

# The School Age Update

The NC School Age Initiative

Fall 2021

The past year has been a struggle for students, families, and staff. In North Carolina, the repercussions of Covid-19 has directly contributed to sharp spikes in homelessness, malnutrition, domestic violence, and academic regression.

While it is easy to get lost in the chaos created by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to remember that you have the ability to help turn adversity into victory. As a school age professional, you operate in the perfect position to help students and co-workers succeed and thrive this upcoming school year. The great American orator Edward Everett highlights the power you hold in one simple phrase:

*"I am only one but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but can still do something."*

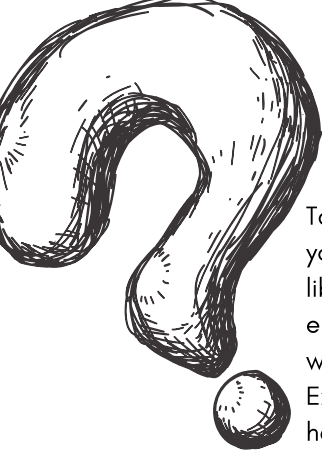
During the upcoming academic year, dedicate time to help ONE student, ONE community member, and ONE school age staff member achieve some form of personal victory. Find that student who might be struggling with social and emotional trauma, and devote time to helping them feel special and wanted. Acknowledge the parent or guardian experiencing the stress of unemployment brought on by Covid 19, and be that one person who listens. Reflect on the actions of that fellow co-worker who rubs you the wrong way, and provide them the grace and understanding they might need.

① Student

① Family Member

① Co-Worker

If Covid-19 has taught the school age world anything, it is that intentional personal connections are essential to student and adult success. Students learn and behave better when treated with kindness and compassion. Family members provide more stable living conditions for children when they have a strong school age support network. Group leaders and co-workers excel at work when they are greeted by peers with friendship and enthusiasm. Taking time to better the life of just one person is the answer North Carolina needs to rebound from the disaster of Covid-19, and get back to our goal of helping students thrive!



# Expanding Literacy with Open-Ended Questions

Take a second and reflect on the ways you promote literacy in your school age classroom. Maybe you have a classroom library, filled with books and novels for students to read and enjoy. You might have a board game shelf, stocked with a wide arrangement of literacy board games and puzzles. Expanding even further, your school age classroom might even have a dedicated writing center with paper, pencils, and other mediums of writing.

Having an activity area filled with literacy themed materials is fantastic. The Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE) highlights that high quality school age classrooms need a specific space for students to read and expand their literacy skills. The School Age Care Environmental Rating Scales (SACERS-U) assessment dedicates an entire subscale (Subscale 19) to what a well-equipped literacy area should look like. School age professionals from across the field agree that routine access to books and writing materials spurs student literacy development and proficiency.

However, as school age professionals, it is our job to think beyond these traditional approaches to literacy. While having a set reading and literacy area helps students master language skills, simply having access to materials is not enough. Literacy is developed through application. Having the ability to think about complex ideas, put words to these ideas, and finally communicate these words audibly with adults helps students expand their vocabulary and enhance their overall "Word Bank".

One of the easiest ways to help students apply and grow language skills is by incorporating open-ended questions into your daily communication. Open-ended questions are a bit more complex than the simple "how was your day" run around we typically ask students. The goal of open-ended questions is to spur students to delve deeper into themselves or a topic. Often times these questions:

- Ask students what they think about a topic or subject. These questions seek to look inward and get the student's opinion or an explanation.
- Require multiple exchanges and longer communication time between the student and group leader.
- Are more specific and seek to achieve a deeper answer from students. These questions seek critical thinking.
- Might use new learning words tied to a topic being covered during program hours.





Here are a few examples that show the difference between simple questions and open-ended questions. As you read these examples, reflect on how the open-ended question can enhance literacy and vocabulary development.

## Simple Question

How was your day?



## Open-Ended Question

Tell me about the best part of your day?

How many legs does this insect have?



Why do you think the stag beetle has so many legs?

What are you coloring?



Tell me the story behind that picture you are coloring?

These open-ended questions above move students away from simple responses, and require them to dig deep into their developing vocabulary to communicate answers. Molding questions around learning topics will help you communicate new words and ideas that might not be easily grasped through reading or listening to books. More importantly, these open-ended questions allow you to spend more time with students and connect literacy skills with intentional group leader interaction.

## Perfect times to ask open-ended questions

Snack time sitting with students

Group time with all students

At arrival or departure from program

During reading times when looking at a book together



Outside when playing with students

During transitions when students are waiting

Exploring nature or conducting a science experiment

# 3

## Steps to Setting Up an Effective Reading Area

Developing an attractive and effective reading area can be a struggle. With activity choices like blocks and construction, dramatic play, and gross motor play, school age reading areas often become neglected spaces with little use. This doesn't have to be the case. With some reflection and planning, you have the ability to turn a boring reading nook into the cornerstone of your school age program. Below are three easy tips to help transform your reading area from boring to beautiful.



