



Mobilizing Rural Churches to Improve Early Childhood Literacy in North Carolina

How The Duke Endowment is using evidence to build and scale a summer literacy program in rural communities

May 2021



Summer Literacy
An initiative of The Duke Endowment



PROJECT
EVIDENT

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Executive Summary

More than half a million students in North Carolina — about 40 percent of all students in the state — attend rural schools, and one in five school-aged rural children is living in poverty. Rural students, particularly those from low-income families, lose substantial ground in literacy during the summer due to diminished access to academic support and enrichment opportunities, which contributes to long-term disparities in educational outcomes.

The Duke Endowment's Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative is designed to help United Methodist congregations improve early childhood literacy in North Carolina's rural communities. The Endowment's Rural Church program area, which works to strengthen the capacity of churches to serve their communities, has developed and supported the initiative as a measurable, meaningful way for churches to reduce educational inequities and to transform the long-term trajectories of children and families.

Program Components

The Summer Literacy Initiative takes an evidence-informed approach to prevent summer learning loss and maximize reading growth for rising first- through third-graders during the academic recess.

The program model combines six weeks of literacy instruction with enrichment activities, family engagement, meals and wrap-around services for students and families. Program staff say that the comprehensive approach helps support students that are most in need of reading assistance, and engage families who may not otherwise participate in summer programs due to barriers such as child care and transportation.

Churches operate the programs with support from their congregation and community partners, and recruit experienced educators to serve as program directors and teachers. While the programs are located in United Methodist churches and leverage church resources, there are no requirements for the families and students to be church members or to share the faith. Churches have flexibility in adapting the programs to their own context — responding to the specific needs of children and families in their area, and the resources and partnerships that are available in the community.

Summer Literacy Program Guiding Principles

Thriving and engaged church communities

Strong community investment

Wrap-around services

Empowered and effective teachers

Data-informed, student-focused instruction

Family engagement

Program Evolution and the Role of Evidence

Continuous generation and use of evidence has been at the core of the initiative's evolution from a pilot program in one community in 2013 to a multi-community initiative today. The Rural Church program area has taken a measured approach to expanding the initiative across North Carolina, supporting programs at only three churches until 2018 while building evidence of implementation feasibility and student outcomes. The Endowment used this evidence to expand the programs to more than a dozen churches in 2019 and 2020. Each program serves between 24 and 36 students.

2016-2018

Rural Church conducted formative, yearly evaluations to assess student and family engagement and outcomes and to better understand the factors that affect implementation. Evidence generated each year was used to: (a) improve the program model and its implementation across programs, including student outreach, teacher recruitment, instructional practices and family engagement; (b) develop an implementation manual and other program resources; (c) strengthen student assessments and feedback loops with all stakeholders; and (d) strengthen collaboration among the Endowment, grantee churches, program staff and local schools. The evaluations also found that students made significant reading gains in standardized assessments administered at the start and end of the program, and reported positive changes in their motivation to read and reading behaviors.

2019-2020

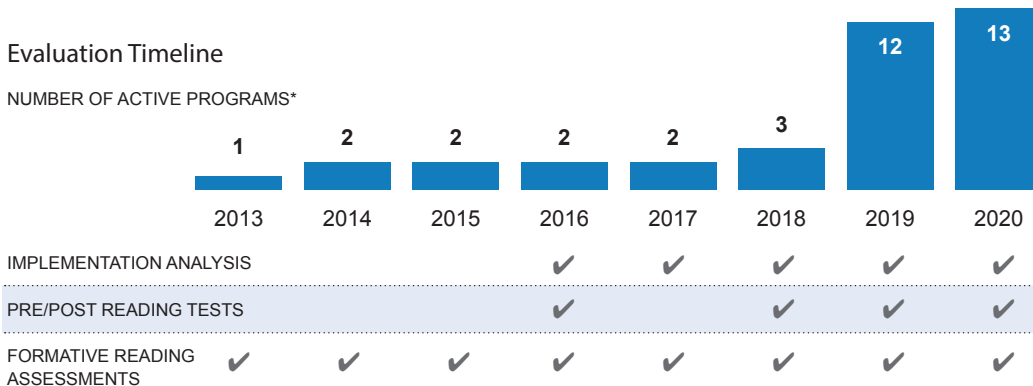
Based on the promising results, Rural Church expanded the initiative to additional communities in 2019, with an eye toward conducting a summative evaluation to rigorously assess the causal impact of the programs on student literacy. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) supported the expansion by recognizing the initiative to be “a strong option for families whose children are in critical need of summer literacy programming.”

In early 2019, Rural Church also partnered with Project Evident to develop a Strategic Evidence Plan to prepare for a summative evaluation to estimate the causal impact of the program model on student literacy, which involves: (a) gaining a better understanding of the value of different program components and what works well for whom; (b) ensuring consistent implementation across programs according to a well-defined model and theory of change; (c) strengthening the capacity of programs to participate in evaluations and continuous improvement; and (d) exploring the feasibility of different methodological approaches to assess the programs’ impact in the most rigorous manner possible.

Consistent with evaluations for prior years, the evaluations conducted in 2019 and 2020 also demonstrated reading growth for students over the program period. They also confirmed that rural churches across a broad range of communities can implement the program model according to its guiding principles, and that there is need and demand for out-of-school summer literacy interventions in rural communities. Despite the obstacles posed by the pandemic, 13 churches operated the program in 2020 — offering in-person or virtual instruction and adapting other components of the model — and their students gained reading skills and reported positive shifts in reading motivation and behaviors. The adaptations allowed the evaluation to examine variations in program delivery, providing initial evidence on core elements that are essential to fidelity.

Evaluation Timeline

NUMBER OF ACTIVE PROGRAMS*



**In 2019 and 2020, a total of 15 churches participated in the Summer Literacy Initiative. Ten of the 2019 grantee churches held summer literacy programs in 2020, in addition to three new grantee churches.*

Looking Forward

The Rural Church team is continuing its efforts to support churches and program staff in delivering high-quality services to their students and families and making necessary adaptations to meet their needs during an unprecedented time of disruption and uncertainty. Data and evidence continues to be at the core of the initiative’s strategy and decision-making, and Rural Church is working with NCDPI, program staff and American Institutes for Research (its 2020-2021 evaluation partner) to generate evidence that can drive further improvements, while exploring options for a summative evaluation in the future.



“We say, ‘We know you bring your strengths from the classroom. Do what you need to do to teach these students how to read and bring them along to a higher reading level.’”

Dr. Helen I. Chen
Literacy Expert and Evaluation
Consultant for Rural Church

Lessons Learned

In developing the Summer Literacy Initiative, the Endowment has an intentional approach to building an evidence-based program from the ground up — incrementally strengthening the programs through continuous testing, evaluations, learning and improvements, and building toward a summative evaluation of impact on target outcomes. Staff who have worked on the initiative have surfaced lessons on how the Endowment and other social sector funders can effectively collaborate with researchers and practitioners on building evidence for continuous improvement. These include:

Promoting a framework that recognizes the value of a broader range of evidence, encouraging evaluative methods and activities that match the learning needs at different stages of an initiative or a program.

While pursuing evidence that the Summer Literacy Programs can have a net impact on student literacy, Rural Church needed other types of evidence to effectively support churches and educators as the program was getting off the ground. At the Endowment, there is an increasing focus on building evidence that can support implementation and answer questions about who benefits from what and how, in addition to summative evaluations that prove impact of interventions or programs on outcomes of interest.

Investing in strategic decision-making tools to guide evidence pursuits and to build a learning culture, including the development of theories of change, learning agendas, Strategic Evidence Plans, and evaluative frameworks.

For Rural Church, developing a theory of change and a Strategic Evidence Plan was valuable in guiding their work on the literacy initiative. The Evaluation team at the Endowment is currently working with the four program areas to develop theories of change and learning agendas to foster a more holistic approach to building evidence, and to create a shared set of values and tools for staff to use.

“There’s hidden reading in a lot of the enrichment. You’re subtly building confidence outside of that classroom setting, where they have to worry about performance and tests.”

- Teacher



Building the capacity of grantees to engage in the evidence-building process.

Rural Church makes considerable investments in providing funding, training and technical assistance to help programs build their capacity to participate in evaluations and improve their services. This includes providing programs with opportunities to learn from peers and sharing evaluation findings in a timely and accessible manner.

Create feedback loops with grantees and constituents to translate evidence into action, and to leverage practitioners’ expertise and constituents’ voices to guide strategic decisions.

Rural Church uses formal and informal feedback loops with programs to discuss lessons from evaluations, to solicit feedback on implementation and data collection, and to make decisions on future improvements. The process incorporates feedback from students and families, who participate in surveys and verbal feedback loops with program staff. There’s also growing emphasis on: (a) engaging educators in the program in sharing their expertise to further strengthen and standardize instructional practices and assessments across programs; and (b) elevating the needs and voices of families and encouraging shared decision making among the programs, families, and communities.

The case study of the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative showcases what Project Evident calls the “Next Generation of Evidence” — one that centers on community needs and voices, embraces continuous improvement, empowers practitioners, and prioritizes collaborative learning and accountability among funders, researchers and practitioners. We hope that it provides insights for philanthropic and public funders, practitioners and researchers on building and using actionable evidence to strengthen the pipeline of evidence-based education and social programs.



