

“BELL is helping me read better, and makes learning fun! I want to return next summer”  
– BELL Scholar

## About BELL

BELL is a non-profit organization that provides educational summer and after school programs to thousands of children in New York City, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. BELL's mission is to increase the academic achievements, self-esteem and life opportunities of children living in low-income, urban areas.

*BELL Summer* is a six-week enrichment experience that operates from Monday through Friday for eight hours per day in July and August. Every morning, certified teachers lead two hours of literacy activities and one hour of math instruction using Summer Success: Reading and Summer Success: Math curricula published by Great Source, a Houghton Mifflin Company. Teachers also use a leveled reader's library of multi-cultural titles. After an hour break for lunch and recess, specialty instructors lead structured enrichment activities such as music, art, drama, dance and physical education. A wide variety of enrichment partners diversify enrichment activities provided to children. Throughout the program, highly trained college and graduate students serve as mentors to scholars and support academic instruction. On “Mentor Days,” scholars listen to successful community members as they share inspirational stories about what scholars can achieve if they apply themselves. Scholars also visit museums or other educational destinations and participate in community service projects.

The achievements of BELL scholars earned BELL Summer national acclaim as a model of “best practices.” The program was named best educational summer program for children in the nation by the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University; highlighted as a model summer program in the American Federation of Teachers' publication, *American Educator*; and leveraged as a model program in new legislation drafted by Senator Barack Obama called the STEP UP Act. The legislation is designed to create public funding for children to attend high-quality summer learning programs.

## About the Urban Institute

The independent evaluation of the BELL Summer program was conducted by Duncan Chaplin, Senior Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research, and Jeffrey Capizzano, Director of Public Policy and Research of Teaching Strategies, Inc. The Urban Institute is an independent, non-partisan economic and social policy research organization. It analyzes policies, evaluates programs, and informs community development to improve social, civic, and economic well-being. The Urban Institute works in all 50 states and abroad in over 28 countries, and shares research findings with policymakers, program administrators, business, academics, and the public online and through reports and scholarly books.

The evaluation was funded by the Smith Richardson Foundation and the William T. Grant Foundation.

To view the full evaluation report, titled *Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)*, please visit <http://www.urban.org/index.cfm> or [www.bellnational.org](http://www.bellnational.org).

BELL wishes to thank the generous foundation, corporate and individual donors who make BELL Summer available to the children who need it most. Your efforts are not only transforming thousands of students into scholars, but also helping improve the quality of public education in America.

For more information about BELL, please visit [www.bellnational.org](http://www.bellnational.org).

To support BELL's educational programs for children, please call or email Lester Strong, Chief Development Officer, at (617) 740-0431 or [lstrong@bellnational.org](mailto:lstrong@bellnational.org).

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Urban Institute

# Independent evaluation demonstrates BELL Summer significantly increases children's reading skills.

*“The Urban Institute's evaluation of BELL Summer demonstrates the power of structured learning opportunities offered to children in the summer. It furthers BELL's conviction that BELL Summer must be made available to thousands of additional children to help them excel in school and become scholars and leaders in their communities.”*

Earl Martin Phalen  
CEO & Co-Founder, BELL

Researchers from the Urban Institute completed a two-year evaluation of the BELL Summer Program and its impact on children's academic achievements and parental involvement. Key findings of *Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL)* include:

- “Scientifically rigorous evidence regarding the ability of the BELL Summer program to improve the reading skills of low-performing elementary school children.”
- Evidence of positive impacts on the degree to which parents encouraged their children to read and the degree to which they read with their children.
- “Programs that work are hard to find. Our results suggest that the BELL program has positive and substantively important impacts.”
- “The results are of particular importance given the long-standing public policy focus on raising achievement levels of low-income students.”

Learn to lead.



## Evaluation Context

An emerging body of research demonstrates that all children experience a decline in academic progress during the summer months. Children from low-income families tend to lose two to three months' grade equivalent literacy and math skills, while children from higher-income families experiencing smaller losses (Entwisle and Alexander, 1992; H. Cooper et al. 1996). This phenomenon known as "summer learning loss" is a key contributor to overall differences in educational achievement between children from low- and higher-income families.

