



## Overview

Literacy is a foundational skill to helping students feel empowered as learners, communicators, and engaged community members, and is key to students' success in high school and postsecondary education; despite its importance, students of color and students from low-income schools are significantly behind in their reading levels. Results from the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that, on average, black 12th graders read at or slightly below the level of white 8th grade students. This alarming disparity applied across income levels as well, with students in low-poverty schools scoring significantly lower than those in high-poverty schools<sup>1</sup>. To level the playing field for students looking to pursue postsecondary education, several SEA programs integrate literacy into their academic programming. Below are recommendations for how to lead high-quality literacy development programs.

## Key Literacy Development Skills<sup>2</sup>

Developing students' literacy skills involves addressing various components of reading, outlined below (for further explanation on skills, see [here](#)):

- Confidence as a Reader
- Motivation to Read
- Knowledge about Text
- Reading Comprehension
  - Strategies
  - Skills
- Vocabulary and Word Recognition
  - Sight Words (common)
  - Analyzing Word Meaning in Context
  - Word Analysis and Decoding
  - Dictionary Skills
- Fluent Reading
- Reading/Writing Connection
- Text Analysis and Discussion
- Library Skills

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<sup>1</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_cnb.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cnb.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Florio-Ruane, Susan. "Strengthening Reading in Racquet Up Detroit"

Programs may find it useful to also gauge students' reading levels by: 1) assessing their English and Language Arts grades in school 2) obtaining standardized reading scores 3) observing students' comfort with literacy activities during homework time.

## **Incorporating “Book Clubs” into Academic Programming**

Reading books together for 20-30 minutes during academic time is a fun and effective way to cultivate literacy development. During this time, often referred to as “Book Club,” students read a central novel together, and hone the aforementioned “key literacy development skills”.

### **Book Selection and Lesson Planning**

Selecting a book that everyone will enjoy and be able to engage with requires thought and research. Here are some tips on choosing the right-fit book for your group and planning a unit.

**Plan a Theme-Driven Unit** - It may help to think of an overarching theme that is relevant and engaging to students. Once you think of a theme, you can then choose a book and create a unit plan. Your unit plan should include the following components:

#### **❑ Theme**

- ❑ What core, relevant, and engaging word or phrase captures the main idea of your unit? Examples include community-building (among students), leader dogs, and The History of Detroit.
- ❑ Make it catchy/memorable:
  - ❑ Community-Building → “Ubuntu”, “Dream Team”
  - ❑ Leader dogs → “Doggy Business”
  - ❑ The History of Detroit → “Detroit Vs. Everybody”

#### **❑ Essential Question**

- ❑ What is a key question that your students will be able to explore and answer as they participate in the book unit? Below are two examples:
  - ❑ Theme: “Justice League”
    - ❑ Essential Question: “How do heroes exist in today’s society?”
  - ❑ Theme: “Proud Family”
    - ❑ Essential Question: “How can we make our program a ‘home away from home’ for students”?

#### **❑ Guiding Questions**

- ❑ What are additional questions that your students will be able to explore and answer as they participate in the book unit? Below is an example:
  - ❑ Theme: “Proud Family”
    - ❑ Guiding Questions:

- ❑ How do we resolve conflict as 5th and 6th grade teammates?
- ❑ How do we deal with frustration?
- ❑ How do we become a team and a family?
- ❑ What are our stories? Who are we as individuals and as a collective?

#### ❑ **Potential Projects**

- ❑ Think about ideas for potential projects that will reflect students' creativity, research skills, and/or general engagement and comprehension of the book and theme. Examples include: research project, creative poetry and short story writing, online scavenger hunt

#### ❑ **Timeline**

- ❑ Brainstorm a tentative timeline for your unit. Take into account the length of the book your students are reading and special events like field trips and school closures. If your unit will last longer than 6 weeks, brainstorm ways to keep lessons engaging for students.

