Sora
The student reading app

Why Sora is a great use case for grant funding

When you're writing a grant proposal, one of the most important things you can do to set your application apart is use supporting data to help make your case. But it's hard to know where to start – so we've done some of the heavy lifting for you by finding resources to help you start making the case for "Why Sora?"

- Literacy levels and poverty: The connection
- Why access to books matters
- The benefits of ebooks
- How Sora meets the need

Literacy levels and poverty: The connection

There is a crisis when it comes to literacy and children in the United States. Children who are not reading capably by fourth grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time (source).

In fact, the Reading is Fundamental Literacy Network states that 65% of fourth graders nationwide read below grade level, which contributes to 8,000 students who drop out of high school each day. If the fourth grader comes from a low-income family, the percentage of those not reading proficiently increased to 82% (source).

Even more concerning, one in three kindergarteners lack the basic skills needed to learn to read, meaning they are behind before they even begin (source).

And, even if a student does graduate high school, only 37% of students graduate high school at or above reading proficiency (source).

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN INCOME AND EDUCATION

Studies show that employees who do not have a high school diploma are the lowest paid workers, and as such are the least likely to break the cycle of poverty. As of 2020, The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the average annual income of a worker with less than a high school diploma at $32,188, not including withholdings and assuming a year of constant earning. With a high school diploma, this number jumps to $40,612 (source).

A lack of high school diploma means fewer choices in jobs, education, housing, and many other factors of living a happy, healthy life. However, the employees themselves are not the only ones affected. A National Public Radio (NPR) report titled "School Dropout Rates Add to Fiscal Burden" states that taxpayers spend nearly $320 billion each year to account for lost wages, taxable income, health care payouts, welfare, and costs of incarceration.

When it comes to developing strong literacy skills, income levels matter. There is an achievement gap between children of different classes, which has widened over the last 50 years.

- An article from Stanford University suggests that higher-income families may have more material resources available to support children's education, including quality daycares, preschools, tutors, and enrichment programs (source).
- Parents in these families are also more likely to be aware of the influence they have over their children's development, and foster it by talking and reading to their children (source).
- Low-income families simply do not have the same resources as higher-income families. These children lacking resources and support are at a distinct disadvantage, and this is reflected in the data.
- Approximately 80% of low-income fourth graders are not proficient in reading, compared to 49% of higher-income students in the same grade (source).
- This number jumps to 93% not at reading proficiency when looking at dual-language learners.
- Minority students fare the worst: 55% of white students lack reading proficiency, while 83% of Black students and 81% of Hispanic students lack reading proficiency (source).

Why access to books matters

Children entering kindergarten have vastly differing abilities when it comes to reading. Mary Carlson, a kindergarten teacher in Ohio, states that some of her new students are so unfamiliar with books that they do not know how to look through a book, follow pages left to right, or hold it correctly.

The question becomes: how do we even the playing field for students, and improve literacy skills overall? One answer: access to books.

According to scholastic.com, "Children from impoverished households have access to fewer books and other reading materials than do their more financially stable peers. Not only do poor children have fewer books in their homes, but they also live in communities with fewer books in the classroom, school, and public library. If their neighborhood even has a public library, they are likely to encounter reduced hours and limited funding for replenishing and updating the collection." (source)

In fact, in a comparison of book access in Los Angeles, CA, researchers found that students in Beverly Hills schools had access to eight times as many books in their classrooms as students attending schools in Watts and Compton, both of which are high poverty and largely Black communities.

HOW ACCESS IMPACTS LITERACY

Access to books directly impacts reading levels. In fact, according to scholastic.com, "the only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home."

A large study published in Research in Social Stratification and Mobility found that just the mere presence of books has a big impact on a child's educational success. Researchers found that having books in the home helps create a culture of reading in the home that "persists from generation to generation within families, largely independent of education and class." (source)

This reading culture helps promote the skills that children need for literacy and leads to long-reaching educational advantages (source).

That said, the location of the books is not the key factor. Students need access to a wide variety of genres, reading levels, and titles to create a lifelong reading habit. With access to a well-stocked library classroom, children read 50-60% more and report higher reading engagement (source).

This is not surprising, as proficiency in any skill takes hours and hours of practice. Children cannot practice reading books to which they do not have access. It should be noted that time spent reading is the best predictor of reading success, but other factors include frequency, amount, and diversity of reading (source).

The bottom line: *children become better readers, which impacts their academic success, simply by having access to books.*

The benefits of ebooks

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly forced schools, and education in general, to engage in a complete digital transformation. The return to in-person learning has not eradicated the need for digital solutions; rather, that need has grown exponentially. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how beneficial educational technology can be, particularly ebooks and audiobooks.

Children are increasingly comfortable with mobile technology. This is evidenced by a recent survey in which 98% parents of children 8 years old and over reported the presence of mobile devices in their home (source).

Not only are children largely comfortable with mobile devices but reading on a mobile device itself has unique benefits.

SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS OF DIFFERING ABILITIES:

Unlike print books, ebooks can offer a tailored reading experience through features like adjustable font size, dyslexic font, and high contrast mode. Additionally, audiobooks allow students with significant visual impairment to listen to the same books as their peers.

EASE OF ACCESS

Through platforms like the Sora app, ebooks and audiobooks are easily accessible on any device. Students do not have to worry about accidentally leaving books at school as long as they can access a computer or mobile device. Books can also be downloaded for reading offline.

INSTANT ACCESS

Ebooks allow readers to instantly access their book of choice without ever leaving their home or classroom. This supports more time reading, because “when kids choose, kids read.” (source)

HELP MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE:

Students who are reading at a lower level than some of their peers are often discouraged and embarrassed to read the texts that are appropriate for their ability when they know others can see exactly what they are reading.

One way to combat this is through digital titles, since other students only see a computer or mobile device; only the reader knows what exactly is on the screen. This offers support for students to read at their level, encourages more reading time, and helps support students to become better readers (source).

The benefits of digital media do not end there.

- There is evidence that as compared to print books, ebooks have a positive impact on vocabulary retention. One possible explanation is that with an ebook, readers have access to an interactive dictionary which strengthens word meaning (source).
- Gains in phonological awareness are also present when reading ebooks (source).
- Additionally, studies show that children with learning disabilities and English Language Learners also benefit from ebooks, which highly improve literacy skills, reading concepts about print, phonological awareness, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (source).
- Additionally, students are often expected to read books to augment their understanding of concepts or for analysis. A digital book collection is an ideal way to deploy digital class sets. In many schools, there may be one paper class set provided by the school that kids cannot take home. Students who cannot purchase the books must arrange to borrow one of the school library's copies; they cannot write in it or make notes. Teachers often use their own personal money to buy books for students as well. Books often go missing or become unusable over time due to wear and tear. However, digital book sets allow for students to access the text at school or home, make notes, and do not wear down over time.

How Sora meets the need

Books are the essential foundation upon which student success is built. Yet, according to a recent national survey, 99% of educators said their most urgent need is for books and learning materials (source).

Educators agree on the importance of reading, but students cannot read if they do not have access to books. OverDrive Education's student reading app, Sora, helps fill the gap by providing access for every student to ebooks, audiobooks, and read-alongs (e.g., ebooks with professionally recorded narration that plays along as students read) on any device.

Using Sora, all students will have access to their school library's digital collection and required curriculum books with just a tap, from any device, including their school-issued devices, from anywhere and at any time. Having access to books is the key factor in cultivating reading proficiency.

OverDrive Education's digital books through the Sora reading app can assist K-12 students in becoming strong readers while providing the curriculum support that educators need. Not only does Sora provide access to the books that students want to read – as well as curriculum texts – it brings several unique benefits that go beyond traditional print, subscription, or database products.

CUSTOMIZABLE PLATFORM

Sora is not a subscription. Sora can be customized exactly with the books that students need, curated by a school's own staff and librarians.

DEEP CATALOG

The breadth of the digital collection offered by OverDrive Education – spanning more than 5 million digital titles – ensures that schools can build a collection of books of interest to every student. Students can borrow books they like, and "when kids choose, kids read." (source)

MULTIPLE FORMATS

Students can discover new ideas or feed their interests by engaging in different formats with Sora: ebooks, audiobooks, read-alongs, and magazines.

PERSONALIZATION FEATURES

Sora's personalization features make reading more "sticky," and encourage readers to add notes, highlight, define or translate words, earn badges for progress, and customize how their book is displayed.

PUBLIC LIBRARY ACCESS

Students have even more options to choose from with the Sora feature Public Library CONNECT. With this partnership enabled, students browse and borrow age-appropriate ebooks and audiobooks from their local public library using their school credentials. PLC expands choice and access beyond the school's core collection adding thousands of public library books to students' devices. Sora brings schools and libraries together, side-by-side.

ROBUST READING DATA

Sora generates robust reading data in the aggregate and student level with data points such as reading sessions, average time per book, and books opened. Educators can use report information to verify that students are engaging with required books through Sora or use data to adjust intervention strategies for readers who need support.

DEEP READING TOOLS

Reading fluency and comprehension are essential for students to thrive in school and beyond. Sora's features further help with learning, as students can highlight text, search for definitions, bookmark pages, make notes, and export all of these features for later use. Sora also offers dyslexic font and high-contrast mode, making reading more accessible for students who prefer alternate reading modes.

MULTILINGUAL SUPPORT

Sora supports all students, including English Language Learners. Sora's multilingual support allows users to display Sora in one of ten languages, meaning students can easily search for books in the language with which they are most comfortable. Although book content itself is not translated, OverDrive Education offers thousands of books in over 100 languages. Additionally, OverDrive Education has read-along titles that enable students to follow along in the text as they hear the words being read.