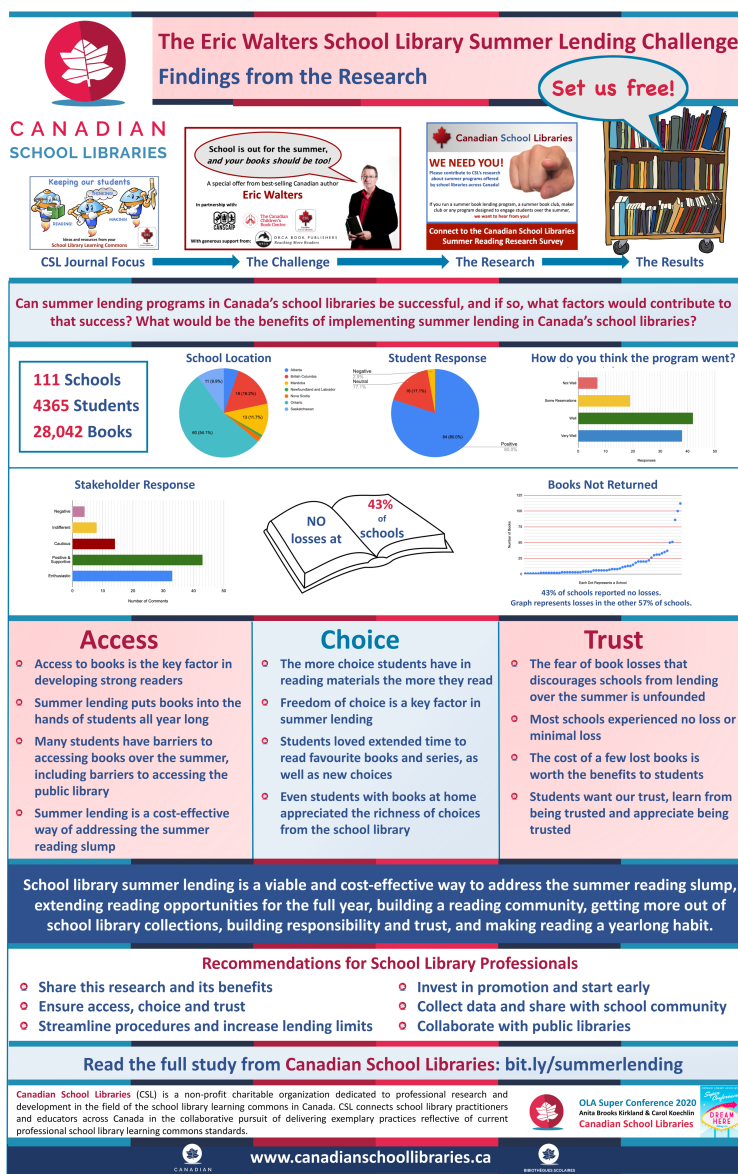
What would be the benefits of implementing summer lending in Canada's school libraries?

Over 80% of respondents in our survey reported very positive results with summer lending through the school library learning commons. The benefits of summer reading were consistent with existing research, but also revealed some unique outcomes. While the literature does recount involvement of school libraries in some successful summer reading programs, the potential of this simple model of summer lending from school libraries had not been fully explored.

Our study provides substantial evidence that summer lending programs have a positive impact on students. One might expect that students would appreciate the opportunity to borrow books from the school library over the summer but we were pleasantly surprised by the depth of student responses.

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Respondents reported on student engagement in reading, appreciation of choice and time to read books without constraints as well as gratitude for the opportunity to borrow the books for the summer and for the trust granted to them to be responsible and return books in September. These findings were replicated many times in various schools. Positive responses were noted by those leading the summer reading programs as well as by many teachers, parents and administrators.



Connect to the full research report here and a print-ready version of this graphic.

Factors contributing to success

Specific themes emerged as we analyzed the survey responses.

Access: A summer lending program initiated by the professionals in the school library learning commons has proven to contribute to participation and positive results. Our research indicates that simply lending books from the existing collection will reap positive results and make good use of excellent resources without further investment. Loss of books is minimal and considerably less expensive than purchasing a few books for students to own, as is typically done in many summer reading programs. Even students with books at home appreciated having increased access. Public libraries are an important point of access, but many students remarked that they had limited access to the public library over the summer because of the challenges of just getting there. Access to books children want to read is key and the school library is a natural and inexpensive solution that is already in place.