### **Evaluate what type of book is most appropriate.**

- ❑ A less dense, age-appropriate book may be best if you hope to also incorporate relevant field trips and enrichment activities.
- ❑ To help build reading stamina, you may also support students with occasionally reading texts that are slightly above their comfort zone.
- ❑ If you look online, many websites categorize books by age or grade level. Consider choosing a book that is slightly below or at students' grade level to ensure that everyone can engage with it.

**Student Input** - Survey students to see what types of books or what topics most interest them.

### **Additional Guidance for Book Club Sessions**

- ❑ **Length of Time:** Spend 20-30 minutes on the book each session.
- ❑ **Content:** Intersperse the following activities in your academic sessions: (1) reading aloud as a group (2) having discussions about the reading, (3) other activities.
- ❑ **Tips for reading aloud**
  - ❑ Students can read in whole groups, in pairs, in small groups of 4 to 5, or independently.
  - ❑ Don't force kids to read aloud. Have students volunteer to read.
- ❑ **Tips for discussions**

Ask questions about the text that:

- ❑ Access prior knowledge and connect to personal experience.
  - ❑ Make connections between the book you're reading and other texts.
  - ❑ Gauge text comprehension (e.g. plot, setting, character development, climax, resolution, etc.).
  - ❑ Cultivate students' imagination (e.g. making predictions)
- ❑ **Tips for other activities**
- Plan other engaging activities to accompany reading the book together. Consider some of the following ideas:
- ❑ Drawing (e.g. sketching characters from the text, creating a storyboard based on scenes from the book, creating drawings that connect with the larger theme of unit)
  - ❑ Writing (e.g. free-writes connecting text to personal experience, making predictions about text, picking a favorite character and writing about them, creative writing - students create poems, raps, songs, and short stories related to text and theme)
  - ❑ Gallery Walk: see [here](#)
  - ❑ Fishbowl: see [here](#)
  - ❑ Four Corners: see [here](#)
  - ❑ Research Project: In connection to your unit's essential and/or guiding questions, have students complete an individual/group research project.
  - ❑ Online Scavenger Hunt: Give students a list of clues/trivia for which they'll need the Internet to solve. If your unit is about your member program's location, for instance, students will have use Google and other websites to find information. Feel free to make it into a fun competition!

### **Incorporating Volunteers**

Volunteers should play an active role during book club sessions. They can:

- ❑ Lead small group reading with discussion questions (prepared beforehand by academic staff)
- ❑ Read aloud in whole group sessions or with students who need extra support during independent reading.
- ❑ Assist academic staff with guiding students in supplemental activities (e.g. gallery walks, book trivia, reflection activities, etc.)

### **Maximizing Students' Enjoyment**

- ❑ **Exposure Outings:** Plan field trips that connect to the book club unit (e.g. going to see a movie adaptation of the book you're reading)
- ❑ **Games:** Occasionally host games, like trivia, to evaluate students' comprehension and engagement with the text.

## Other Ways to Cultivate Literacy Development

### Host an Open Mic Night

Give students a fun, creative outlet to express themselves through avenues such as rap, spoken word, song, etc. To make the most out of this experience, consider building out a unit around it that involves the following components:

- ❑ Have students watch videos of high-quality and low-quality performances from across artistic genres.
- ❑ Help students evaluate what makes a good performance (e.g. confidence, preparation, and creativity)
- ❑ Give students adequate opportunities to rehearse their performances. Approve students' performances before the day of showtime.
- ❑ Create buzz: 1) Allow two students to audition (American Idol style) to be emcees for the event. 2) Invite family, friends, board members, and other supporters. 3) Have the Open Mic Night in a cool venue.

