ADOLESCENT BOOK GROUP IMPACT REPORT 2021-22

WHY READING & OUR PARTNERSHIP MATTERS
Reading is the foundation to academic achievement and a key to living a free and full life. Development of that skill begins early and continues throughout a learner’s scholastic career. When learners gain confidence as readers and build reading habits, they have the power to become lifelong learners.

OUR SHARED PURPOSE
At Words Alive, we believe that empowering experiences turn learners into agents of change and advocates for their own education. We also believe that reading is the foundation of community and economic development, and that when everyone can read, whole communities thrive!

Words Alive’s Adolescent Book Group brings books alive for teenagers facing extraordinary circumstances such as homelessness, violence, teen pregnancy, and impact by the justice system. Through engaging projects, writing workshops and discussion sessions, Adolescent Book Group participants enhance their critical thinking skills, self-esteem, and ability to express themselves. Words Alive’s commitment to reading diverse and relevant texts provides an avenue for program participants to connect books to themselves and the world while changing the story of their life.

During the 2021-22 academic year, Words Alive partnered with like-minded leadership at seven community partners in 13 locations to deliver our Adolescent Book Group program with 350 learners in 4-12th grade.

In response to community needs and the collective call to action to support the mental wellbeing of learners in a changing world, our network of program partners serving teens and tweens expanded to include more out of school time providers and organizations delivering “Level Up” summer programs through San Diego Unified School District. Level Up SD reimagined the summer school experience by offering truly extraordinary academic and enrichment programming to students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

This program and partnerships support strategic goals of all partners:

- To engage the whole community in working together to ensure that children and youth are poised for school success.
- To develop programs, competencies, and linkages that support and promote learner empowerment and self-sufficiency.

PARTNERS
Thank you to the following community partners who collaborated to connect teens and tweens with experiences to read, think, write, and create:

- Boys & Girls Clubs of Oceanside
  Jefferson Middle School
  Laurel Elementary
  MLK Middle School
  Townsite
- Boys & Girls Club of Vista
  Madison Middle School
- Guitars in the Classroom
  Millennial Tech Middle School
  Clairemont High School
- Jackie Robinson YMCA
- Oceanside Public Library
- Pro Kids - First Tee, San Diego
  Oceanside
  City Heights
- The Monarch School
OUR PROGRAM METHOD & PROCESS CONDITIONS
In our research-based program designed to ignite a love of reading, trained Words Alive facilitators team up with learners to discuss, write, and create projects that bring books alive. The diverse and relevant texts make reading matter to teens who find deeper, more meaningful contexts while connecting books to themselves and the world. As learners share perspectives with their peers and caring adults in a safe space, learners improve their communication skills, gain confidence, and enhance their ability to express themselves. Our program is designed to meet the process conditions needed to build the strong engagement that leads to positive learning routines and improved achievement. Each of our program sessions are:

- **Linked to learning**: Content and activities are directly connected to age-appropriate developmental milestones and what learners are expected to do academically.
- **Relational**: Activities help learners build relationships, get to know one another, and build trust.
- **Developmental**: Learners are learning new skills, and after participating, better understand how they support reading achievement.
- **Collaborative**: Learners are working together to learn a new skill as a group and with caring adults.
- **Interactive**: Learners practice new skills and have opportunities for corrective feedback.

OUTCOMES: WHAT CHANGED FOR LEARNERS
Research shows that providing books alone is not enough to jumpstart or strengthen reading habits among youth. Instead, the most successful program models elevate learner interest in reading via relevant and relatable texts and incorporating group and project-based learning.

Using research and tools identified or developed by our third-party evaluative partners at Dialogues in Action and the University of San Diego’s Caster Center for Non-Profit and Philanthropic Research, our Adolescent Book Group focuses on three key impact goals. That learners:

**Develop an enduring commitment to reading.**
Objective: Learners internalize the value of reading as they analyze a close reading of characters, plot, and theme and experience life-changing ideas through discussion with their peers and caring adults.

**Become life-long learners.**
Objective: Learners experience positive attitudinal shifts about learning and recognize their own ability to seek out information to solve problems, acquire critical thinking skills, and transition successfully into post-secondary education or career.

**Become advocates for themselves and their futures.**
Objective: Learners become empowered to invest in their futures by increasing self-esteem and clarity as readers, writers, and speakers who use effective communication strategies to express themselves.

Our objective is that learners believe in the power of reading and love what reading means in their lives. That is the tipping point between someone who can read and someone who calls themselves a reader. To get there, our program aims to influence what learners know, how they feel, and what they do about their own reading development and enjoyment.
DEMOGRAPHICS
Of 350 learners and 17% response rate:

- The average age was 14.6 years old.
- 67% speak a language other than English at home with their families.