Introduction

Summer learning loss is a well-documented challenge that disproportionately affects children in poverty. Low-income students lose substantial ground in literacy during the summer due to diminished access to academic support and enrichment opportunities, which contributes to long-term disparities in educational outcomes.¹ These gaps in opportunity and achievement are particularly persistent in rural communities, which have historically faced significant inequities in education funding.

In North Carolina, more than half a million students — about 40 percent of all students in the state — attend rural schools.² In the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP), two-thirds of the state’s rural 4th-graders performed below proficiency on the reading assessment, compared to about half of the state’s suburban students, and low-income students and students of color fared most poorly (**Figure 1**). The gap in literacy outcomes for rural students reflects a combination of factors, including socio-economic characteristics of students and families and the state’s educational funding and policy context.

¹ McCombs et al. (2011); Alexander, Entwisle and Olson (2007)

² Public Schools First NC (2020)

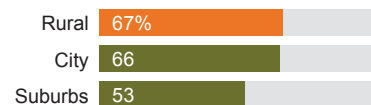
FIGURE 1

Rural Literacy Gap

Performance of North Carolina's 4th-Graders in the 2019 NAEP Reading Assessment

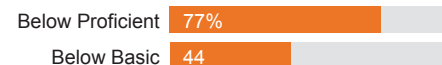
BY SCHOOL LOCATION

Below Proficient



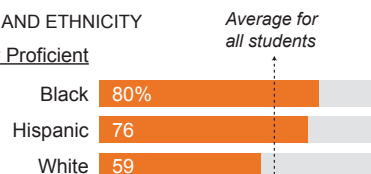
Performance of Rural 4th-Graders

ELIGIBLE FOR NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM



RACE AND ETHNICITY

Below Proficient



- North Carolina has one of the highest levels of rural child poverty in the United States, with one in five school-aged rural children living in poverty. The state's rural student population is also one of the most racially diverse in the country, when compared to rural districts in other states, and rural students of color are significantly more likely to live in low-income households.³ Income-based disparities in children's home learning environments, including availability of reading resources and supports, as well as unequal access to out-of-school enrichment opportunities contribute to the disparities in literacy outcomes.⁴
- Rural schools face significant challenges in meeting the high level of needs among their students and families and in closing the gaps in opportunities and achievement. Instructional spending for each rural student in North Carolina is about \$1,000 below the average rural school district in the country.⁵ Many schools in rural counties experience difficulties in "recruiting and retaining highly skilled teachers" and are "unable to offer the diversity of course offerings found in wealthier counties," according to an analysis by the Public School Forum of North Carolina.⁶
- Reading performance for rural students in North Carolina also declines from 4th to 8th grade in the NEAP, subsequently affecting their post-secondary readiness — leading a 2019 report from the Rural School and Community Trust to conclude that "the most pronounced area of concern [for the state's rural students] is reading."⁷ Research suggests that students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are far less likely to graduate from high school.⁸

In this context, addressing the gaps in early childhood literacy in North Carolina's rural communities is of utmost importance, and research shows that literacy programs that prevent summer learning losses can improve reading outcomes, especially for low-income students.⁹

Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative

The Duke Endowment's Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative is designed to empower and equip United Methodist congregations to address early childhood summer learning loss and improve reading outcomes for struggling kindergarten to third-grade students in North Carolina's rural communities. United Methodist churches have deep roots across the state and they play pivotal roles as centers of weekly worship, community events and services for children and families. The Endowment's Rural Church program area works to strengthen the capacity of these churches to serve their communities, and has invested in the Summer Literacy Initiative as a measurable, meaningful way for congregations to transform the lives of children and families. While the programs are operated by United Methodist churches, they are open to rising first through third graders who are below proficiency for their grade level, regardless of their family's religious affiliations, beliefs and practices.

The Endowment has supported the initiative's development and implementation since 2012, starting with one pilot program in 2013 and expanding the program to 15 communities across the state by 2020. Along the way, the Endowment has invested in formative evaluations to assess student outcomes, and to build evidence that can improve its collaboration with churches, strengthen program services and expand the initiative's reach. The Summer Literacy Programs have yielded consistently promising results for participating students in multiple communities over the years, producing significant reading gains and changes in reading behaviors by the end of the program. In 2019, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) supported the expansion of the program to more communities by recognizing it as an out-of-school option for students who are identified to be in need of summer intervention by the state's Read to Achieve guidelines.¹⁰

³ Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, and Klein (2019)

⁴ García and Weiss (2017); Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, Lloyd (2013)

⁵ Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, and Klein (2019)

⁶ Fox, Wagner, and Lee (2020)

⁷ Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, and Klein (2019)

⁸ Hernandez (2011)

⁹ Kim and Quinn (2013)

¹⁰ In 2012, North Carolina passed the Read to Achieve legislation to replace social promotion based on age with an emphasis on demonstrated proficiency in reading, and to boost the reading achievement of elementary-school students. In addition to school-year interventions, the legislation mandates districts to provide voluntary summer camps for students below grade-level proficiency.



“We always say something magical happens and we can’t really explain it but it really does.”

- Program Director

This report, written by Project Evident, documents how the Rural Church program team worked with United Methodist churches, program staff, NCDPI, the Evaluation team at the Endowment and external partners in its efforts to build an evidence-based summer literacy model that leverages the strengths and resources of rural churches. It also discusses the Endowment’s process of building a Strategic Evidence Plan with Project Evident, which outlines a roadmap to building evidence of the Summer Literacy Program’s efficacy and implementation to support scale-up and sustainability in the long run.

Our goal is to provide an example that showcases an incremental and intentional approach to building evidence-based programs from the ground up — one that is focused on continuous learning and centered on the needs of those who are operating the programs and those who are expected to benefit from them. We hope there are actionable insights here for philanthropic and public funders of education and social programs, practitioners and researchers on generating and using evidence beyond periodic impact studies and on effectively collaborating to drive outcomes for communities.

The Rural Church Summer Literacy Programs leverage church and community resources and relationships to deliver a comprehensive, evidence-informed package of services. The model (**Figure 2**) combines literacy instruction with enrichment activities, family engagement, nutritious meals and wrap-around services to serve rising first- through third-graders who need reading support. There are no requirements for the families and students to be members of the United Methodist church, and the programs do not proselytize.

The program model and its guiding principles are grounded in the existing evidence base for summer learning programs, which identifies several features to be associated with outcomes, including smaller class sizes; individualized, high-quality instruction; engaging enrichment experiences and caring relationships that maximize participation and attendance; family involvement; and regular evaluation.¹¹

¹¹ McCombs et al. (2011)

FIGURE 2

Rural Church Summer Literacy Program Model

PARTNERS	CORE PROGRAM COMPONENTS	TARGET OUTCOMES
United Methodist churches Recruit students, staff, teachers, and volunteers Provide space, supplies, and other resources	 Literacy instruction <i>3 hours each day</i> Highly individualized instruction based on weekly student assessments	During the program Students... Face fewer barriers to participating in a summer literacy program Have increased confidence in their own reading abilities Read more in their free time because they like it Receive increased support and encouragement for reading at home Grow in key reading skills and in overall proficiency Families... Have increased supports and skills to engage children in reading
Local schools Support outreach to families and identify students who can benefit from the program	 Enrichment <i>3 hours each day</i> Variety of activities to make learning fun, and connect students to community resources and caring adults	
Master teachers Provide instruction and support implementation of other program components		
Community partners Provide additional resources and volunteer time to provide enrichment, and to support students and families	 Family engagement <i>Weekly events</i> Empower families to support their children's literacy at home	
The Duke Endowment Oversees implementation Provides funding and technical assistance to programs on implementation and evaluation	 Wrap-around supports Provide breakfast and lunch everyday; remove barriers to engagement, like transportation, child care, or supplies	
		After the program Changes in student and family behavior around reading lead to sustained gains in literacy



“You have to have guiding principles — here are your fences, this is how we need you to operate within those fences, and then go to it and make it work for your community.”

- Program Director

Guiding Principles

Implementation of the Rural Church Summer Literacy Program model is guided by six core principles.

Thriving and engaged church community

The programs build on the strengths and resources of United Methodist churches in rural communities, including their facilities and supplies, clergy leadership, congregation members and volunteers, and community ties. The pastor at each church provides foundational leadership in developing the program, engaging their congregations and communities for support and recruiting experienced educators to serve as program directors and teachers. Congregation members contribute to nearly all aspects of the program as volunteers, working with students on reading or other enrichment such as music or arts, cooking meals, or helping families with transportation.

“One of the things that has impressed me tremendously is the volunteer commitment to the program, and the real desire I’ve heard from the volunteers to share with and to basically love these children. It’s really powerful and, the kids sense that.”

- Program director

Strong community investment

Churches build relationships with schools and community partners to recruit program staff, volunteers and students, to identify enrichment opportunities, and to secure additional resources necessary to supplement the Endowment’s support. The programs strive to connect students to libraries, museums, and other educational institutions in the community for sustained enrichment beyond the program and to expose them to different professions and positive role models. In these efforts, the programs engage local organizations and professionals —firefighters, doctors, athletes, business leaders, artists and musicians, among others — to work with students.

“Over the years, we have been reaching more and more into the community for volunteers. To me the more the community feels they have ownership in the program when it comes to the serving the kids, the more support you get from the community.”