### Publish an Anthology

An anthology is a collection of student drawings and writings (short stories, essays, poems, raps, and songs) created during program over the course of the school year. It can be published in the late Spring to be distributed to students, families, and supporters. Before publishing an anthology:

- ❑ Think about creative projects and activities that can be infused into units throughout the year (e.g. capstone projects for book units, SEA Art and Essay Contest)
- ❑ Consider planning a unit on creativity to help students prepare their works. Select shorter texts like famous poems, popular and appropriate lyrics, and short stories as models.
- ❑ Create writing/drawing prompts to inspire students' creativity. These prompts can be incorporated into the full lesson or great activities for students without homework.

### Program-Wide Reading

Consider having everyone (staff, students across grades, families, and volunteers) read the same book. Refer to CitySquash for information about their annual program-wide reading event.

### Start a library

- ❑ **How to get books**

- ❑ Partner with a local bookstore or an organization that gives away new or gently used books to nonprofits.
- ❑ See if your program qualifies to purchase discounted books through online marketplaces, like [First Book Marketplace](#).
- ❑ **Build excitement**
  - ❑ Sort books by sub-genre (e.g. African American literature, Anime, Comedy, etc.)
  - ❑ Encourage students to take ownership of the library (e.g. book selections, sorting books, helping with book check-in/checkout process)

## Additional Resources

- ❑ [Anti-Defamation League, Books Matter: Children’s Literature](#). Suggestions of books that instill empathy, affirm children’s sense of self, teach about others, transport to new places, and inspire actions on behalf of social justice.
- ❑ Gil, Christina. [“Teach Empathy with Literature”](#). *Edutopia*. 14 Feb. 2017.
  - ❑ This resource describes how literature can help build students’ empathy skills.
- ❑ Hasty, N., Highfield, K., Florio-Ruane, S., George, M., [Book Club Plus! A Literacy Framework for the Primary Grades](#).
  - ❑ This text describes how “book club” can be incorporated as a framework for students’ literacy development. Although designed for primary graders, programs might find its information is helpful for older students. One of the co-authors, Dr. Susan Florio-Ruane, is a literacy advisor to Racquet Up Detroit.
- ❑ [“Read About Best Practices in Supporting Struggling Readers”](#). *Benchmark Education*.
  - ❑ This article suggests strategies for supporting struggling and/or reluctant readers.
- ❑ [“School Leaders’ Guide: 45 Ways to Support Struggling Readers”](#)
  - ❑ This handbook suggests strategies for supporting struggling and/or reluctant readers.
- ❑ [“Success Starts with Words: The Story Behind Grade-Level Reading in Low-Income Communities”](#). NAACP.
  - ❑ This NAACP infographic address grade-level reading challenges in low-income communities.
- ❑ [“The Problem We Are Tackling.”](#) Reading Partners.
  - ❑ This article addresses the crucial importance of literacy and how almost 9 million low-income students are unable to read at grade level.

- ❑ Willingham, Daniel T. [“How to Get Your Mind to Read”](#) *New York Times*. 25 Nov. 2017.
  - ❑ This *NYT* article describes the role of comprehension and factual knowledge in literacy success.

## **SEA Shared-Drive Resources**

- ❑ [Book Club Volunteer Best Practices](#) (Racquet Up Detroit)
- ❑ [CitySquash Reads - Informational Documents](#)

“CitySquash Reads is an annual book club in which CitySquash staff, students, parents, mentors, and supporters participate in a one-day interactive book discussion.”
- ❑ Book Suggestions
  - ❑ [CitySquash’s Reading Catalogue](#)
  - ❑ [Racquet Up Detroit’s Reading Catalogue](#)
  - ❑ [Squash Haven’s Reading Catalogue](#)
- ❑ Racquet Up Detroit Sample Book Club Units:
  - ❑ [Doggy Business](#) - contains presentations and lesson plans
  - ❑ [The Justice League](#) - contains unit overview
- ❑ [Racquet Up Open Mic Unit](#)

*This guide was written by Jessica Reed at Racquet Up Detroit, with support from the 2017-2018 Academic Leadership Committee.*