### Think About the Look!

The overall look and feel of an activity area is essential to its effectiveness. If your reading area looks boring and uninviting, students will not use it. Think about the places you like to personally read. Is it a Starbucks, a local coffee shop, or a library? These adult spaces are set up specifically to ensure comfort, style, and calmness. Providing a reading area with similar characteristics can be applied directly to your program's reading area.

Consider adding elements of comfort to your reading area to make the space inviting. Add a collection of soft materials like soft mats, pillows (after Covid-19), and soft chairs. If your reading area is in a gym or shared space, use rugs to provide softness and some visible boundaries.

Outside of softness, incorporate reading specific furniture and decorations. Adding a small coffee table to your reading area enhances the look of the space and provides students with a useable area to do homework, play games, or draw. Decorative lamps offer even more style to the area, and give students the freedom to add more light if needed. Look at the walls around your reading area. Adding framed student artwork, family pictures, and potted plants to a reading corner will enhance aesthetics and provide student contribution to the program environment.



### Minimize!

Imagine walking into a new grocery store with only 30 minutes to buy your groceries...without a list. For some this shopping process might not be a challenge; however, for many people the prospect of finding the right items is intimidating and downright impossible.

This analogy can be applied to your program's reading area. Many students have a hard time finding an enjoyable book when reading shelves are packed with hundreds of randomly inserted options.

The best thing you can do to promote success in your reading area is to be intentional about the books offered, and reduce the selection provided to students on a daily basis. Strategically add books that go along with your lesson plan theme, and set these books up where the front of the book can be seen. Rotate these books with new options weekly to keep reading material fresh, and still allow students to access books that you temporarily have in storage if they ask.

# 3

## Books On The Go!

One of the biggest misconceptions about quality school age learning is that activities must be relegated to the classroom. In fact, the opposite is true. Allowing students to take materials outside is a great way to enhance learning opportunities and inspire creativity.

The outdoors is a great space to promote reading and literacy skills. Fresh air, open space, and natural light add to the reading experience. Take time to create a grab-and-go bag of books to take with your group during outdoor play. You can fill the bag with books that correlate with your lesson plan theme or deal with nature and the outdoors.

During the warmer months bring along a blanket and provide students with a soft area to sit and read in the shade. You can couple this activity with art supplies, and work with students to create their own nature inspired book.

Outdoor visits can also be the ideal space to have a teacher led group reading or story telling session. Sitting under a tree and reading is a great way to help students develop a love for reading while building community and program unity.

## Reading Suggestions for 2021

### **She Persisted: Harriet Tubman**

Andrea Pinkney and Chelsea Clinton

### **Lion of Mars**

Jennifer Holm

### **Pizza and Taco: Best Party Ever**

Stephen Shaskan

### **The Elephant in the Room**

Holly Sloan

### **Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut**

Derrick Barnes

### **Front Desk**

Kelly Yang

### **Elephant and Piggie Series**

Mo Willems



# The School Age Resource Corner

School age success is directly tied to a student's overall health. A child who is hungry or suffering from emotional and physical pain starts life with an extreme disadvantage. Below are some important resources dedicated to supporting the health and wellness of all students in your program.



## Oral Health

### **Division of Public Health: Oral Health Section**

Website: [www.publichealth.nc.gov/oralhealth](http://www.publichealth.nc.gov/oralhealth)

Phone: 919.707.5480

## Food and Nutrition

### **Feeding the Carolinas**

Website: [www.feedingthecarolinas.org](http://www.feedingthecarolinas.org)

Phone: 336.365.3450

### **North Carolina Department of Public Instruction: School Nutrition Section**

Website: [www.dpi.nc.gov](http://www.dpi.nc.gov)

Phone: 336.365.3450

## Mental Health

### **National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment**

Website: [www.childcareta.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.childcareta.acf.hhs.gov)

Email: [ncase@edc.org](mailto:ncase@edc.org)

## Physical Fitness

### **National Summer Learning Association**

Website: [www.summerlearning.org](http://www.summerlearning.org)

Email: [info@summerlearning.org](mailto:info@summerlearning.org)

Phone: 410.856.1370

# Need Support...

## We Are Here For You

The North Carolina School Age Initiative is here to help your school age program succeed. We are a state funded initiative that operates under the direction of the Division of Child Development and Early Education. Our school age consultants will work directly with your licensed afterschool, summer camp, or school age community center to help your program meet all quality enhancement and professional development needs.

Some of NC School Age Initiative's services include:

- Free program-specific technical assistance for program administration and teaching staff. This technical assistance can take place in-person or virtually through Zoom.
- Assistance with DCDEE health/safety regulations and licensing regulations.
- BSAC courses for new staff and SACERS-U CEU courses for programs going through the Environmental Ratings Scales assessment.
- Access to a wide range of virtual and in-person professional development trainings. These trainings are provided statewide on a quarterly basis.
- Access to our detailed resource guides and statewide school age publications.

If you would like to connect with the North Carolina School Age Initiative, or if you have any questions about how our project can help your program contact:

**Jonathan Williams**

**NC Statewide School Age Program Coordinator**

**Email: [williams.joneswcdcinc.org](mailto:williams.joneswcdcinc.org)**

**Phone: 828.450.9218**

We look forward to helping you and your staff grow.