- Program director



Wrap-around services

A majority of participants in the Summer Literacy Programs are from low-income families: nearly 70 percent of students in 2019 were eligible for the federal free and reduced price meal program. In addition to providing breakfast and lunch, Summer Literacy Programs strive to identify and address unmet needs that may hinder a child's or a family's ability to participate fully in the program, and to reduce inequities in access to resources and opportunities for low-income families. This includes assistance with transportation, meal provision, child care and school supplies; in 2020, churches that served students virtually during the pandemic supported students with devices (such as iPads) and internet access. The Endowment encourages the programs to create an environment that fosters learning by making students feel safe and nurtured and helping them build relationships with caring adults.

“In terms of wrap-around services, it’s all about making sure that the teachers and the volunteers are aware of what they see. If a child needs shoes and we know that they need shoes, we’ll figure out a way to get it for the child. We try to meet those unmet needs.”

- Teacher

Empowered and effective teachers

Summer Literacy Programs work with local school administrators and principals to recruit experienced “master teachers” and retain highly effective teachers from year to year. Teachers are expected to deliver a high level of individual attention and emotional support to students as part of instruction, and use a variety of techniques to move students toward stronger understanding of reading and greater independence in the learning process.

In doing so, the programs empower teachers to shape literacy instruction based on their experiences and assessments of student needs. “There’s a lot of autonomy and that’s part of being a master teacher,” said Dr. Helen Chen, a former researcher at Harvard University who has been supporting the Rural Church program area with the implementation and evaluation of the initiative since 2016. She added: “We say, ‘We know you bring your strengths from the classroom. Do what you need to do to teach these students how to read and bring them along to a higher reading level.’” The Endowment provides training and technical assistance to teachers on using assessments and collecting data, and engages them in collaborative learning on effective instructional practices.

“We bring a lot of the instructional strategies. With all of the years of experience that all of us have, we’re well-versed in research-based strategies that have been proven to get results.... But what we do with that, how we assess, and how we record the evidence — all of that’s hugely important, and the support from the Endowment is very helpful. This year, we learned about trauma and how that can impact students. That really, really changed our perspective and how we interact with the students. It was timely and gave us a lot of tools for how to meet the needs of the kids that might not necessarily be academic.”

- Teacher and Program Director



Data-informed and student-focused instruction

Teachers use formative assessments to gauge student progress weekly on various measures of literacy, such as comprehension, fluency and phonemic awareness. Teachers use the results to create and inform individualized goals for student growth and tailor instruction.

The Summer Literacy Programs also have low student-to-teacher ratios — one teacher and a teacher’s assistant for 10 to 12 students, in addition to assistance from volunteers, when available — which allow them to offer more individualized attention to students than is often delivered in traditional classrooms. Research shows that “students who are unable to meet grade-level standards in literacy often require supplemental, intensive, and individualized reading intervention to improve their skills.”¹

“I think we’re spot on with the assessments. We need to know what their gaps are and give them multiple ways to meet their reading goals because they might not be ready for comprehension. Some still can’t decode. We need to meet them where they are, and it gives them time to meet their individual needs and still meet reading goals.”

- Teacher

Family engagement

Summer Literacy Programs require parents or other family members to attend a weekly event to keep them informed of their child’s literacy development and to provide strategies and tools they can use to support their children with reading at home. To make it easier for families to engage, the programs provide meals, child care and assistance with language translation.

Rural churches can adapt their programs to their own context, responding to the specific needs of children and families in their area, the characteristics of their congregation, and community resources and partnerships. One of the programs that primarily serves Native American children from the Lumbee tribe has emphasized tactile learning based on the cultural preference of the students. It also closes for Lumbee Homecoming, which is a week-long summer event hosted by the tribe. Some programs have a large number of students from Spanish-speaking families and need to employ bilingual teachers or teaching assistants. Some use food programs through local school districts to provide meals, and others have staff or volunteers cook meals.

Program leaders and staff interviewed for this report voiced appreciation for the Endowment’s approach in empowering practitioners to make necessary adaptations while providing them with the tools to stay true to the core principles. One program director said: “You have to have guiding principles — here are your fences, this is how we need you to operate within those fences, and then go to it and make it work for your community. I love how [the Endowment’s Rural Church program area] works with us, and the respect that they show the practitioner.”

“Over the years, we’ve learned that in order for the program to be as effective as possible for the children, we have to do whatever we can for the parents to help them be the partners at home. That is so important for the whole program to succeed.”

- Program Director



“The Summer Literacy Program lets teachers be creative in their own area of interest. It’s just about thinking outside of the box, things that we don’t do normally in class, making it fun and being creative.”

- Teacher

“There is a barrier between us and the rest of our community, and this program helped us bridge the gap.”

- Pastor

What Makes the Rural Church Summer Literacy Program Unique

Church leaders, program directors and teachers say that the program’s comprehensive approach to supporting students and their families, combined with the church setting and the relationships that children form with congregation and community volunteers, distinguishes the program from other summer programs that may be available and drives improvements in students’ ability and desire to read. One program director remarked: “We always say something magical happens and we can’t really explain it but it really does. At the beginning [of the program], the parents say that the kids just hate reading and they don’t ever want to do their homework. At the end, they’re like, ‘I cannot believe what just happened. Suddenly, here’s my kid in the back of the car wanting to read their book and they’ve never wanted to read before.’”

Staff across multiple programs highlighted several features that they believe make the Summer Literacy Program unique, help engage families and students who may not otherwise participate in summer programs, and contribute to the promising results in student reading gains.

Low student-teacher ratio and empowered teachers allow the programs to meet students where they are.

In the words of one teacher: “We’re able to provide a more intense instruction, an instruction that’s more geared to what these students need and where they are, because our class sizes are small.” Some teachers also said that they felt free to be more creative in their approach to working with students in the program than they did in traditional classrooms. “As a teacher and as a professional it’s just so rewarding,” said another instructor. “You feel supported and you also feel empowered because we’re able to make it what it is. And we feel that ownership in it. When you feel that ownership, then you’re going to make sure it succeeds.” Another teacher said: “We’re kind of limited in our classroom [during the school year]. We’re really told what we have to do, what we have to teach, and we have to do it. The Summer Literacy Program lets teachers be creative in their own area of interest. It’s just about thinking outside of the box, things that we don’t do normally in class, making it fun and being creative.”



“As a teacher and as a professional it’s just so rewarding. You feel supported and you also feel empowered because we’re able to make it what it is. And we feel that ownership in it.”

- Teacher

The church environment, and the community it fosters, helps students and families who have struggled in the traditional school setting engage with learning.

Teachers in the program, who are educators at local public schools during the school year, said the sense of community that the churches foster by mobilizing volunteers and providing wrap-around services helps many parents and students engage in ways that aren’t typical during the school year. One teacher said: “I think we just created an environment where they feel safe and feel that ‘It is okay if I don’t have something, I have some place that I could go to have my needs met.’” Another teacher added: “It was all about pouring into those kids and families from all of those volunteers that just surrounded them. That was really beautiful. And I think it’s because of it being there at that church.” Nearly all program staff said that helping families learn how to support their children with literacy in their homes is also vital to the programs’ success.

The enrichment component helps students build self-confidence and positive relationships with caring community members, while also serving as much-needed child care for families.

Most staff across the programs said that the number of full-time summer programs for low-income families in their local areas were limited, and that school-based options were typically half-day, which posed child care challenges for many families. The Summer Literacy Programs combine three hours of morning instruction with three hours of afternoon enrichment, which helps families that need child care for longer stretches during the day.

Staff stressed that the enrichment activities — arts and crafts, music, sports, visits to museums and libraries, reading for fun with congregation or community members, swimming lessons etc. — were vital in reinforcing what students learn in the classroom and in helping to build their confidence through engagement with caring adults. “Enrichment is a huge piece because most of those kids got experiences that they would not have ever had the opportunity to experience



without this program,” said one of the program directors. A teacher added: “There’s hidden reading in a lot of the enrichment. You’re subtly building confidence outside of that classroom setting, where they have to worry about performance and tests.” In fact, evidence suggests that providing students with engaging enrichment opportunities promotes attendance in voluntary summer programs, and that instructional experiences that feel different and less stressful from regular school year is important to propel students forward during the summer.¹

The programs help bring different groups in the community together toward a common goal of improving outcomes for children, bridging racial and economic divides.

Most of the students and families who participate in the Summer Literacy Programs are not members of the churches that operate the programs. Taken together, the programs serve a diverse group of students and families — in 2020, approximately 50 percent of the students were White, 20 percent were Latinx, 18 percent were Black, and 6 percent were Native American — whereas the congregations are largely white. Staff at several churches said that these summer programs help their congregations forge relationships with children and families that they would not otherwise interact with, largely due to racial and economic segregation that is common in many communities across this country. “I serve a middle to upper class congregation,” said one pastor. “There is a barrier between us and the rest of our community, and this program helped us bridge the gap.” To strengthen congregations’ engagements with the students and families they serve, the Rural Church program began providing training on cultural humility, authentic family engagement, and trauma-informed approaches to program staff and volunteers in 2019.

Several programs reported that volunteers continue to mentor students beyond the summer and stay in touch with their families. Building these types of connections is a key component of the program’s theory of change toward longer term outcomes for everyone involved. According to Robert Webb, director of the Endowment’s Rural Church program area: “The congregations are beginning to see who their neighbors really are. I hope that this opens up broader conversations about learning, growth and equity. I think it’s bound to because the congregation is making a commitment to a child’s life and to engaging with them and their family deeply.”