Gender

- Male: 43%
- Female: 47%
- Non-Binary, Transgender, Gender Fluid: 10%

Participants by Ethnicity or Race

- Multi-racial: 2%
- Hispanic or Latino/a: 3%
- White or Caucasian: 3%
- Black or African American: 5%
- Asian or Asian American: 8%
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 7%
- African or Middle Eastern: 5%
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: 67%
How Do We Connect Teens to the Power of Reading?

**Bring People Together**
A total of 396 teens, alongside 13 volunteers and 26 trained community partner staff, participated in Adolescent Book Group in the 2021-22 program year.

**Create Access**
Teens added 1,180 new books and 930 learning kits containing curated ideas and supplies to their home libraries.

**Build Habits**
Teens collectively read 2,743 times as part of program sessions and created 1,049 artifacts of writing and artwork.

**Practice What Works**
“Doing this club made me learn that I do like reading.”
— Participant, Boys & Girls Club of Oceanside
WHAT LEARNERS SAID

Participating learners were asked to complete a retroactive evaluation survey after completing the project. This survey intends to measure learner skillsets, interest, confidence, and value placed on reading, with importance placed on indicators of social-emotional learning after the program.

LEARNER SURVEY RESPONSES

It is well documented in research on literacy development in adolescents that skills, motivation or interest to read, and confidence as a reader work in concert to propel learner ability forward.

In that vein, survey responses from learners who participated in the program were positive and demonstrated growth in these three key areas. Learners stated that the books chosen were relevant to their lives and that reading in the program had broadened their perspective; improved their ability to express themselves as readers, speakers, and writers; and influenced their perceived value of reading.

As summarized in Figure 1 (right), learners demonstrated growth in key areas of interest, confidence, and time spent reading.

After participating:

- The number of learners who rated reading as a good or great way to spend time increased by 36%.
- The number of learners who rated themselves as a good or great reader increased by 21%.
- The number of learners who reported spending a lot or most of their free time reading increased by 36%.
Figure 2 below shows the percentage of learners who agreed or strongly agreed that a specific academic skill was strengthened via participation in the program (n=59).

![Figure 2: Participating in the Program Has Helped Me](chart)

Figure 3 below shows the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that a specific social-emotional skill was strengthened via participation in the program (n=59).

![Figure 3: Participating in the Program Has Helped Me](chart)

**LEARNER AND EDUCATOR COMMENTS**

About the act of reading together, learners said: “I believe reading as a group is a great way to get others involved in reading. Being realistic, most students do not read by their own will, so by getting others to join a reading group or space creates a good atmosphere for everybody.” — Angel, learner, The Monarch School

About building relationships with volunteers, teachers said: “I like the push and pull when they’re with you all. They’re able to be heard, build, and grow from the experience because of the space you provide.” – Sherrell, teacher, The Monarch School
**BOOK CHOICE**

Providing access to diverse and relevant books that reflect the life experiences of the learners we serve is a pillar of this program model. When readers see themselves in positive characters who look and sound like them, it sends a message that they too belong and have a valuable place in our social fabric while unlocking a world of role models who can show them what is possible. Research shows that readers also need a hand finding books that they connect with to grow or sustain their interest in reading – this need is especially pronounced for infrequent readers.(1)

Learners read a variety of texts in the program, and as shown in Figure 4, reported that the book choice was relevant, inspired them to keep reading, and a good fit for their reading level.

![Figure 4: Learners who agreed or strongly agreed that the book choice was...](image)

- Relevant to their lived experience: 26%
- Interesting and made them want to keep reading: 51%
- A good fit for their reading level: 47%

*“Relevant” is described within the evaluation as “I could relate to the story, its characters, and/or the author.”
*“A good fit” for learners’ reading level is described in the evaluation as “I understood the vocabulary and what was happening.”

Educator comments on the impact of relevant texts included: “I was surprised by their level of engagement around whatever the discussion topic was. They were willing to share their background knowledge and experiences that they shared with the characters... With my seniors, I’ve been listening to them thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re finally talking!’ I was so happy to hear that many of the volunteers that review [book choices] are students themselves. That puts a whole different perspective, understanding that other students contribute.” – Sherrell, The Monarch School

**ACCESS AND BOOK OWNERSHIP**

In addition to reading fresh and relevant titles, participating learners took home 1,180 books to keep, growing the average size of their home library by 15% to roughly 10 age-appropriate books.

![Comparison of the Size of Learner Home Libraries](image)

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**AUTHOR TALKS**

Meeting authors and illustrators behind the characters we love deepens the context of what we read and encourages learners to imagine themselves as thinkers, readers, and future creators of stories that shape our world. Those moments - especially when authors and illustrators reflect readers’ identities and lived experiences - spark curiosity and can change the way young people view who and what belongs on the page.

