

Evidence Brief: Designing an Effective Home-Based Summer Reading Program That Encourages Family Engagement

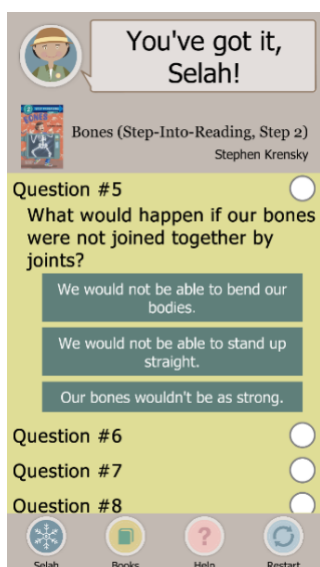


The Model of Reading Engagement (MORE) is an approach to content literacy¹ developed by the [Harvard READS Lab](#) in collaboration with teachers in our partner districts. MORE has the following core components: (1) **whole-class lessons** to build students' knowledge of the topic; (2) a **personalized literacy app** and texts to give students exposure to and opportunities to play with topic-related words, and (3) the **MORE formative assessment**, which indicates how well students are able to transfer their knowledge of the focus topic to new topics.

In this brief, we describe a version of MORE that we ran in 2018 with kindergarten through second-grade students across 16 classrooms at one high-poverty school in an urban district. We were particularly interested in answering the following questions related to the design of the summer component:

1. Is it better to either provide students with “leveled” books² on a variety of topics OR with grade-level books on the topic they studied in school at the end of the year (e.g., conceptually coherent texts) that could potentially be above a students' reading level?
2. When students don't initially engage in the personalized literacy app over the summer, can a family messaging campaign help?

Our questions: What features of a summer reading program are important for engaging students and their families?



In this early study of the MORE program, we considered all these factors. Using an adaptive research design called a Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial (or a SMART), we compared different versions of a summer reading program to see what works best.

We worked with kindergarten through second grade students spread across 16 different classrooms at one high-poverty school over the summer.

Phase 1: The classrooms were randomized to either receive MORE lessons focused on the topic of “animal survival in the Arctic” or lessons designed using a balanced literacy model. Students in the MORE classrooms then chose 10 books on the topic of animals and animal survival, while students in the non-MORE classrooms chose 5 leveled fiction books and 5 leveled nonfiction books on a range of topics. All students were given access to a free educational reading app with activities matched to their chosen books.

¹ **Content literacy approaches** like MORE help students build “rich and connected ideas” about science, social studies, and other content areas, while also supporting students' development of the reading, writing, and speaking skills necessary to engage deeply with these ideas (Catts, H. W. (2022). Rethinking How to Promote Reading Comprehension. *American Educator*, 45(4), 26).

² Books were leveled near students' end-of-year reading ability.

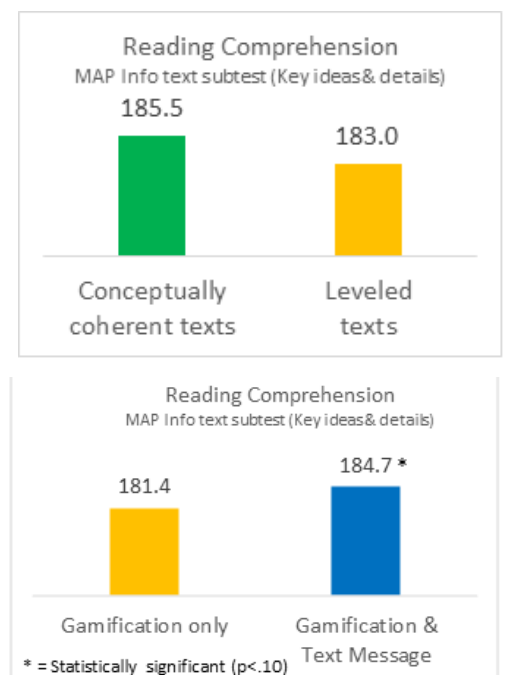
Phase 2: One month into the summer, we identified app “nonresponders” (i.e., those who completed fewer than 1 book’s digital activities). Nonresponders were then randomly assigned to receive either *one or both* of the following supports:

1. **app gamification:** Instead of seeing a list of activities to complete, reading activities were shown as steppingstones on a path toward creating a virtual zoo. Each completed set of activities meant a student could choose a new animal for their zoo.
2. **reminder texts:** Parents received text message reminders about summer reading activities

What we found: Providing challenging texts was not worse than leveled text, and texting parents in addition to a gamified application improved test scores in the subsequent fall

In the fall following their summer break, students who received grade-level books on the studied MORE topic, on average scored slightly higher on the “key ideas and details” subtest of the Northwest Education Associates MAP (MAP) assessment. While this difference is not statistically significant, we can say that we found no evidence that providing students with challenging, (mostly) nonfiction texts over the summer caused them to perform worse on a standardized reading test in the fall.

Most of our families were part of Phase 2, where we compared different sets of supports. We found that the combination of gamification and parent texts produced better outcomes than just gamification alone. First, students in families assigned to the combination of supports were more likely to use the app than those whose support was gamification alone, but this difference was not statistically significant. Second, students in families assigned the combination scored higher on the reading comprehension “key ideas and details” fall subtest assessment than those who only received gamification alone. This finding is statistically significant, which means that we have good reason to believe that it was not just due to chance.



Conclusion: Exposing students to topically related, rigorous texts could be an effective way to improve students’ reading, and text messaging in the summer can improve test scores.

We observed positive, though not statistically significant, differences on comprehension scores for MORE students, despite the fact that the related texts used for MORE are much more challenging than the students’ reading level. This suggests that exposing students to topically related, rigorous texts can be an effective way to improve students’ reading. It also suggests that coherences of texts around a topic may make challenging texts more accessible.

We also show that providing text messaging with reminders and tips about reading in the summer can improve reading scores when students return to school in the fall. We saw that these messages, combined with gamification, were more effective than just gamification alone, highlighting the crucial role families play in encouraging and supporting students’ summer reading activities.