Dr. Chen, who has conducted evaluations of the programs between 2016 and 2019 and works closely with program staff on implementation, says that all of the things above are part of the “magic sauce” that should be explored further with data and evidence. “I think all of these things contribute to confidence, self esteem, sense of belonging and influence reading behaviors, attitudes, and motivation,” she said. Several program staff echoed the sentiment, saying that it was important to build evidence on how different program components work together to support its effectiveness.

In the next section, we look at how the Rural Church program area has built and used evidence to shape the initiative over the last decade, as well as its plans to dig deeper into the implementation of different program components and build evidence of efficacy at scale.

¹ McCombs et al. (2011)

The Role of Evidence in the Evolution of the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative

2012: Origin and Concept Development

The concept for the Summer Literacy Initiative was developed in 2012 by an Endowment Fellow, Chantalle Carles Schropp, in partnership with the Rural Church program area. Kristen Richardson-Frick, associate director of the program area, said that Ms. Schropp, a former Teach for America Corps member, saw “the strengths of the rural church as, in some cases, the last surviving institution in rural communities” and their potential to contribute to solving the heightening literacy crisis. This aligned with Rural Church’s goal of building the capacity of United Methodist churches to be conduits for community transformation. “We think the Summer Literacy Initiative is a way for a church to have a meaningful, measurable impact in a community,” said Ms. Richardson-Frick.

From the onset, using and building evidence has been at the initiative’s core. In developing the concept for the program model, Ms. Schropp and Rural Church leveraged the existing evidence base for effective summer literacy programs. The Rural Church team viewed the initiative as an opportunity to demonstrate that churches can make tangible impact for the advancement of individuals and communities by delivering evidence-informed interventions. Ms. Richardson-Frick said that, in addition to thinking about data and evidence from a practice and culture perspective, the Rural Church area brought a theological lens. “We have three general rules in the Methodist church: do no harm; do good; and stay in love with God,” she said. “How do you actually know you’re doing good and you’re not doing harm? These are evaluative questions. It’s always been about asking the deeper question about how we can know the impact of what we’re doing, and bringing the realm of evaluation and social science to the church.” She added that evidence was also crucial for effective stewardship. “We have a finite amount of money,” she said. “What we want to encourage churches to do is the thing that’s going to have the most impact; without data and evaluation, we don’t know what that is.”

“It’s always been about asking the deeper question about how we can know the impact of what we’re doing, and bringing the realm of evaluation and social science to the church.”

Kristen R. Richardson-Frick
Associate Director of Rural Church

2013-2018: Development and Continuous Improvement

The Rural Church team piloted the Summer Literacy Program with a grant to one church in 2013, which produced promising results on student reading. “We began to see that student scores were getting better. We thought we may have something promising, so we wanted to begin to test the program more deeply to better understand what it was that we had and how it could work to improve reading,” said Mr. Webb. Rural Church took a measured approach to expansion, supporting the program at only two churches between 2014 and 2017, and at a third church in 2018, while investing in evaluations to better understand the factors that affect implementation and student outcomes. Evidence generated each year was used to strengthen implementation, student assessments and data collection for future evaluations, creating a continuous cycle of learning and building better evidence.

During this period, Rural Church’s strategic approach to building evidence and expanding the program was also shaped by concurrent shifts in the Endowment’s strategy and thinking about evidence.

- The Endowment began to place a stronger emphasis on early childhood initiatives across its program areas in an effort to facilitate positive early development between the ages of 0 to 8 that prime children for better outcomes in life. The “Zero-to-Eight” emphasis also stressed the use of rigorous evidence for making investment and scaling decisions.
- Around the same time, the Evaluation team at the Endowment was working with program teams and external experts to develop an evaluative framework for matching evidence building to the needs and stages of programs. There was an increasing recognition that initiatives or programs in early stages of development need to test strategies and build evidence that can help them refine and implement services according to their theory of change, before pursuing large-scale summative evaluations designed to measure their overall impact. “In the past, we’ve rushed into randomized control trials way too soon, without doing all the formative work that is necessary to understand factors related to implementation and context,” said Rhett Mabry, the president of the Endowment. “We’ve learned from experience about the importance of conducting pilots and formative evaluations, and getting buy-in from communities and practitioners before launching summative evaluations,” he added.



Rhett N. Mabry
President



Robert R. Webb III
Director of Rural Church



Kristen R. Richardson-Frick
Associate Director of Rural Church



William F. Bacon
Director of Evaluation



Laila A. Bell
Associate Director of
Learning and Evaluation



Dr. Helen I. Chen
Literacy Expert and Evaluation
Consultant for Rural Church

In describing the framework, Laila Bell, associate director of learning and evaluation at the Endowment, said: “It helps us assess where we are in program development and what are the kind of evaluation questions, needs and methods that are best-suited at that phase. There are different questions that need to be asked throughout program development and expansion: what type of evidence do we need to answer those questions, and then what claims can we make on the basis of the rigor and how that evidence was created?” William Bacon, director of evaluation, added that developing the framework leveraged lessons learned from supporting summative evaluations prematurely. These lessons highlighted the need to think about evidence more holistically and as a tool for learning and improvement, and not just as a yes/no exercise to say whether something “works.”

In this evolving organizational context, the Rural Church program area worked with Dr. Chen on a series of formative evaluations between 2016 and 2018 while exploring the feasibility of a summative impact evaluation in future years. Evaluations for all three years collected data on implementation of program services; those conducted in 2016 and 2018 also measured reading gains through administration of reading tests before and after the program. In both years, participants across all three programs gained an average of three months in reading in validated, standardized assessments.¹ Students and parents also reported significant improvements in their reading behaviors, attitudes toward reading, intrinsic motivation and home literacy environments.

The evaluations built from one year to the next, gradually increasing qualitative data collection from teachers, students, surveys and church members to gain deeper insights on how the programs work on the ground and the challenges they face. “There has been a steady progression of not only measuring, but understanding what we’re measuring and making sense of what we measured,” Dr. Chen said.

¹ The 2016 evaluation used the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the 2018 evaluation used the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test.

“How do we cultivate the initiative in a way that’s thoughtful and intentional, so that we don’t find ourselves with 20-plus sites and not knowing how to really rigorously measure and thoughtfully think about the next steps?”

Dr. Helen I. Chen
Literacy Expert and Evaluation Consultant
for Rural Church

Rural Church used insights from these evaluations to develop an implementation handbook for the six guiding principles, and to support programs with strengthening their:

- Partnerships with local schools for outreach and recruitment;
- Process for recruiting master teachers;
- Use of student assessments to deliver data-informed, student-focused instruction;
- Documentation of service delivery for different program components; and
- Implementation of high quality, individualized instruction, where teachers gradually release responsibility of learning to students and help them become independent readers.²

The evaluations produced consistent evidence that there is need and demand for out-of-school summer literacy interventions in rural communities, that rural churches can implement the Summer Literacy Programs according to the guiding principles, and that the programs can produce reading gains for students. Based on this evidence, Rural Church developed a plan for scaling to additional communities between 2019 and 2021 with an eye toward conducting a rigorous impact evaluation to assess causal impact on student reading. But it needed a roadmap to ensure a strategic approach to scaling the initiative, while continuing to build evidence that is necessary to help the initiative prepare for a summative impact evaluation.

When describing the need for an evidence roadmap, Dr. Chen said: “How do we cultivate the initiative in a way that’s thoughtful and intentional, so that we don’t find ourselves with 20-plus sites and not knowing how to really rigorously measure and thoughtfully think about the next steps? People want it and it’s going to grow. But if we don’t actually help it grow well, prune it and cultivate it, it’s going to become a mess pretty quickly. It was apparent that we needed a roadmap to guide our evidence building as we scaled.”

² Starting in 2017, the Endowment encouraged programs to use and adapt principles of the “balanced literacy” framework to promote consistently high quality instruction across all sites. In doing so, teachers are empowered to use a variety of instructional activities to gradually release control of the learning process to students as they become more proficient and independent. For example, teachers can start out by modeling reading and writing, and then transition to shared or guided practice. As students’ skills become more advanced, teachers encourage them to read and write independently. The Summer Literacy Initiative does not take a prescriptive approach to implementation of the balanced literacy framework, instead leaving instructional choices to programs and teachers based on individual student needs and data from weekly assessments. Rural Church is working with its evaluation partners to assess the implementation and impact of instructional practices used in the program. It is also working with teachers and NCDPI to identify evidence-based strategies and curricula that might be incorporated into Summer Literacy Program classrooms to optimize its impact.

2019: A Roadmap to Evidence for Scale and Sustainability

Between January and March of 2019, the Rural Church program area collaborated with the Evaluation team at the Endowment and a multi-disciplinary team from Project Evident to develop a Strategic Evidence Plan for the Summer Literacy Initiative. Project Evident developed the Strategic Evidence Planning process (**Figure 3**) with social sector organizations to define a continuous approach to building evidence that is tied to strategic goals and learning agendas, that leverages practitioner and community voices, and that advances actionable knowledge needed by decision-makers to build and scale solutions for communities. Working with Dr. Chen and the Evaluation team, the Rural Church program area had created a strong foundation for building and using evidence for improvement in collaboration with practitioners. The work with Project Evident built on that foundation and produced a roadmap to accelerate investments and activities for generating evidence that can advance the vision for the initiative.