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Choice: Over and over again in the literature review previous researchers proclaimed the importance of giving students choice of personal reading materials to ensure summer reading engagement. This success factor was confirmed in our research by both students and other stakeholders. Students really appreciated the freedom to select books they wanted to read and

Students really appreciated the freedom to select books they wanted to read and the luxury of borrowing several books...

the luxury of borrowing several books by their favourite authors or even a whole series. As expected, freedom of choice was an important factor in the success of summer lending from the school library learning commons. One special aspect to our study was the mention of having a professional on hand to guide student choices when needed.

Trust: Probably the biggest inhibitor for schools to try summer lending from the school library is the fear of book loss. Our study sheds new light on this roadblock. Responsible behaviours cannot grow without opportunity and trust. Our findings indicate that students were very appreciative of the trust they were granted to care for and return borrowed materials. This factor was repeated again and again in responses from both students and other stakeholders. This trust translated into student engagement in borrowing books, appreciation for the program, and following through with their responsibility to return books in September. The gains in building trusting relationships with students surely outweigh the minimal loss of books. This factor seems to be unique to our study and it is hoped this finding will put to rest the book loss syndrome for schools in the future.

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The benefits of summer lending became clear through the research, and Canadian School Libraries can confidently make recommendations to school library professionals for continuing the success of and extending school library learning commons summer lending programs.

Benefits of implementing summer lending in Canada's school libraries:

- Engaging students in reading to address the summer learning slump
- Building a community of readers within and across schools
- Putting books into the hands of students during the summer and all year
- Getting more out of school library collections
- Building responsibility and trust
- Making reading a yearlong habit

Realizing these benefits requires support from school administrators and teachers. Summer lending is a positive influence on placing the library learning commons at the heart of literacy and school-wide improvement.

Recommendations for school library professionals for continuing the success of and extending school library learning commons summer lending programs:

- Share this CSL summer reading research widely and discuss the potential positive impact for students in your school or school district.
- Ensure that access, choice and trust are key factors in designing your summer lending program.
- Discuss the impact that administrative procedures can have on determining the success of summer lending. Consider increasing lending limits and streamlining processes to facilitate student loans and to reduce losses.
- Invest in promotional activities to engage teachers, parents and students in participation.
- Collect school data, and analyze and share results with administration and your school community.
- Continue to build connections with local public libraries and collaborate on ways to engage more students in summer reading, including overcoming potential barriers to access.

Ideas to consider for extending programs to build a culture of summer reading:

- Utilize online collaboration spaces and technologies and social media for discussions and activities to get students reading, thinking and making.
- Investigate how the virtual school library learning commons can increase equitable access to quality reading materials.

- Reach out to reluctant readers and special needs learners throughout the school year and encourage them to continue connecting with books over the summer.
- Consider the needs of reluctant readers and special needs learners by providing access to appropriate texts and technologies.

Connect to the full research study

Our full research report was presented as part of the sixth biennial Treasure Mountain Canada Research Symposium and Think Tank (TMC6), held in Toronto on January 31 and February 1, 2020. Connect to our report [here](#).

This edition of *Synergy* includes a report on the [Treasure Mountain Canada Research Symposium and Think Tank](#).

The report includes an extensive literature review, but provides little in the way of connecting to the context in Australia. While not Australian, [this resource](#) from the National Library of New Zealand.

Are you ready for next summer?

CSL's plans to expand the summer lending program and engage in a second phase of research during the summer of 2020 have been cancelled because of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. In the best-case scenario, schools may be back in session for a short time before the summer vacation. In that event we will do everything we can to encourage summer lending. Our hope is that the second phase of our research will be able to proceed during the summer of 2021.

Of course it's spring in Canada, but fall in Australia. In all hope the world will have returned to some state of normalcy by the time summer vacation arrives for you. Our hope is that the findings of this first phase of our Canadian research may inspire school libraries worldwide, including in Australia, to set their books free for the summer!

*As a writer, presenter and consultant, **Anita Brooks Kirkland** specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to [Together for Learning](#), Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations, currently serving as chair of [Canadian School Libraries](#). She was the 2014 president of the [Ontario Library Association](#), and has also served as president of the Ontario School Library Association (2005) and co-chaired [The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario](#) (2011-13). Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, www.bythebrooks.ca.*