When authors meet with learners in Words Alive programs, they discuss the value of representation in literature, share experiences from their own lives, reveal their initial failures and the persistence required in their journeys to get published, and encourage learners to make their own voices heard.

After reading his book, learners at The Monarch School spoke with Mark Oshiro, award-winning author of Anger is a Gift, via Zoom. Learner reactions highlight a positive impact of the experience on their interest in reading and real-world connections to the author’s work.

Letters from learners to Mark Oshiro, following the author’s visit, included:

“I got back into reading when I started reading your book. The fact that the book talks about real life problems makes the book more interesting.” – Marianna

“I understand some of the problems in the book because I have family that went through stuff like that. I am very glad we got to meet a book writer. Thank you!” – Samuel

“I appreciate you for coming to our class and telling us how you came up with your book. Also, the book was really interesting and understandable. I usually don’t like reading books, but I enjoyed this one.” – Chantal
**ART & LIT: Authentic Selves**

Since 2014, Words Alive’s Art & Lit projects have been a source of deepening understanding for students in our programs, and rich collaboration for community partners working in the arts. The experience not only provides an avenue for students to digest themes of the book and place it within the context of the real world, but especially for those students struggling with reading or learning English, the creative process provides an unparalleled opportunity to communicate their connection to literary themes.

Today, young people face unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate challenges, creating alarming effects on their mental health and well-being. A 2021 health advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General, Protecting Youth Mental Health, trumpets a call to action to address the mental health impact of the pandemic on our youth, with a special focus on empowering youth and their families to recognize, manage, and learn from difficult emotions.

Words Alive is answering this call through our 2022 Art & Lit Exhibit, with support from the Jordan Ressler Charitable Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation. Inspired by collage and self-portraiture, and developed in collaboration with The New Children’s Museum, this year’s project – Collectively You portraits – helps students develop mindfulness habits and emotional awareness through a connection with reading and art.

This year’s anchor texts feature characters navigating challenges and friendships on their journey to discover and celebrate their authentic selves. As students read about characters who face challenges with resilience, courage, and kindness, they develop their ability to reflect on their own tribulations and sharpen their coping skills. Enhancing text-to-self and text-to-world connections, this year’s art project is poised to help students activate knowledge and serves as a vehicle for self-expression and communication that transcends language. The guiding challenge of each learner’s creation is to explore the ways we can reveal and celebrate our authentic selves.

Learner artwork will be presented to the community in a curated exhibit at The New Children’s Museum in Fall 2022.
WHAT PARTNERS SAID

The movement to make reading matter gathers the greatest momentum when teens and families live in literacy-rich communities. Research shows that reading role models are critical to instilling reading as an integral part of a child’s life, and do not need to be limited to parents: frequent readers have more encouragement to read from family members, friends, principals, teachers, and librarians than infrequent readers. This is especially important after 4th grade, the age by which in the absence of support, children’s frequency of reading for fun and the number of children who say that they love reading begins to decline.  

To broaden the reach of reading role models, Words Alive shared what we have learned about what works with partners at organizations in the Oceanside community and southeastern San Diego. Doing so helps ensure that the spaces where teens gather and the organizations with which they interact are prepared and empowered to incorporate engaging reading experiences into their own program offerings.

Partners who were trained to implement the Adolescent Book Group completed evaluations following training, and after receiving support throughout implementation, participated in a qualitative interview after delivering the program.

Implementing partners were asked to reflect on whether and how this collaboration expanded access and deepened their own work or empowered their team to do support reading habits among tweens and teens. Partners’ responses described increased capacity to support reading development, deeper learner engagement with reading, and positive changes in adult attitudes about what’s possible:

Pictured: Teams from the Oceanside Public Library and Boys & Girls Club of Oceanside celebrate after a day of learning.

About increased access and team capacity, partners said:

“It’s cool to have a supportive connection. We can only provide so much. Words Alive helps to give us a focused approach for us to learn how to engage as readers. It helps us click-up because it’s so specific and we can use that. We can be a lot more intentional with our students.” – Summer, Pro Kids, First Tee - Oceanside

“We talked about how you can create activities from a book instead of just reading. And now we have more staff that can do this. I’m very grateful for Words Alive for doing that.” – Maui, Boys & Girls Clubs of Oceanside

“Having a set of books that EVERY kid had was really important. It’s so easy to read with them now with the kits and having the curriculum. I really enjoy the collaboration.” – Holly, Boys & Girls Clubs of Oceanside

“There’s so much you all provided...resources, supplies, books, direction, layout and a creative platform. It really enhances the opportunity for the kids to learn.” – Art, Pro Kids, First Tee - City Heights