Vision, Goals and Learning Agenda

The Strategic Evidence Plan is grounded in Rural Church's vision that the church-based summer literacy model could be replicated across North Carolina as a Zero to Eight initiative of the Endowment. Toward that end, Rural Church seeks to produce the strongest possible evidence of the model's impact on student reading achievement by 2023. While the program produced outcomes for participants at three churches, the Rural Church team and the Evaluation team had many questions on their learning agenda:

- Can rural churches in a broader range of communities across North Carolina implement the Summer Literacy Program model as intended? Can they attract investments and participation from their congregations and communities as necessary? Can they recruit a sufficient number of students and families who are most in need of reading support during the summer?
- What are the enabling conditions that need to be in place — characteristics of the church, community, program staff or participating families — for the programs to thrive?

FIGURE 3

Steps to Developing a Strategic Evident Plan



Define Vision and Goals

Articulate how evidence can advance strategic priorities within a specific timeline, and identify concrete goals to help achieve that vision



Review Context and Capacity

Use in-depth interviews, focus groups and document review to understand the operational context and evidence capacity, such as tools, data, or partnerships

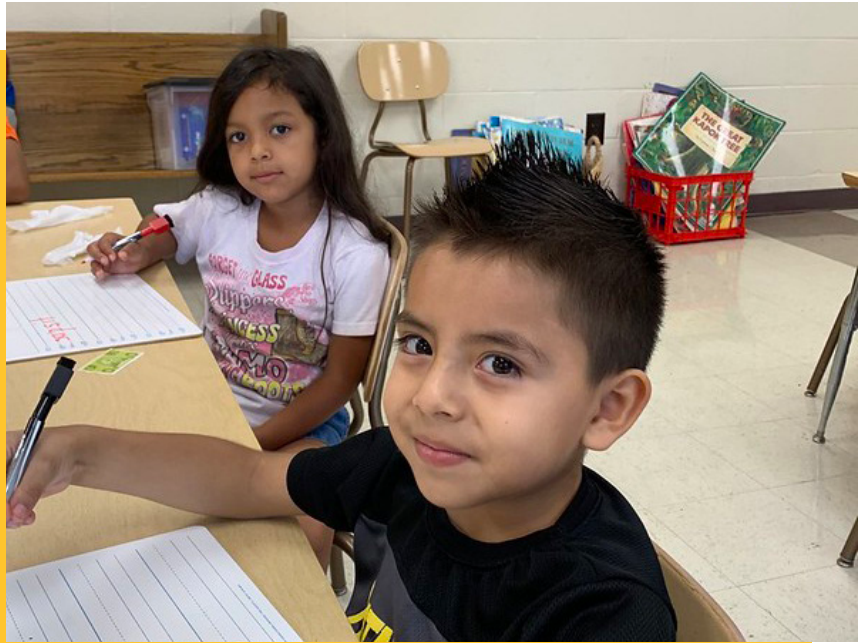


Develop Roadmap

Apply learning from assessments to delineate investments and actions needed to achieve evidence vision and goals, and outline a series of actionable steps to implement them

“The congregations are beginning to see who their neighbors really are. I hope that this opens up broader conversations about learning, growth and equity.”

Robert R. Webb III
Director of Rural Church



- What are the ways in which churches adapt the guiding principles to their local context? How do these variations in implementation affect student outcomes? Which students and families benefit the most?
- As churches adapt the program model to fit their organizational and community context, and as teachers adapt instruction to fit the needs of their students, how does one define fidelity to the model? Are there areas that require a more prescriptive approach to ensure consistency of program quality and outcomes?
- How do the non-academic program components — enrichment, family engagement and wraparound services — contribute to reading outcomes? Do they need to be implemented in specific ways to drive outcomes? Are certain components more essential than others?

Addressing these questions is crucial to Rural Church’s vision for producing the strongest possible evidence of the Summer Literacy Initiative’s impact, and the program area identified two goals to help achieve that vision:

- **Optimize the Summer Literacy Program model for impact and sustainability:** Generate evidence to support improvement and codification, to understand the value of different components, and to determine how fidelity should be defined.
- **Develop evidence of the model’s effectiveness to support replication:** In collaboration with churches, NCDPI and other partners, pursue strategies to rigorously demonstrate the programs’ impact on student reading achievement at a larger scale and to generate evidence that can support more widespread replication in different communities, if the program model is found to be effective.



Assessing Context and Capacity

To develop an evidence roadmap that can help Rural Church achieve its evidence vision and goals, Project Evident conducted in-depth interviews and group discussions with the Rural Church team, the Evaluation team and program staff at the three participating churches. The interviews illuminated variations in: (a) implementation of different program components across churches; (b) program and community context, including partnerships with schools and the availability of alternative summer reading programs; and (c) what program leaders and practitioners wanted to learn from evaluations.

The context and capacity assessments reinforced the learning agenda discussed above and surfaced other needs that are pertinent to the initiative's evidence vision.

Ensuring consistent implementation according to a clearly defined theory of change.

The Summer Literacy Program model was generally implemented in accordance with the six guiding principles, but there were key variations in how services were delivered and the types of students and families who participated. Differences in characteristics of the congregations and communities affected what the programs were able to offer for enrichment, family engagement and wrap-around services. As Rural Church expands the program to more locations, there is a clear need to understand these variations and to ensure that the core elements are tested and implemented with some level of consistency before trying to assess the summative impact of the model.

Understanding the availability of alternative summer reading programs.

Full-time summer reading programs with the combination of supports that the Rural Church Summer Literacy Programs offer were not readily available in the three communities where the program operated, but families had access to school-based reading camps.¹ An impact evaluation would estimate the effects of the Summer Literacy Programs relative to the counterfactual in a community. Since students may receive services at other reading camps, it is vital to understand any differences among students and families who choose the Summer Literacy Programs or alternative camps, and the contrast in services. Continuing attention to service contrast during the implementation and adaptation of the intervention could also help identify the characteristics of students and families that can most benefit from the program and the program features that may drive outcomes.

¹ North Carolina's Read to Achieve (RTA) legislation requires public schools to offer voluntary summer reading camps to students who are reading below proficiency at the end of 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grades. Implementation of these school-based reading camps and the services they offer vary across communities.

“I think we just created an environment where they feel safe and feel that ‘It is okay if I don’t have something, I have some place that I could go to have my needs met.’”

- Teacher



Exploring the feasibility of different methodological approaches to assess the programs’ impact and developing relationships and partnerships necessary to mount large-scale evaluations.

Any impact evaluation of the initiative would require a strong partnership with NCDPI and local schools, as they are instrumental to outreach and recruitment of students who need a summer reading intervention. Project Evident’s analysis suggested that Rural Church would need time to develop conditions and relationships that could enable a well-designed impact evaluation, including: (a) building buy-in among churches, community partners, local schools and NCDPI; (b) working with these partners to devise a recruitment process that can minimize differences between students who participate in the program and those who do not; (c) building demand for services that exceeds program capacity, which can be challenging in rural areas with population dispersed across a wider geography; and (d) exploring data sharing protocols with NCDPI to access administrative data on student outcomes.

Strengthening program capacity for data collection and continuous improvement.

The formative evaluations of the Summer Literacy Programs between 2016 and 2018 used paper-based data collection, which increased the time needed to analyze data and share insights with programs. As Rural Church prepared to bring the program to more communities in 2019 and build the foundation for a summative evaluation in the future, there was a need to invest in building the capacity of the programs to meet the increased expectations for data collection and participation in research design discussions.

Building a Roadmap

Based on the findings from the context and capacity review, Project Evident co-developed a roadmap with the Endowment's Rural Church and Evaluation teams, outlining a sequence of steps to achieve their evidence goals (**Figure 4**).

Conduct evaluation and improvement cycles.

The roadmap is grounded in the operational reality of the Summer Literacy Programs: They are six-week programs implemented by rural churches and not a year-round program with permanent staff and infrastructure, which limits the time frame and opportunities for staff development and training, data collection, and program improvement and evaluation activities. Toward that end, Project Evident laid out a path to conduct multiple evaluation and improvement cycles between 2019 and 2021 toward the first goal of optimizing the Summer Literacy Program model for impact and sustainability. This includes:

- Testing key assumptions of the program model;
- Strengthening data collection to assess intervention fidelity or whether the services are being delivered in a manner that is hypothesized in the theory of change (for example, assessing teacher responsiveness to students' instructional and emotional needs);
- Exploratory analysis of implementation and outcome patterns across churches to generate ideas for program improvement and codification of essential elements; and
- Testing program improvements, potentially using randomized tests of systemic variation (for example, testing different family engagement strategies or testing a more streamlined package of services).



Strengthen capacity for data and evaluation.