Providing high-quality summer learning opportunities can be an important strategy for ensuring that all children are able to achieve high academic and social standards. According to the report, "another body of research has attempted to test the effects of programs dedicated to mitigating this problem." The majority of studies conducted to date are non-experimental and of low quality. Few random assignment evaluations have taken place. This study seeks to fill a void in academic research and determine "whether summer learning programs can improve outcomes for a large subset of the target population and whether their impacts can be detected using rigorous methods."

## Methodology

The Urban Institute study used random assignment, the "gold standard of evaluation methods," to evaluate the effectiveness of the BELL Summer program. In total there were 1,917 applicants to the 2005 BELL Summer program at the three study sites (two in Boston, one in New York City), more than double the 750 available slots. Children were randomly chosen to be in either a treatment group that was selected to participate in BELL Summer, or a comparison group that was not. Independent researchers collected data from student reading tests (Gates-MacGinitie), student and teacher surveys, and application forms detailing children's race, gender, and participation status.

The Urban Institute study is different from evaluations conducted by BELL. While the Urban Institute study measured the difference in skills between children attending BELL Summer versus children engaged in other summer activities, BELL's internal evaluations measure the total amount of skills gained by children enrolled in BELL Summer between the beginning and end of the program.

## Why Evaluate BELL Summer?

**"BELL is not only a 'mature' program, but has been judged to be a high quality, stable intervention that can likely be evaluated for a number of years."**

The Urban Institute's evaluation states the following five reasons for electing to evaluate BELL's educational summer program:

- BELL Summer "employs well-developed curricula in both reading and math." The program has also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing summer learning loss among children in internal evaluations.
- BELL Summer receives strong, multi-year support from several philanthropic partners. It has received significant national acclaim from leading policy makers and educational agencies, such as President Clinton, Senator Barack Obama, the Center for Summer Learning, and the American Federation of Teachers.
- The BELL program has been approved by several states to be eligible for Title I funding.
- BELL Summer is prepared to expand its program to additional sites. All sites utilize the same curricula and materials, and a quality control system is in place to ensure the consistent implementation of the program model.
- BELL exhibits a "strong interest in evaluation as demonstrated by their own internal evaluations of both their summer and school year programs and the development of an Evaluation Advisory Board."

## Results

**The study found statistically significant positive impacts on the reading test scores of children who attended the BELL Summer Program.**

- When compared to students who attended the same amount of school days, BELL scholars had higher reading comprehension and overall reading scores.
- Children's participation in BELL Summer increased the time spent on academic activities and the number of books read by 50%, and decreased their time spent watching television and playing computer games
- Application for the BELL Summer programs may signify that a family has a great deal of interest in promoting the academic achievement of children. Thus, even among the control group members, most of which did not attend the BELL Summer program, participation in academic activities during July of 2005 was substantial. This means that the true impact of BELL is likely under-estimated by the study.
- The BELL Summer program is as cost-effective as regular school.

**A statistically significant increase was found in the frequency of BELL parents encouraging their children to read and reading to their children at night.**

## Implications of the Study

**The results of this independent evaluation "are of particular importance given the public policy focus on raising achievement levels" of students living in low-income communities.**

Much attention has been focused on the potential of out-of-school-time programs to increase students' academic achievements. In the last decade, many studies have attempted to quantify the impact educational summer and after school programs have on children's reading and math skills. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) created significant public funding for underperforming children to attend educational out-of-school-time programs. According to Senior Research Methodologist Duncan Chaplin, one of the report's authors, this evaluation of BELL Summer provides "the best evidence we have right now about summer enrichment and low income students."

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant to national and local educational policy. Currently, federal funding from NCLB is primarily used to fund after school programs. While the law stipulates that funds may be used to support summer learning programs, few districts have elected to disburse funds in this manner, thus limiting the ability of non-profit providers such as BELL to scale their programs and impact the lives of many more children. BELL "represents the type of organization that state education agencies will be considering when deciding how to use their Title I funds." The evidence contained in this evaluation supports using federal, state and/or local funds for summer learning programs as a strategy for increasing children's academic skills. It also validates efforts to create additional public funding streams explicitly supporting summer learning programs. Currently, the STEP UP Act, proposed by Senators Barack Obama and Barbara Mikulski, calls for such funds to raise the achievement levels of children. The legislation, which was developed in partnership with BELL, is currently under committee review.