

# Closing the Literacy Gap in Philadelphia

Helen Cunningham 24 October 2012

A young Teach for America teacher is handed the end-of-the-school-year reading achievement data for his incoming first grade class from their kindergarten year. He then spends the first 83 teaching days of the current year getting his class *back* to those reading levels. It is not until November 28th that his students finally catch up to where they had been the previous June.

Reading loss over the summer, called summer learning loss, is the sad reality for many children from households that are neither computer- nor book-rich, nor inhabited by habitual readers. Research finds that two-thirds of the achievement gap in high school is attributable to summer learning loss in the elementary school years. The teacher introduced above, Alejandro Gac-Artigas, decided to create a program that both prevented summer learning loss *and* advanced his students' reading levels. He called it Springboard Collaborative.

Springboard combines student reading instruction with parent training to close the literacy gap for low-income students in Philadelphia. By training parents and teachers to share the role of educator, Springboard nearly doubles students' annual reading progress. It creates these gains

in one-third the time and for one-fifth the cost of school year instruction. These results put K-3rd graders on a path to close the reading achievement gap by 4th grade.

Third grade is something of a “do or die” grade. Educators know that children spend K-3rd grade “learning to read” and all the later grades “reading to learn.” A child who is behind in reading after grade three will have increasing problems mastering content from then on. If a child is struggling to master a tool (reading), he cannot use that tool to master a subject (e.g., social studies or science). A strategy that enables students to read at grade-level by grade three makes sense in terms of mental health (a child’s positive self-image leads to good behavior), in terms of costs to society (juvenile offenders are notoriously poor readers), and in terms of the costs of educating (it is cheaper to teach well early than it is to remediate later). Springboard Collaborative transforms the summer from a barrier into a springboard for learning for financially disadvantaged students and families. The model is three-pronged:

1. Springboard trains a school’s own teachers for a 5-week summer instruction program that blends data-driven teaching with project-based learning for K-3rd graders. Teachers set growth goals, tailor instruction and measure progress.
2. Weekly teacher-led workshops equip parents with effective strategies for reading with their kids. This empowers parents to be their children’s reading

teachers at home, and gives students access to the same continuum of learning at home and school that *all* children need to be successful.

3. Incentives of books and laptops are used as rewards for reading gains. In the short term, they help align teachers, parents, and students behind a common goal. Over the long term, parents use these tools to drive further growth.

In 2011 Gac-Artigas took 42 children and their families in North Philadelphia through the first pilot program. He employed four teachers. Part-way through the first summer, Gac-Artigas adjusted the model to add a site manager to coach teachers for better student outcomes. Instead of reading losses, students gained 2.8 months of reading growth by the end of the project.

Over the past year Gac-Artigas grew Springboard 800 percent from the pilot of 42 children in one school to 340 students in four schools, two of which were neighborhood schools and two of which drew students from over 41 zip codes. He was able to replicate the results of the pilot—replacing a three-month loss with a 2.8-month reading gain—nearly doubling students' annual reading progress in five weeks. What's the secret? Weekly family workshops, during which parents learn to teach reading, averaged 91 percent parent attendance. Springboard's students are selected on the basis of their academic struggles, and 97 percent are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. Despite tough odds, nearly every family rose

to the occasion every week.

Financially, the model works, too. Gac-Artigas explains that Springboard costs \$700 per student per summer verses an average of \$1,109 to \$2,801 for other summer learning programs. Of this, schools use Title I, summer learning or discretionary funds to pay ~\$500 per student, representing 70 percent of the total cost. Gac-Artigas is raising the remaining 30 percent now, but he intends to move schools to 80 percent of the total cost as he triples the number of students and continues demonstrating the value to the school partners. By transforming a three-month loss into a 2.8-month gain, each summer of enrollment has nearly a six-month impact on a student's trajectory. Over four summers of enrollment, this accumulates to a gain of 2.3 academic years and closes the literacy gap. By the end of the program, students have fully learned to read, and are ready to read to learn.

Other benefits accrue, too. Teachers become better reading instructors and build partnerships with children's parents. Parents become empowered to be leaders in their children's literacy development, Everybody gains.

Based on a tip from Jenn Walters-Michalec at the M. Night Shyamalan Foundation, the Fels Fund investigated the project and matched a \$20,000 Shyamalan start-up grant with \$20,000 for this past summer. If fundraising and school expansion go well, Alejandro can reach 8 schools serving 960 children & families in 2013 and 4,200

children & families by 2015. The program shows such promise that, by adopting it for the entire District, the Philadelphia public schools could close the literacy gap in four years.

**Helen Cunningham has been the President of the Samuel S. Fels Fund since 1992. She oversees grantmaking for this Philadelphia-based charitable foundation. The foundation makes grants in education, arts and culture, and community improvement. Cunningham came to Fels after founding the College Access Program, a still-thriving program to guide public school students into and through college. Prior to her work with this start-up, Cunningham spent nine years on the staff at the Pew Charitable Trusts, another charitable foundation, beginning as a program assistant and ending as the senior program officer in education. Cunningham's philanthropic budgets have ranged from \$2 million to \$45 million per year.**