

Imagination Library Program in the Mississippi Delta

A Report from Indianola, Mississippi

A program that encourages children to read at an early age is giving them an advantage when they enroll in school. Here are the results of a new study.

This past fall, new kindergarten students at Lockard Elementary School in Indianola, Mississippi took a school readiness assessment called the Measure of Academic Performance (MAP). The results of the MAP assessment give teachers and school officials information about the pre-reading and pre-math skills of each student, which they use to help design the kindergarten curriculum.

Since the MAP assessment is a national test, it also lets school officials compare Indianola students with similar students throughout the country. In comparing Indianola kindergartners reading and math scores to national norms, the fall 2013 MAP test showed that 50% of new kindergartners in Indianola were at or above the norm in reading, though only 30% were at or above the norm for math.

Meanwhile, as part of the kindergarten registration process, parents of these students completed a survey that asked them about their child's early reading experiences, the number of books they had at home, and whether or not they participated in the Imagination Library program offered through the Delta Health Alliance's Indianola Promise Community.

Under the Imagination Library program, Delta Health Alliance, in the fifth year of its partnership with the Dolly Parton Foundation, mails a free book, each month, to any participating family before their child turns five. Currently more than 850 families are receiving books. Through the Imagination Library program, it is possible for a child to receive 60 early reader and picture books before ever entering kindergarten!

With the kindergarten readiness scores from the MAP assessment, we were able to compare the readiness scores of the group of children who received Imagination Library books with the group of children who did not receive the Imagination Library program.

That comparison strongly suggests that the Imagination Library program has a positive effect on early language and literacy development and kindergarten readiness. As a group, children who received the Imagination Library books are likely to have stronger pre-reading and pre-math skills than the group of children who did not participate in the Imagination Library program.

According to the data, 62% of the students who were above the norm for the reading portion of the MAP test participated in the Imagination Library program, compared to only 38% who did not participate. In other words, a child who participated in the Imagination Library early reading intervention was *twice as likely* to be kindergarten ready in reading as a child who did not receive the Imagination Library program.

These differences are even more pronounced on the pre-math portion of the assessment. Here, 71% of the students who scored above the norm were Imagination Library participants, compared to only 29% of students who were not. In other words, Imagination Library kids were *two and a half times as likely to be kindergarten* ready.

These findings affirm the growing body of evidence that early childhood experiences matter, and that they have lasting implications for kindergarten readiness and subsequent academic achievement. More specifically, the research literature shows that family reading habits and other efforts to support the early vocabulary development and pre-literacy skills of infants, toddlers, and young children pay significant dividends that extend beyond kindergarten entry and extend on into reading development across the first years of primary school. These dividends also include a stronger desire to stay in school and an easier time in mastering the academic material. The association between the Imagination Library program and the MAP assessments suggests a relatively inexpensive and potentially powerful way to making a positive difference in the ability of a young child to enter Kindergarten ready to learn, setting them on the pathway to success in school and life.