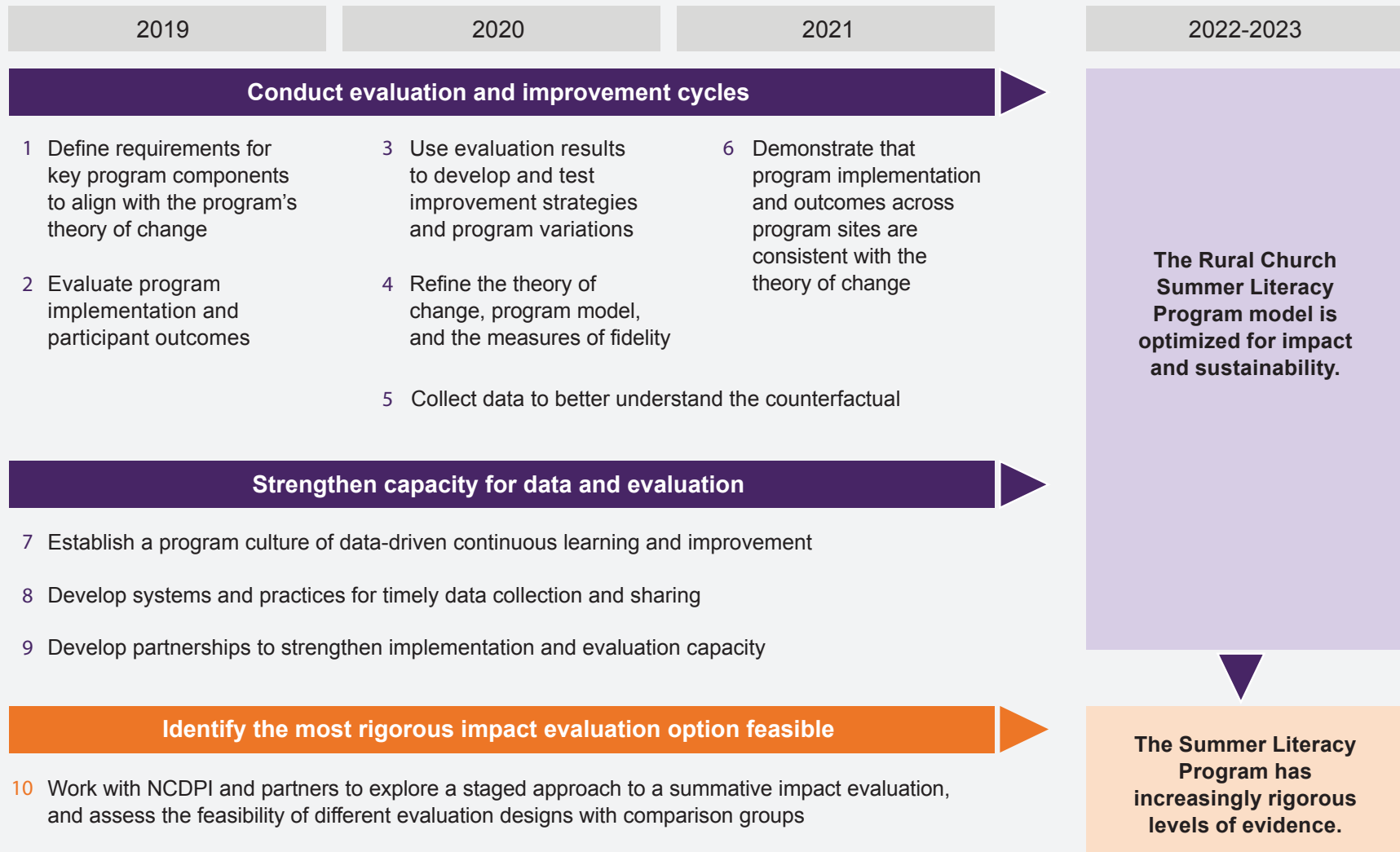
This involves investments in data systems, tools and technical assistance to build the capacity of churches to meet the increased data collection needs in a low-burden and timely manner, as well as building their capacity to participate in conversations about evaluation design. Project Evident also recommended supporting the churches with building a culture and community around learning from data and evidence, including opportunities to connect with peers during the year around best practices and innovations and providing a digital platform to share materials. Another key part of building capacity is strengthening the partnership and communication with NCDPI and schools to garner input on implementation and evaluation, as well as identifying partners who can conduct the cycles of evaluation and improvement.

Identify the most rigorous impact evaluation option feasible.

Project Evident recommended that the Endowment teams work with evaluation partners and NCDPI to explore a staged approach to a summative impact evaluation — assessing the feasibility of different evaluation designs with comparison groups and accessing administrative data from the school system.

FIGURE 4

Summer Literacy Program Evidence Roadmap





2019-2020: Cycles of Evaluation and Improvement

2019

Rural Church expanded the Summer Literacy Initiative to nine additional churches in 2019, serving a total of 12 communities across the state (**Figure 5**), and strengthened its partnership with NCDPI for outreach to students and families, recruiting more than 200 students into the programs. NCDPI provided local schools with guidelines that recognized the programs as “an additional option for parents who might not opt to send their children to Read to Achieve or other summer literacy camps,” stating that the Rural Church Summer Literacy Program is a “strong option for families whose children are in critical need of summer literacy programming.” Ms. Richardson-Frick said that the Endowment was “incredibly grateful” for NCDPI’s partnership and for being able to provide an option for families who may not attend summer school or school-based camps.

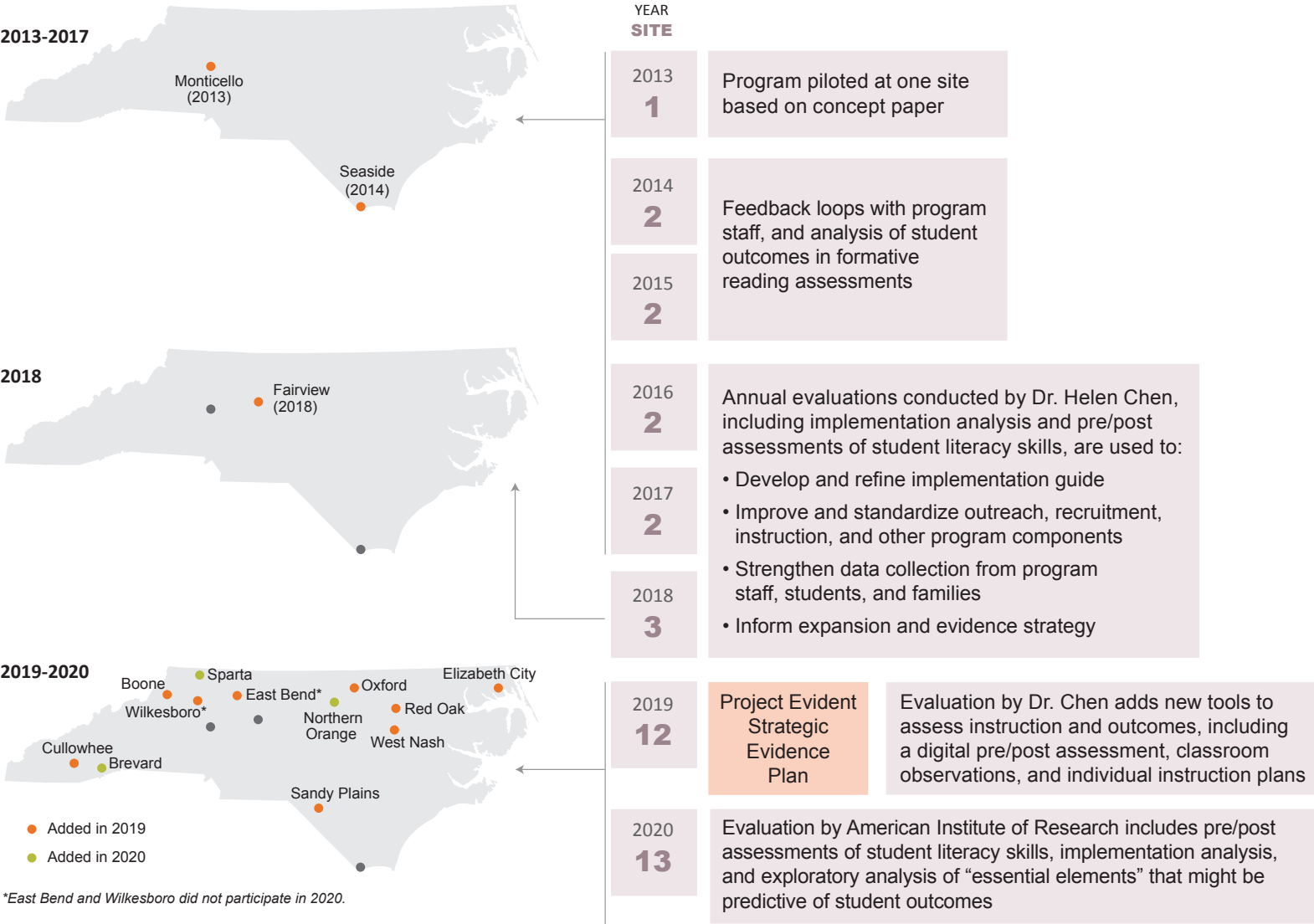
Following the roadmap, Dr. Chen conducted an evaluation of program implementation and effectiveness, as measured by a standardized assessment at the beginning and end. Students across all programs made significant gains in the likelihood of achieving grade level success by the end of the year and in specific reading skills.¹ Students and parents also reported positive impact on reading behaviors, attitudes toward reading, intrinsic motivation and home literacy environment. In an effort to better understand the instructional component of the program, the evaluation also added classroom observations using a validated instrument to assess instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization, as well as student instruction plans where teachers documented their use of formative assessments to individualize instruction.

The 2019 evaluation demonstrated that a wider range of churches can implement the Summer Literacy Program model in alignment with the guiding principles, provide quality learning environments with high levels of emotional and instructional support, and produce reading gains for students. The evaluation also documented the variations in implementation and outcomes across churches, as they adapted the guiding principles to their local context.

