



Guiding Principles | Church-Based Summer Literacy Programs

The following **six principles** will govern the implementation of Summer Literacy programs (SLP's) that are hosted in and by rural North Carolina's United Methodist churches and supported by The Duke Endowment. These programs will run for four to six continuous weeks during the academic recess and will serve rising first- through third-graders who are at risk for reading failure, with the recognition that there is a movement within the Endowment, statewide, and nationally to focus on early education opportunities.

These principles were designed using The Ubuntu Project, a capstone project of a former Endowment fellow. They are meant to provide guidelines for new and existing programs, while allowing for context and community-specific needs.

A strong program will show evidence of these six principles:

1. *Start with a Thriving and Engaged Church Community*
2. *Enlist Strong Community Investment*
3. *Provide Wrap-around Services*
4. *Hire Empowered and Effective Teachers*
5. *Provide Data-informed and Student-focused Instruction*
6. *Involve and Engage the Students' Families*

In addition to the six principles, at least **two core values** inform the activities of the SLP's. These values include a *trauma-informed approach* that considers learnings about the effects of toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), as well as a stance of *cultural humility*, which is defined by three pillars: life-long learning about self, considering power imbalances in human interaction, and seeking institutional transformation toward equity.

Undergirding all these principles and values is a focus on *evidence and evidence-building*. The Endowment recognizes that there is no tested model in the scientific literature for summer literacy programs hosted in rural churches, and we seek to fill that void by developing a model that can be evaluated for effectiveness. We therefore place a high emphasis on program fidelity, standardized assessment and, if possible, the creation of a student waitlist to serve as a control/comparison group.

The following pages detail the rationale and theory behind each principle.



Summer Literacy

An initiative of The Duke Endowment

Start with a Thriving and Engaged Church Community

Principle: Build upon a thriving rural church community and house the program there.

Why this matters:

The United Methodist denomination defines a “vital congregation” as one with strong worship attendance, growing professions of faith, and consistent participation from members in both internal and community-focused activities. In addition, a recent evaluation of the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative at Duke Divinity School identified fifteen markers of a “thriving” church. The list included engagement in regular hands-on service and mission work, valuing young people, and offering something for everyone.

Rural communities often have limited resources and therefore struggle to meet the many needs of their residents. In these communities, the church provides much needed social capital to help the community address the unmet needs. In a successful literacy program, the host church provides crucial project resources, including volunteers, financial support and physical space. Vital or thriving congregations, as defined above, are best suited to provide these resources and to serve as both the backbone organization and largest champion of high-quality programs such as an SLP.

Enlist Strong Community Investment

Principle: Build relationships with school and community leaders to develop a sustainable program that reaches all children who stand to benefit most from the program.

Why this matters:

Community investment serves three essential roles: (1) to identify community need, (2) to ensure that the program reaches children most at risk for failure in school, and (3) to promote the long-term viability of the program. Given the current North Carolina mandate that struggling readers receive summer instruction from their district, the host church and its community collaborators must demonstrate that an additional literacy offering based in a congregational setting will be a value-add.

For programs to have the greatest possible impact, program staff will need the assistance of school and community leaders to identify and reach those children most at risk. Research has shown that students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate high school than proficient readers. Research has also shown a strong link between poverty status and drop-out rates, placing low-income students who struggle with reading in what is often referred to as “double jeopardy.” Additionally, to encourage strong community relationships, a successful summer literacy program will ultimately be sustainable long-term with little to no funding from the Endowment.



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Provide Wrap-around Services

Principle: Whenever possible, recognize and address unmet needs that hinder a child's ability to participate fully in the program.

Why this matters:

A child's physical health, emotional health, and home environment directly impact his or her ability to participate in and benefit from summer learning programs. Low-income students are particularly likely to experience barriers to access and learning.

A successful literacy program will address barriers to learning by providing support for students' basic physical needs, including healthy meals, and emotional needs, including a safe and nurturing environment, structured incentives for attendance and performance, and strong relationship opportunities among students, families and volunteers.

Additionally, programs must find a way to address logistical barriers, such as a caregiver's work schedule, that could preclude student participation. Possible solutions include providing transportation and/or childcare before and after the program.

Hire Empowered and Effective Teachers

Principle: Select highly effective reading teachers who are given flexibility to design and teach data-informed and student-focused instructional plans.

Why this matters:

A successful program will hire highly effective teachers with the skills to create custom lesson plans that respond to the specific needs of their students while aligning instruction to the established reading instruction framework of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), which is currently the Science of Reading.

Highly effective teachers set clear expectations and create a learning climate that is centered around assessment and reflection, as well as safety, positivity and encouragement. They are knowledgeable about the subjects they teach and ensure student engagement through relevant and rigorous instruction and collaborative goal setting. In addition, highly effective reading instructors have demonstrated success in consistently fostering exceptional reading growth among the students they serve.



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Provide Data-informed and Student-focused Instruction

Principle: Instruction is grounded in the Science of Reading, designed around individualized reading growth goals, and driven by student assessment.

Why this matters:

Student-specific learning goals are directly linked to more rapid literacy gains. To set effective and individualized goals, summer literacy programs must be intentional about class sizes, schedule and assessments.

Data-driven instruction is particularly important, as accurate and consistent assessments will allow teachers and students to set realistic and clear expectations for growth. To ensure standardized and actionable student data, teachers will administer formative assessments. Formative assessments will be shared and standardized across all North Carolina SLP's, with access and data collection tools provided by The Duke Endowment's consultants and evaluation partners. It is recommended that teachers conduct the assessments weekly and use results to craft lesson plans and individual and/or group reading intervention. Teachers will also work with the Endowment's consultants and evaluation partners to administer to all students a shared and standardized pre- and post-test at the beginning and end of the program. Finally, if relevant and feasible, the program will obtain students' end-of-grade (EOG) and beginning-of-grade (BOG) test scores from the district, in hopes of showing student growth over the summer and in subsequent years.

Classrooms should also be kept as small as possible (6-to -1 or better student-teacher ratio) to facilitate one-on-one attention, and the 80-90 total hours of morning literacy instruction will be devoted directly to reading in alignment with the Science of Reading approach.

Involve and Engage the Students' Families

Principle: Involve parents and guardians in their child's learning and engage them in the program.

Why this matters:

Studies have concluded that there is a positive relationship between family engagement and students' educational achievement. To this end, successful programs will work to ensure parent and caregiver involvement through a program orientation, weekly parent/caregiver workshops, and an end-of-program celebration.

The orientation will provide an overview of the program, the workshops will equip parents and guardians to reinforce their child's learning at home, and the celebration will reiterate the importance of literacy in children's lives. The workshops will be structured to provide parent/caregiver-teacher interaction time to maximize communication about the child's learning and growth needs and strengths.

In addition, parents and caregivers are important stakeholders and the learning environment of the SLP. Care should be taken to provide opportunities and means for them to share their wisdom and experience with the program leaders for continuous quality improvement and growth purposes.