
Beer for Books: A Community Summer Reading Program

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Shock waves ran through the neighborhood as the Chicago Board of Education announced that Trumbull Elementary School, in the diverse, north-side neighborhood of Andersonville, would close in June of 2013. For years, test scores and attendance (now at about 500) had been declining. Some of this was due to a high percentage of special needs children—about one-third of the enrollment—which had impacted testing scores.

But in the fall of 2012, the community had gone into action. Residents founded the Friends of Trumbull, a group dedicated to improving the school. Energized by the Friends, a recently

elected Local School Council, and a new principal, the school took quick and effective steps. Outside literacy consultants were hired from academia. The school upgraded its technology and adopted a new math program. In short, community, parents, school staff, and consultants created a new vision for Trumbull.

Progress was immediate and dramatic. You could feel the energy as you walked through the halls. That academic year (2012-2013), scores reversed their historical slide of -2 to 5% and went up a whopping 8%! To help students maintain the gains, the Friends of Trumbull began planning an extensive community Summer Reading Program.

Imagine their dismay when, a few weeks later, the Chicago Board of Education announced that Trumbull was one of 50 Chicago schools to close in June of 2013. What was the community response? It might well have been resignation and defeat, but this story has a happy ending. The Friends of Trumbull (currently reconstituted as the Friends of Andersonville) redoubled its efforts, creating a collaboration of residents, businesses, and local leaders who invigorated the neighborhood with a summer literacy program.

Was Trumbull closed and unable to host events? Fine! Business leaders and the local church opened their doors. Teachers and parents from the closing school volunteered their time and expertise. Local restaurants and take-out stores offered to supply refreshments. Stores contributed journals and gifts. The resulting program brought together the community and helped children prevent the reading loss that so often occurs over the summer (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013) so that they were ready to start at one of the four remaining schools in the fall. The Summer Reading Program has now completed four years of successful operation, growing stronger and larger with each repetition. This is its story.

Conceptualizing and Funding the Program

The Friends of Trumbull Summer Reading Program initiative was spearheaded by three people who had served as local school board members for Trumbull: Mark Emmler, Randy Heite, and Ali Burke. They enlisted the help of Roosevelt University Professor Becky McTague, who had been instrumental in guiding Trumbull to improve its achievement by restructuring the reading program.

The group understood the importance of children reading during the summer to maintain the gains they had made during the school year. They wanted to motivate children to read (Gambrell, 1996) while, at the same time, inviting local businesses to become involved. It was also important not to create financial burdens on small business concerns but, rather, to enhance their customer base and community profile.

The spearheading group ended up creating a “win-win” situation for the children in Andersonville, their families, the businesses, and the community as a whole. To begin, though, the program needed some funding. This was accomplished through the collaboration of the Andersonville Chamber of Commerce, which sponsors two yearly summer festivals. The Midsommarfest Fest (mid June) and the City Made Fest (mid September) are traditionally popular and well-attended neighborhood celebrations. Booths that sell beer provide both a festive atmosphere and profit for the community. First, of course, the beer tents needed to be set up and staffed. Friends of Trumbull organized and supplied dozens of volunteers who worked in the tents. In return, profits from the beer sales were earmarked to support the Summer Reading Program. Monies received were proportional to the help provided on assigned days. If the Friends provided half of the help, the Summer Reading Program got half of the profit. The “Beer for Books” efforts generated a few thousand dollars to fund the initial summer program.

Ideas into Action

To begin the program, announcements and flyers were distributed at Trumbull School. This made families aware of the fact that, although the school was closing, the children’s reading efforts would be supported through the summer. The program was to serve children from Kindergarten through 8th grade. Advertisements were also sent out for volunteers to staff the program.

In early July, a Saturday meeting was held at a local church for interested families. They were told that on Wednesday during the summer, Reading Nights would be held for families from 4:00 to 7:00 PM. Parents and children who signed up to participate would receive a book voucher and support to encourage reading.

