We want adolescents to live in a book flood with “literally—finger-tip access to books (Allington Mc-Gill Franzen, 2013)” because physical access to books positively affects young people’s reading achievement (Neuman & Celano, 2012), the level of schooling they attain (Evans, et. al, 2014), and their motivation to read (Guthrie, 2000). Children need books in their ELA classrooms (Tatum, 2014; Worthy & Roser, 2010), school libraries staffed by degreed librarians (Kachel & Lance, 2013), access to public libraries in their communities (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2012), and book ownership at home (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Unfortunately, too many children—especially children in urban and rural communities, who are disproportionately children of color—live in book deserts (Wong, 2016). They do not have meaningful, consistent access to books at school, at home, or in their communities.

This gap in access to books perpetuates inequalities between low-income students and middle-income ones. While schools scramble to implement intervention programs like tutoring and summer school, there is little evidence that such programs have a long-term positive effect on children’s reading achievement and reading motivation (Allington & Mc-Gill Franzen, 2013). We have overwhelming evidence that access to books is the game changer for kids. Providing adolescents with access to books gives them the tools they need to develop strong literacy skills and a lifelong orientation toward reading (Guthrie, 2008). How can we increase young people’s access to books in schools, communities, and homes and guarantee our children have access to books 365 days a year? This is a complex problem to solve, and each school community has distinct needs and concerns. Talking about book access among ourselves, we could see that no one solution met the needs of every school community. Here are some of our ideas.

**Donalyn:** For many low-income (and middle-income) students, their primary sources of reading material are their classroom and school libraries. When schools close over the summer, many young people lose their book access. When students do not read much over the summer, they lose academic ground and reading momentum (Kim, 2004). While many schools assign summer reading or develop summer reading programs, such activities do not meet the reading access needs of 100 percent of the students in the school.

The most effective summer reading programs physically put the books in students’ hands before they leave for the summer (Allington & Mc-Gill Franzen, 2013). Open your school libraries up for summer reading checkout shortly before school ends, and check out books to every student. There is always the concern that children will lose library books. Guess what? You would rather lose a library book than lose a reader. Los Angeles Unified School District allocated $12 million to summer school credit recovery programs with little documentation that this program improved students’ reading achievement or offset summer slide (Seidel, 2014). How many library books would that funding purchase? Consider this: the key to our children’s reading achievement success sits locked up inside our school libraries, unused all summer.

Additionally, we must re-examine the
goals and outcomes of school library fines or penalties that block students’ checkout privileges. Charging library fines disproportionately affects poor children and often eliminates their primary source of reading material (Dixon & Gillis, 2017). While no one believes that adolescents should be allowed to lose and damage library books without consequence, there has to be a better way than cutting off their book access and their opportunity to receive support from the school librarian. Perhaps, students who lose or damage library books can perform service in the library, such as shelving books or assisting the librarian. You would surround them with books instead of denying them their best access opportunity.

Katherine: As a child, book access was not a topic I thought much about. Sure, my parents would have to drive me over thirty miles to reach the nearest bookstore, but we had books in our house. Whether we purchased them from said store, from the book orders I got at school, or borrowed them from the library, I grew up in a house full of stories. I never thought about the impact of that simple fact on my life until I became a teacher. Plenty of my students do not travel to the nearest bookstore on a regular basis, if ever. Some don’t have a library card or a way to get there. Now, we can even order books online, but that isn’t in the budget for many of the families I serve. How can I ensure that all of my students grow up surrounded by stories? I buy books. A lot of them.

I have been fortunate enough to teach in schools with a school library throughout my teaching career. In twenty years of teaching, from kindergarten through seventh grade, my students have been some of the most active patrons of those libraries. So many folks might wonder why I would feel the need to purchase books with my own money for my classroom. The simple fact is that I feel my classroom library is an investment in my students.

It is our classroom library that I turn to repeatedly every day. It is where the kids in my middle school stop before and after school, just to browse. Jacob came by after school on Friday. He said he needed to grab another book before the weekend. He knew he’d finish his current read before he came back on Monday. Teya and Olivia stopped by before school one day last week. They’re eighth graders now, but they knew right where in the classroom library I had one series, and they wanted to reread a few books in it. It was surrounded by these books that some boys in my homeroom were talking about the other day before announcements. As I eavesdropped one was pointing up to the right corner of our far shelf, telling a friend that when The Downside of Being Up was returned, that was where it was shelved. They needed to get it so that they could read it too. My students know that I will buy books whenever needed. If they see a gap in our collection, they tell me. Spencer did this just the other day. As he came in the classroom, he headed to the shelf where Jason Reynolds’s books are placed. From the back of the room I heard, “Mrs. S., how many copies of Patina do you have?” When I replied, “One”, he said, “Could you get another?” I smiled as I went to my computer to order a book.

The books in our classroom library are for my students to fill their lives with stories, to let them know I will invest in them through the books we surround ourselves with each day. Whether or not their homes are filled with books is a fact that I cannot change, but their classroom certainly will be.

Cindy: While technology is hardly the answer to everything, promoting and sharing digital resources with our students can actually make more books—ebooks and digital audiobooks—available to our students when they want them. The trick is being able to help them navigate these resources so they can use them. Often public libraries have digital collections through services such as Hoopla and Overdrive, allowing access to thousands of titles without needing to navigate leaving home or worry about how to return what they’ve borrowed.

Without consistent access to books, social inequities remain. Book access is a powerful equalizer. How has your school community improved students’ physical access to books? What has worked? What challenges do you have? How can we share ideas and build consensus in our communities about the urgency of this issue?

References

Donalyn Miller, Colby Sharp, Cindy Minnich, and Katherine Sokolowski are the facilitators of the The Nerdy Book Club blog (www.nerdybookclub.com), a community-based blog that invites teachers, librarians, authors, illustrators, booksellers, and families to celebrate the artists who write and illustrate for young people and share ideas for engaging children with reading through their caring adults.

Donalyn Miller is a former upper elementary and middle school teacher in Northeast Texas, and author of several books on engaging children with reading, including The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

Colby Sharp is an elementary school teacher in Parma, Michigan. He coaches middle school football, facilitates the annual Nerd Camp literacy Ed. Camp conference with his wife, Alaina, and blogs about his classroom at Sharpread (https://sharpread.wordpress.com/).

Cindy Minnich is a high school teacher in Central Pennsylvania and currently serves on the ALAN board. She lives with her husband, son, and pets among the “decorative” stacks of books and board games.

Katherine Sokolowski has taught for 21 years—from kindergarten through seventh grade—and currently teaches seventh grade in Monticello, Illinois. Her thoughts about the power of relationships to engage readers and writers have appeared on NPR and Choice Literacy.