



**Excerpts from “Give Back, Give Books: A Formative Program Evaluation”  
By Wendy Lynn Fritz submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for her Ed.D degree at St. John Fisher College**

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**Abstract:** This study of the Rochester Education Foundation (REF) Give Back, Give Books program used data collected through interviews with teachers and a librarian, who received books from REF, and their school principals. The study reviewed the practice, process and results of the program. The study found that the program “matches the research literature that indicates that to encourage reading, it is most effective if children have access to books, and are engaged with books that are fun to read and offer the students a chance to respond in a creative manner.” The study also found that the practice of having teachers work with children and the books was sound and exemplifies “some of the best practices in reading instruction.” Ms. Fritz found that teachers thought that the program was helpful to students, encouraging some reluctant readers to read, motivating students to read with parents and classmates, and in some cases promoting better classroom management and student behavior. Additionally, the program supported teachers, and helped teachers and parents communicate with one another in a positive way. However, the study also found that there is limited awareness of REF and the Give Back, Give Books program within the Rochester City School District.

**Background:** REF is a not-for-profit organization incorporated in 2005. The mission of REF is to provide resources and programs to empower the success of Rochester city school students, and to support community partnerships with city students. REF launched the Give Back, Give Books program in 2006 to support the success of city students by providing them with pleasure-reading books that support effective and creative literacy efforts in the classroom. Distribution of books was formalized in 2009, with the creation of the Teachers’ Choice book distribution program, through which educators in Rochester city schools could apply for up to 200 free books apiece. The process was designed to help ensure that new books would support teaching and learning. Research-based standards are used to select recipients of the books. To date, more than 25,000 new books have been donated to city school students. Educators create book clubs, parent-student events and other literacy activities. Books are given to children to keep by the end of the school year.

**Need:** Literacy support is needed among Rochester’s youth. In 2009, nearly 43 percent of Rochester’s 4th graders and 56 percent of Rochester’s 8<sup>th</sup> graders did not meet N.Y. State standards in English Language Arts – significantly higher than the state average. Rochester’s children have been ranked the 11<sup>th</sup> poorest in the United States. Ms. Fritz noted: “Poor households lack the resources that are typically associated with reading and literacy development. Not only are there fewer books and reading materials...but there is a scarcity of resources that enhance reading...” There is a strong correlation between students who do not learn to read and a variety of negative indicators. “Students who cannot read by the fourth grade are at risk

of dropping out of school before graduation.” Additionally, “The US Department of Justice reports that children who can not read at grade level by the end of fourth grade are more likely to be incarcerated or on welfare.”

**A Book Flood:** Give Back, Give Books supports the concept of what is termed by scholars a “book flood,” which refers to the practice of saturating classrooms with books and having trained teachers to work with students. Ms. Fritz notes that this has been done in schools from Fiji to South Africa to Michigan. While the programs vary, the core idea is the same: Using trained teachers and exciting books to motivate student readers. Reported results include improved reading ability, more positive feelings about student literacy efforts, and better attitudes about reading material.

**Results:** Ms. Fritz interviewed seven teachers, three principals and one librarian, and reported on the outcomes of the program for students, teachers and parents.

**Students:** “The students clapped when they realized they could take the books home,” one teacher noted. Another said: “The books created classroom excitement, and I was surprised how engaged the kids were.” Two other teachers noted that their “non-reader” and “reluctant readers” were “now reading.” Teachers noted that student reading activities were improved by having new books that they wanted to read. “I found my reluctant readers sitting there and going ‘what do I have to read?’” Many students were incredulous that they were receiving new books to keep. “They kept saying, ‘I get to keep this book? I can take this book home?, and I was...so amazed because they thought...I thought they wouldn’t want to keep it after they finished...but that was the book they wanted to keep.”

**Teachers:** Ms. Fritz noted that many teachers appreciated the fact that the program enabled them to receive great resources for their students without having to pay for them. She noted that gratitude was a recurring theme among teachers. “For me, (picking out the books) was like a treasure. I...didn’t want to leave.”

**Parents:** Ms. Fritz was surprised that the program also was praised as a positive conduit for parental engagement. “Of the seven teachers interviewed, five noted that the books gave the teachers and the parents a positive reason to speak to one another. This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that two teachers mentioned the challenging nature of relationships that can exist between teachers and parents.” One father calling a teacher said: ‘We don’t have time to get to the library, we don’t have any books at home.’ Another teacher reported that 100 percent of the parents returned book response forms when she sent new books home each night for eight days in a row.

**Conclusion:** Two major themes emerged during the interviews, Ms. Fritz noted. First, she noted the fact that this program does not give books to children, without the benefit of additional instruction related to the new books. “Rather, students and teachers engage together with the books before they are sent home to become part of the child’s personal library. Because the Give Back, Give Books program requires instruction before ownership, it exemplifies some of the best practices in reading instruction...” Second, Ms. Fritz notes the educational benefits of using high-interest reading material instead of textbooks – something REF does through this program. Ms. Fritz also noted that REF supports teachers and parents through this program, in addition to the students upon which the organization focuses. “REF serves under-resourced students and also builds relationships in under-resourced communities.” As the program develops, the study suggests there are additional opportunities to serve the community and create a community of better readers.