Key to the program was the site, a local independent book store called Women and Children First. The store has long been an icon in the neighborhood and is located close to Trumbull. The book store offered to provide space for children and parents to read, collaborate, and choose books from the shelves. A table would be placed outside of the bookstore, with an umbrella over it in case of rain. Each child would be provided a \$5.00 voucher to be used toward the purchase of a book. In addition, each child would get a journal to record the names of books read and to draw, or write, a response to the book. The bookstore made a special effort to purchase books that were no more than \$5.00. To encourage children to select suitable books, Becky McTague, who ran the initial meeting, talked about the “five finger” rule, and encouraged parents to allow children to select books on their own. The first program, in the year 2013, was to last for four weeks.

The response exceeded expectations. Fifty families were enrolled the first year, with about 80% of enrollees attending each week. Although, at first, project volunteers only checked students in, soon they were helping students to choose books and to discuss them. Five teachers from Trumbull were among the

volunteers, and their modeling of book discussions provided blueprints for the community volunteers.

The response was so overwhelming that project leaders felt that they needed to hold a final celebration. The same church that had held the initial meeting was the site of the finale. Refreshments were served as each child read from—or showed pictures from—a personal journal. Children were thrilled to discuss their personal responses.

The Program Continues

Trumbull School closed, but the Summer Reading Program continued. It is now in its fourth summer. With each passing year, the program is refined. What are some of the changes?

First, the program now functions as a community program for Andersonville as a whole—not just for the children of Trumbull. The Friends of Trumbull has disbanded and has been reconstituted as the Friends of Andersonville. Each summer, the Friends of Andersonville group promotes the Summer Reading Program through word-of-mouth in the community and via flyers delivered for distribution at local public schools. Students who are homeschooled or attend private schools are also allowed to participate.

Fundraising has also been expanded. “Beer for Books” continues to raise several thousand dollars, but two additional fundraising efforts have been added. First, there is an annual happy hour event for which local businesses donate free or discounted food and beverages. These “buy-in” parties have beer and food generously provided by Simon’s Tavern and Ranalli’s Pizza. To attend, each individual is asked to donate \$50.00

The Friends of Andersonville also entered a contestant in the “Miss Andersonville” fundraising competition run by the Chamber of Commerce. Each entrant to the competition works to out-fundraise the others. The

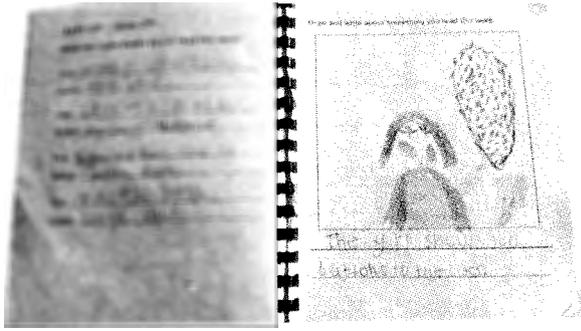


organization whose entrant fundraises the most during the contest period is awarded a bonus donation. Last year, the Friends’ Miss Andersonville contestant came in a close second place, raising thousands of dollars.

Each year brings increased amounts of money. In fact, total funds have increased from about \$2,000 the first year to more than \$10,000 in 2016. Friends of Andersonville is continuing efforts to increase funding and has applied for 401(c)3 tax exempt status.

As funds have increased, so has the number of students served. In 2014, 64 families were enrolled; in 2015, 120 families; and in 2016, 150 families. Additional reading incentives have been added. In addition to a \$5.00 gift certificate for a book, each week children now also receive a \$5.00 certificate for a special gift. These special gifts include ice cream, comic books, and toys. The program continues to serve children from Kindergarten through 8th grade, with about two-thirds of the participants clustered at 3rd grade and below. The four-week cycle of 2013 has expanded to six, and sometimes eight, weeks.