“Kids are saying, ‘Wait, this is mine? This is new. And the color pencils too?’ And I was able to say, ‘Yes it’s all yours.’” – Meredith, Boys & Girls Clubs of Oceanside

“It’s so awesome having all the other resources like the kits and projects because we don’t have the budget to do those things with our kids.” – Summer, Pro Kids, First Tee - Oceanside

“Having the kids read the same books at the same time is big. It enhances our program and the connections are priceless.” – Twannia, Pro Kids, First Tee - Oceanside

About quality of engagement among learners and changing attitudes, partners said:

“The conversation was so surprising. I had been selling the tweens short. They’re so much more capable than what I thought. But now, I am in awe of their capacity, and I think I bring a different kind of respect to their book group.” – Lisa, Oceanside Public Library

“They are reading books collectively and not alone. It helps the school, helps parents, and helps them. A group of boys are in class together and their teacher asked us what we were reading after school because the boys kept talking about Ghost. She thought it was another student, not a character! The librarian also told me the kids are checking out the sequel on their own.” – Meredith, Boys & Girls Clubs of Oceanside

“I can see that the kids are way more active, talking a lot more, they’re more engaged, and there are more discussions happening. Having the kids read the same books at the same time is big. It enhances our program, and the connections are priceless.” – Twannia, Pro Kids, First Tee - Oceanside

“The training you all gave us really helped me to get the kid excited. It helped show how much I can contribute to the program. The kids are a lot more engaged than when we first started. They ask questions, grab concepts and connect it to the real world.” – Hannah, Pro Kids, First Tee – Oceanside
REFLECTIONS

In the 2021-22 program year, efforts to expand the Adolescent Book Group model resulted in new partnerships and broader access to engaging community programming for youth during a time they needed it most.

Overall, learners reported growth in key areas of academic and social-emotional skillsets, the size of their home libraries, and their perceived value of reading. Logistical complications of the ongoing pandemic for schools and community partners at the beginning of the school year disrupted the usual duration of the Adolescent Book Group program model. As such, learner growth was not quite as pronounced as that of learners in recent years who were able to participate in the program for a longer period of time. As we move forward, Words Alive is dedicated to supporting partners in creative solutions that allow for a return to deep and durable connections with texts, volunteers, and each other.

In the year ahead we intend to strengthen the impact of the Adolescent Book Group in two exciting ways:

1. By developing curriculum resources and extended activities that support readers in digesting the story to ponder the author’s message and continue developing their own opinions about the story during every volunteer visit. One possibility is to provide each reader with their own write and draw journal where they can record their reactions and thoughts to each story.

2. By developing consistent and more frequent opportunities for learners to meet authors of the stories read in the program.

In the meantime, we look forward to connecting more youth to the power of reading through the essential and effective act of reading together.
SPECIAL THANKS

Words Alive and participating classrooms share deep gratitude for the philanthropic leaders who invest in our Adolescent Book Group program and the movement to make reading matter:

**Literacy Legends ($100,000+)**
- Bentivoglio Family Fund
- William Gumpert Foundation

**Transformational Leaders ($50,000 - $99,999)**
- Century Club of San Diego
- Dr. Seuss Foundation
- Farmers Insurance
- The Conrad Prebys Foundation
- San Diego Foundation

**Impact Investors ($25,000 - $49,999)**
- City of San Marcos via the San Marcos COVID-19 Community Grants Program
- Hologic
- Qualcomm Incorporated
- S. Mark Taper Foundation
- The Westreich Foundation

**Learning Advocates ($10,000 - $24,999)**
- Bravo Foundation
- Carleton Management Inc.
- Christensen Family Foundation
- Craft - DeMeules Family Fund
- Toby Eisenberg
- Lee Goldberg
- Kimberly & Jeffrey Goldman
- Kay & Bill Gurtin
- Jordan Ressler Charitable Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation
- Cynthia & Aaron Shenkman
- The Patricia & Christopher Weil Family Foundation
- Walter J. & Betty C. Zable Foundation

**Reading Patrons ($5,000 - $9,999)**
- S. Bernstein Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation
- BetterWorld Trust
- Samuel H. French & Katherine Weaver French Fund
- LJ Galinson Advised Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation
- Norman Hapke
- Jennifer & Thomas Janes
- Gail & Donald Kohn
- Leslye & Scott Lyons
- Molina Healthcare
- Nordson Corporation Foundation
- PGA Tour Wives Association, Inc.
- Polger Family Fund of The Jewish Community Foundation
- Rice Family Foundation
- San Diego County Office of Education
- Santa Monica Press
- Rick Seidenwurm
- The Schoenith Foundation
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