¹ The 2019 and 2020 evaluations of the literacy programs used the Lexia RAPID for the pre/post tests, which is a norm-referenced computer adaptive assessment of literacy skills. The Reading Success Probability, a measure of the likelihood that a student will score at or above the 50th percentile of the Stanford 10 standardized assessment of reading comprehension by the end of the school year, is calculated from a combination of student performance in different tasks like word reading, vocabulary pairs, and following directions.

FIGURE 5

Summer Literacy Program Evidence Journey





“We had to take into account the critical need to serve students during a pandemic while meeting as many of the research and evaluation goals as possible in that context.”

Kristen R. Richardson-Frick
Associate Director of Rural Church

2020

Based on the 2019 evaluation results and a concrete evidence roadmap to build causal evidence of impact on student reading outcomes, the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative received additional Endowment funding to support evaluation activities.

Rural Church identified American Institutes for Research (AIR) as an evaluation partner to work with the Endowment, grantee churches and Dr. Chen to conduct further evaluations in 2020 and 2021, advance the evidence roadmap and optimize the program model. The implementation and evaluation plan for summer 2020 was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. But despite the obstacles, 13 churches operated summer programs — five implemented in-person programs and eight implemented virtual programs — serving nearly 150 students. The Endowment provided support to churches to explore the feasibility of implementing different components and adapting them to meet safety protocols. “We had to take into account the critical need to serve students during a pandemic while meeting as many of the research and evaluation goals as possible in that context,” said Ms. Richardson-Frick.

Variations included a combination of in-person and virtual service delivery and adaptation of different components due to feasibility issues. For example, some churches that provided in-person instruction had to implement some components, such as family engagement, virtually. Some churches were not able to provide enrichment or family engagement activities, while others provided alternatives such as drive-through parent-teacher meetings or sending home materials for enrichment activities. Even with the challenges, program staff reported that the camps provided immense value to students and families, especially in reducing isolation for children and helping them prevent further learning loss during a year of unprecedented disruptions to their education. “Just seeing each other on that Zoom session was so important to them,” said one of the program directors when discussing her students.

Consistent with the findings from the 2019 evaluation, AIR’s evaluation of the 2020 programs found that participants made significant gains in the likelihood of achieving grade level success by the end of the year and in specific reading skills that were measured, which included word reading, following directions and vocabulary pairs.² In addition, students who started the program with lower scores on baseline assessments demonstrated greater gains than higher-

² The 2019 and 2020 evaluations of the literacy programs used the Lexia RAPID for the pre/post tests, which is a norm-referenced computer adaptive assessment of literacy skills. The Reading Success Probability, a measure of the likelihood that a student will score at or above the 50th percentile of the Stanford 10 standardized assessment of reading comprehension by the end of the school year, is calculated from a combination of student performance in different tasks such as word reading, vocabulary pairs and following directions.



scoring students, on average. In line with prior evidence, the evaluation also found that students' attitudes toward reading, their beliefs about their own reading skills, and their reading behaviors shifted over the course of their participation, based on student and parent surveys.

While the Summer Literacy Programs were not implemented as designed at most churches in 2020, the adaptations presented an opportunity to examine some programmatic variations and their relationship to student outcomes. For example, some programs provided only four weeks of programming, but their participants still saw reading growth at levels similar to that of 2019 participants who received six weeks of programming. Students who attended in-person sites received many more hours of instruction and showed significantly greater gains, on average, than students who attended virtual sites. AIR also conducted an exploratory analysis of the association between program elements and student outcomes in both 2019 and 2020, which identified emerging “essential elements” that are predictive of student outcomes. These included in-person instruction, small class sizes, an emphasis on vocabulary instruction, providing take-home literacy activities for families, and educating families about children's literacy development.

Rural Church will be partnering with AIR in 2021 to build on these findings and further explore questions about program fidelity, outcomes for different subgroups, and the feasibility of different methodological approaches to assess the causal impact on student reading outcomes. A key goal for 2021 is to better understand how different students — including those with different demographic characteristics and reading proficiency at baseline — fair in the program and why, and using that evidence to optimize program delivery for those groups.

Looking Forward

The Rural Church Summer Literacy Programs have consistently yielded promising results for students in multiple communities and they have the potential to make measurable, positive impact on the lives of struggling readers in rural areas — contributing to closing the achievement gap with their more affluent, suburban peers, which can lead to better education and employment outcomes in the long run. The Endowment continues to advance its evidence roadmap despite the challenges faced in 2020 and to pursue its vision of building the strongest possible evidence of the initiative's impact on student literacy outcomes.

The Endowment's approach to developing and improving the Summer Literacy Program model that is documented in this report demonstrates a commitment to evidence and outcomes that is rooted in meeting the needs of communities and practitioners — and that goes beyond asking “what works” to asking what works for whom, where, and how. It demonstrates a deliberate and continuous approach to program improvement through evaluations that use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to produce timely, actionable evidence.

In the next section, we look at the lessons and reflections that the Endowment's Rural Church and Evaluation teams have surfaced from their work on the initiative over the years.

Lessons Learned

In conversations with Project Evident, the Rural Church and Evaluation teams at the Endowment (including Dr. Chen) shared reflections from their journey with the Summer Literacy Program that continue to inform their work in other areas. These reflections hold lessons for how social sector funders can effectively collaborate with researchers and practitioners on building evidence and continuous improvement and include the following:

Promote a framework that recognizes the value of a broader range of evidence, encouraging evaluative methods and activities that match the learning needs at different stages of an initiative.

Organizations or programs need to build different types of evidence at different stages of their journey. To contextualize evidence on outcomes, they need evidence to test the core assumptions of their theory of change; they also need to ensure that they are able to recruit and serve their target population, and that they are engaging their constituents with the intended quality and quantity of services. Funders need evidence that is not just about making thumbs-up or thumbs-down decisions on whether a particular program should receive funding. Toward that end, they need to rely on a wide range of methods and tools that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data to produce evidence that can answer more than just “does it work.” While pursuing evidence that the Summer Literacy Programs can have a net impact on student literacy, Rural Church needed other types of evidence as the program was developing and scaling on the ground — evidence to drive implementation decisions, to effectively support churches, teachers, students and families, and to understand the broader impact on student and family behaviors around reading that are key to sustaining outcomes in the long run.



Ms. Bell said there's a growing awareness at the Endowment that "evidence building is broader than just a randomized control trial to prove programmatic impact on an outcome of interest, and that it needs to be done throughout different stages of program development to answer different questions that test program assumptions and deepen our understanding of implementation and outcomes." Dr. Bacon echoed the sentiment, saying that there was also an increasing focus on building evidence that can support implementation and answer questions about who benefits from what and how. "You need evidence well before you're ready for an impact evaluation, and you still need evidence well after," he said. "Evidence is not something that is only about demonstrating a binary, whether something is effective or not."

As alluded to in the previous section, the Evaluation team worked with Virginia Tech professor Tom Archibald and Jane Buckley of JCB Consulting to introduce a framework that maps evaluative activities to different stages of program development and replication, and different questions that need to be asked throughout the stages. This work has helped increase awareness at the Endowment that building evidence requires a broader set of tools and should be viewed as a continuous, iterative process.

Invest in strategic decision-making tools to guide evidence pursuits and to build a learning culture.

This includes developing and using tools such as evaluative frameworks, theories of change, learning agendas and Strategic Evidence Plans. According to the Rural Church team, developing a theory of change and a Strategic Evidence Plan with Project Evident were valuable in guiding their work on the Summer Literacy Initiative. Ms. Richardson-Frick remarked: "We were asking ourselves how can we be more faithful to the vision that we have and the goals that we hope to achieve? What are the right steps? And having a theory of change that can guide our measurement strategy, and having a roadmap that we could follow was crucial. We continuously go back to the roadmap [in the Strategic Evidence Plan] – what are we supposed to be doing? It's literally a checklist that I use to guide this work." Mr. Mabry added that Rural Church's work on the roadmap for the initiative has demonstrated how "purposeful, intentional and nuanced" funders need to be when developing evidence of what works.

The Evaluation team is also working with program teams across the Endowment to develop theories of change and learning agendas that are connected to each program area's strategic goals. A theory of change, simply put, is an articulation of what each program area expects to produce its desired impact. In addition to laying out the causal pathway from inputs and activities to target outcomes, a theory of change clarifies the assumptions embedded in the hypothesized change mechanism, the evidence supporting those assumptions, and the contextual factors that may influence the work and outcomes. A learning agenda is a set of questions that addresses the assumptions and evidence gaps in the theory of change and articulates the knowledge needs of an organization.



“Providing templates for program teams to document their thinking was a simple step that encouraged a shift in how we think about evidence.”

William F. Bacon
Director of Evaluation

Both of these tools are crucial to guiding a program area’s evidence building strategy and are being used by the Evaluation team to spur learning around a more comprehensive approach to evidence. “We ask them to really interrogate their assumptions and ask questions about gaps in knowledge,” said Dr. Bacon. “Providing templates for program teams to document their thinking was a simple step that encouraged a shift in how we think about evidence. These types of tools are invaluable because they create an opportunity for in-depth discussions that foster organization-wide learning.”

Ms. Bell said that frameworks and strategic decision-making tools are vital because they “make your thinking explicit,” adding that “having ongoing conversations about how do we evaluate and what are our shared values around evaluation, and creating a shared sense of language, shared tools — all of that has really contributed to conversations about a more holistic approach to evidence building at the Endowment.”

