

## **SAVE THE CHILDREN'S U.S. PROGRAMS**

### **Narrowing the Opportunity Gap: Rural Literacy Initiative**

#### **2006-2007 Results**

There are 2.6 million children living in poverty in rural America.<sup>1</sup> Poverty is woven deeply in these communities, moving from generation to generation. Save the Children believes that education and health are critical tools for children to escape poverty's grip. Partnering with schools and community-based organizations, we provide high quality early childhood development services, supplemental literacy support, and physical activity and nutrition programming, benefiting over 12,000 children from birth through eighth grade. Through enhancements to libraries and computer labs, which benefit the entire school, we reach an additional 29,000 children.

Children living in the nation's poorest rural areas face severe challenges to academic achievement and life success.<sup>2</sup> Low-income children experience less cognitive stimulation and enrichment than their middle-income peers. For example, low-income parents are less likely than middle-income parents to participate in literary activities such as reading aloud or visiting the library.<sup>3</sup> In addition, rural parents have the lowest education levels of any demographic group, and the disparity affects children's early language development and lowers their educational aspirations.<sup>4</sup>

Save the Children builds scalable, replicable, accountable programs that deliver effective in-school, afterschool and summer literacy services for children in kindergarten through eighth grade. The program provides highly trained staff, new age-appropriate books, software and technology resources, and structured program content to help them become stronger readers. Our goal is clear: rural children should read at or above grade level. This is extremely difficult; during the 2006-2007 school year, 80 percent of children entering our programs were not reading at grade level, which is significantly higher than the national average of 36 percent.<sup>5</sup> Progress takes time and commitment on the part of the child, constant monitoring and evaluation from our community partners and literacy staff, and ongoing financial support.

### **Real Gains in Reading Achievement**

Evaluation results from the 2006-2007 school year found that our approach is effective at increasing the reading levels of regular participants. In the 2006-2007 school year, the percent of children reading at or above grade level increased by 38 percent. Additionally, 54 percent of children assessed were shown to be making greater gains in reading proficiency than would be expected if they were just attending school. That equates to an extra 2-3 months of school, all accomplished in less than 9 months in an afterschool setting. The fact that many of our programs are in the start-up phase makes these gains even more impressive.

To set our results in a greater context, research conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Proficiency (NAEP) from 1992 to 2005 found that fourth-grade reading scores have remained fairly stable, despite national and local efforts to improve reading instruction. In addition, most evaluations of out-of-school time programs show no significant gains in reading. A review of findings of four studies of afterschool programs found no significant impact on reading scores.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, the NAEP results and the evaluation literature on out-of-school time programs demonstrate the inherent difficulty in increasing reading levels.

Placed in this context, the gains made by children attending Save the Children's model literacy programs are even more remarkable, clearly represent an improvement over national trends, and clearly demonstrate that we have the potential to narrow the literacy gap in rural America.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development Research Report Number 100, July 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, Carolyn S. "Education and Development in Poor Rural Communities: An Interdisciplinary Research Agenda. ERIC Digest." ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. December 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, GW. "The Environment of Childhood Poverty." *American Psychologist* 59 (2). 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Israel, G.D. *Rural-Urban Differences in Early Childhood Educational Achievement*. 2005.

<sup>5</sup> National Assessment of Educational Proficiency, 2005 Assessment of Fourth Graders

<sup>6</sup> Kane, Thomas J. "The Impact of After-School Programs: Learning the Lessons from Four Recent Evaluations." W.T. Grant Foundation Working Paper. January 2004.