Perhaps most importantly, the quality of interactions, both around literacy and in the community, continues to be enhanced. For example, the Women and Children First bookstore now has a central space where children and parents can meet and discuss books. The journals have been formalized and have room



to record more detailed and thoughtful contributions from children. Children must prove through discussion and journal reflections that they have read the books they list before they get their weekly vouchers.

To do this, each child receives a blank reading journal (at an appropriate grade level), which is used to record books read every week. Students in Kindergarten through 3rd grade are encouraged to draw pictures of favorite book parts and comment on them. Parents are encouraged to assist children with reading and dictation.

Students in 4th through eighth grades are encouraged to record titles of what they are reading, the number of minutes they read each day, and to write a response (paragraph) to something they have read during the week. The first week's entries are usually the bare minimum, but as the program continues, the older kids come to enjoy writing longer responses.

During the course of the Summer Reading Program, a tent and table is set up just outside of Women and Children First bookstore each Wednesday evening. Families are invited to drop by anytime between 4:00 to 7:00 PM to share their reading journals with the volunteers as well as to collect their prizes for the week.

When children arrive at the tent, an adult checks them in to keep track of who is participating each week, and then proceeds to look through their reading journals. Many parents choose to stand back and let their children approach the tent alone. One parent stated that she wanted this to be her daughter's "thing." This parent found a meaningful

learning opportunity for her daughter to grow as a reader while encouraging independence. At the tent, the three volunteers conference individually with the children, providing them an opportunity to share what they have read. The adults ask children questions about their entries, and share observations, always aiming to make connections with the children, what they are reading, or even what the volunteers themselves are reading. It is an exciting 4 to 5 minutes for each child and validates each child as a reader. After sharing their entries, kids get a high-five as well as a \$5.00 gift card for Women and Children First and a \$5.00 gift card to that week's local business. One parent self-reported that her child commented that she "liked the Summer Reading Program because they [the volunteers] read my journal."

A sense of book ownership is a powerful thing, which should never be taken for granted. One year, a 4th grader came out of the bookstore, new book in hand, and asked when she would have to return it! Volunteers realized that this was her first experience buying a book. Creating a personalized collection of books is a great motivator (McTague & Abrams, 2011).

The team at Women and Children First have added extra staff on Wednesday evenings to provide positive bookstore experiences for the children. They also have created book sections based upon price and interest. After making a purchase, most of the children return to the tent to share what they have bought with the volunteers.

Wednesday night is ideal because the Andersonville Farmers Market is also on Wednesday. The streets are buzzing, and there is often a musician or two performing along Clark Street, Jack's Puppet Bike around the corner, and cafes filled with evening diners. Many families have mentioned that Wednesday night has become their Family Night out in Andersonville as a result of the Summer Reading Program. Parents share that when they return home from work on Wednesdays, their kids are eager



to march up the street to visit the Friends of Andersonville tent, with many of the children running ahead of the family! After visiting the tent, the children use their voucher in Women and Children First, and then the families walk together through the neighborhood, often visiting the Farmers Market, shopping at other local businesses, or dining out at one of the many restaurants.

This program has motivated the community in countless ways. The Friends of Andersonville started with a neighborhood tragedy, the closing of an important school in the community. But the community rose to the challenge, and out of the ashes of the school closing has come an effort that has increased literacy and neighborhood spirit. Adults—volunteers, business owners, and family members—have been inspired to donate time, to share literacy experiences, and to experience the joy of watching children come to love reading and writing. And, most importantly, children have been given an opportunity to read, write, and react over the summer. They begin the school year with joyful literacy experiences and the motivation to love learning.

Just ask Mark Emmler, part of the spearhead group of the Friends of Andersonville, the differences he sees, and he will tell you:

We've noticed a community forming around the program and around reading over the past years. Parents, children, and business owners are often seen in the local stores talking to one another about books. They get to know one another in a context that is often foreign to

them. Before the program started, many of the children had never been in a book store. But now, we will see them at the local stores excitedly talking in groups about their new books.

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