Build the capacity of grantees to effectively engage in the evidence building process.

While the Summer Literacy Program is only six weeks, Rural Church makes considerable investments in providing funding, training and technical assistance to help programs participate in evaluations. Dr. Chen is a key part of this work: In addition to conducting evaluations of the programs, she has supported them with implementation, data collection and research protocols. In interviews with Project Evident, pastors and program directors expressed that they valued the dedicated and timely support and the encouragement they received to seek help when problem-solving.

Ms. Richardson-Frick said the capacity-building support and technical assistance is important to forming a relationship that is reciprocal and equitable, where grantees receive the support they need to deliver what Rural Church is



asking of them. “Every year, we’re asking them for more,” she said. “We’re asking new questions every year, and the evidence building is evolving. We need to give [the grantees] everything they need, so that they can give us what we are asking for. We want to be very responsive to our grantees, and try to make things easy for them. We need it to work for them.” She added that it was important to ensure that grantees are empowered to provide honest feedback, so that the Endowment can be responsive to them.

Dr. Chen also emphasized that developing relationships with program leaders and practitioners is an important part of this capacity building work to ensure robust grantee participation and high-quality data. She strives to ensure that grantees feel ownership of data collection and evaluation activities and can clearly see the connection between research and outcomes. “That’s been a big learning point over the years: seeing how much the sites actually are willing to participate in studies and care about it,” she said. “We get really high response rates and complete data sets because pastors and program directors understand the importance of participating in research. The desire for building evidence and using data is not just a funder-inspired thing. It’s coming from the programs themselves. They want to do good work and show impact.”

As part of its efforts to build grantee capacity, Rural Church has also facilitated peer learning opportunities, particularly by connecting new programs to churches that have implemented the model in prior years. These efforts include onboarding retreats and connecting more established programs to newer ones through peer learning visits or conversations. Rural Church has also started to provide individualized “data cards,” which synthesize and translate findings from the evaluations to make them more accessible and actionable for program leaders and educators.

Create feedback loops with grantees and constituents to translate evidence into action, and to leverage practitioners’ expertise and constituent voices to guide strategic decisions.

Rural Church uses formal and informal feedback loops with programs to discuss lessons from evaluations, to solicit feedback on implementation and data collection, and to make decisions on future improvements. “I try to be always asking: What’s working for you? What’s not working for you? What ideas do you have for next year? There’s not a year where we don’t make a change as a result of what we learn from the churches, or the parents and students,” said Ms. Richardson-Frick. Dr. Chen added: “There is constant feedback. Here’s what we learned, and what we heard from you. And here’s how we’re going to respond and improve. It’s always about closing the loop – that’s really powerful.”

Evaluations of the program in recent years have also included surveys of pastors, program directors, teachers, students and parents. Findings from the surveys, along with data on implementation and student outcomes and verbal feedback from the program staff, are used to generate ideas for improving implementation and data collection and discussed further with program staff before implementation.



“I’ve been so struck by how program directors and teachers are incredibly knowledgeable about what it takes to improve literacy.”

Dr. Helen I. Chen
Literacy Expert and Evaluation
Consultant for Rural Church

Rural Church leverages the knowledge and expertise that practitioners bring to inform their decision-making around use of evidence and evidence-informed practices. Dr. Chen said: “Use of data in education has grown a lot over the last decade. Teachers are not buying any package that’s just given to them. They’re saying, what’s the evidence? Will this work for my students, and if so, how? I’ve been so struck by how program directors and teachers are incredibly knowledgeable about what it takes to improve literacy. They bring so much expertise and years of experience. And we try to build on that.” In 2021, Rural Church is working with Dr. Chen to develop an Instructional Advisory Council to more systematically engage Summer Literacy Program directors — who are experienced educators or reading specialists — in further refining the curricular framework, instructional guidelines, and measurement practices of the programs.

Rural Church is also working to increase the involvement of families in the initiative, encouraging deep relationships and shared decision making among the programs, families, and communities, and ensuring that implementation and evidence building are more strongly centered on the needs and voices of those that the programs seek to benefit. This includes the development of Parent Advisory Councils and offering more opportunities for families to strengthen relationships with their children and other members of the community.

The Endowment recently redesigned its grant closing process to ensure that program areas are routinely reviewing grantee insights and feedback in final grant reports, and incorporating it into conversations about strategy and grantmaking. Creating routine two-way feedback loops, like Rural Church has done with the Summer Literacy Programs, is something that the Evaluation team is exploring embedding more deeply at the Endowment through its Evaluation and Learning Plans.



Conclusion

Rural schools and communities across this country face serious obstacles in providing equitable educational opportunities for their students. Continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to exacerbate the achievement gap in rural areas, as inadequate broadband infrastructure and other factors impede distance learning and disrupt access to supplemental supports for the most vulnerable students. In this context, an effort like the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative is more important than ever in helping rural families stem learning loss for their children and tackle barriers in engaging with learning. It is an innovative approach to serving rural communities that leverages the infrastructure and social capital of United Methodist churches to support families with literacy.

Building evidence of student outcomes and the implementation factors that affect student outcomes, and using evidence for continuous improvement, has been at the core of the initiative's evolution from a one-site pilot program in 2013 to a multi-site initiative in 2020. In its efforts to develop an evidence-based program from the ground up, the Rural Church program area took an R&D approach — a continuous process for testing, learning and improving — that is often rare in the education and social sector. In addition to investing in regular evaluations, Rural Church worked with Project Evident to develop robust evidence tools — a theory of change, a learning agenda and a Strategic Evidence Plan — to drive a more intentional and disciplined approach to building evidence that is grounded in strategic priorities for the initiative.

Most importantly, Rural Church centered its grantmaking strategy and evidence building efforts on improving outcomes for children and families, and empowered churches and practitioners to equitably participate in the evidence building and learning process. Mr. Webb said: “All questions ultimately lead to: How do we make this better for the students? How can we make this more impactful? That clarity and that focus is driving this work. The evolution of the Summer Literacy Initiative and how we've strengthened our evidence over the years has been remarkable. And the churches have wanted to come along for the ride because they care deeply about how they are impacting students, and they want to have an impact. It's been an incredible learning journey for us as a department and for the churches we work with.”

The case study of the Rural Church Summer Literacy Initiative showcases what Project Evident calls the “Next Generation of Evidence” — one that centers on community needs and voices, embraces continuous improvement, empowers practitioners, and prioritizes collaborative learning and accountability among funders, researchers and practitioners. We hope that it provides useful insights on building and using actionable evidence to strengthen the pipeline of evidence-based education and social programs.

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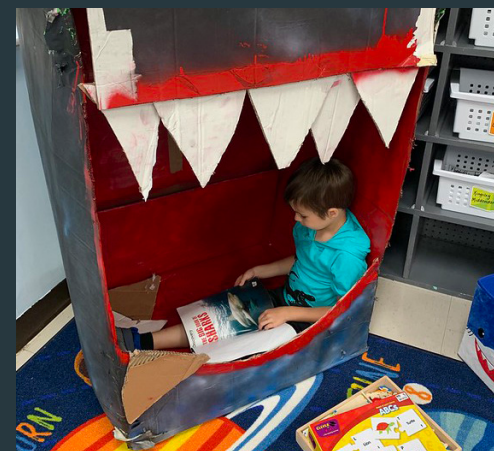
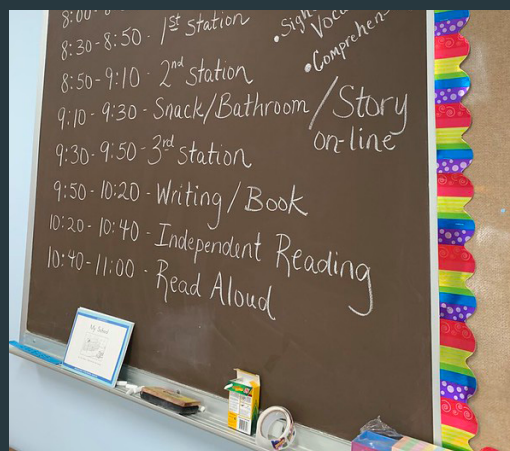
Acknowledgements

The Duke Endowment and Project Evident are sincerely grateful to the following Rural Church Summer Literacy Program leaders and educators who have shared their experiences and insights for this case study and for the Strategic Evidence Planning process (listed below). We would also like to express our gratitude to all staff and volunteers of the programs who have contributed to the success of the initiative over the years, and who have participated in evaluations that are discussed in this case study.

Programs interviewed for the case study

- **Cullowhee United Methodist Church**
Angie Lovedahl, Program Director and Teacher
- **Seaside United Methodist Church**
Rev. Mary Jane Wilson-Parsons, Co-Pastor
Barbara Duclos, Program Director (2019-2020)
Mary Ellen Good, Program Director (2014-2019)
- **Fairview United Methodist Church**
Rev. Ed McKinney, Pastor (2018-2019)
- **Monticello United Methodist Church**
Rev. Amy Spivey, Pastor
Donna Grant, Program Director and Teacher
- **Oxford United Methodist Church**
Donna Bowling-Critcher, Program Co-Director
Chenita Roberts, Program Co-Director and Teacher
- **First Brevard United Methodist Church**
Fay Agar, Program Director

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