

CASE STUDY

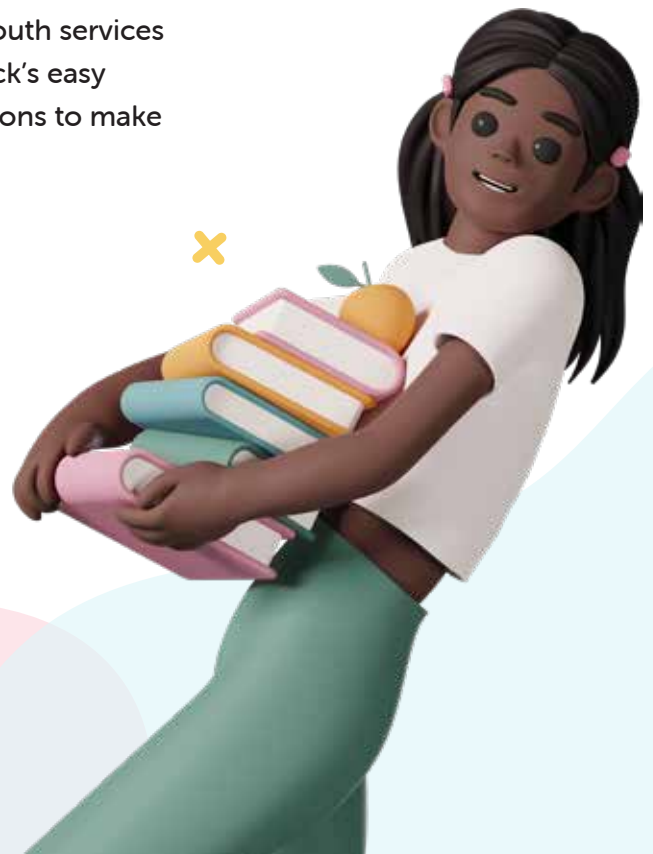
Encouraging Choice and Adventure Through Summer Reading

At Wellington City Libraries

New Zealand's Wellington City Libraries made the switch to Beanstack just in time for their 2021–2022 summer reading program—five weeks before, in fact! With a twin focus on stopping the summer slide and engaging with kids of all reading levels and interests, the library revamped summer reading with Beanstack's motivational badges at the heart of their new program. And, wow, did it work.

When compared to average participation metrics from their previous six years of summer reading, Wellington's '21–22 program had an astonishing 475% growth in participation, from 138 to 794 participants. And the average participant read 250% more books during the two months of summer reading—a jump of 15 books per child.

Leading the charge for Wellington's Summer Reading Adventure was Stephen Clothier, the library system's children's and youth services coordinator. Clothier and his team leveraged Beanstack's easy administrative tools and challenge customization options to make summer '21–22 one for the record books.



From Spreadsheet Chaos to Smooth Sailing



For the past decade, Wellington City Libraries had used a homegrown and time-intensive Wordpress site for their summer reading program. "It was just spreadsheets absolutely everywhere, people trying to manually keep track of hundreds of kids taking part in challenges across a very dispersed network," Clothier recounted. "It was a really huge administrative burden."

Clothier started looking for an engaging virtual platform to create "a more bespoke experience" for their readers that would also ease the staff workload. Beanstack's intuitive interface, different staff roles and access, easy catalog integration, and widespread customization options checked all the boxes.

"It would save us so much time on just administration alone that it was absolutely worth it from our perspective," Clothier said. After weaving through the city approval process, Wellington City Libraries joined a growing group of Kiwis using Beanstack. "We can share ideas and support one another, as well as having the great support from the Beanstack team based in the States," Clothier said. Working at warp speed with their Beanstack client success manager, Clothier got Wellington's shiny new site, premier settings like library catalog integration, and new summer reading challenge up and running in just five weeks.



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Offer Ample Accessible Options



Wellington's summer reading program gave kids a variety of options in a "choose your own adventure" framework, and kept the focus on participation, not completion. "We wanted it to be as open-ended as possible," Clothier said. "They were on a journey, and they were kind of able to decide for themselves what to aim for."

The Summer Reading Adventure played up participants' roles as explorers taking on reading, writing, and activity quests. Kids ages 5–13 could choose to log books; write, draw, or record book reviews; complete activities; or do a combination of all three actions. Hitting key milestones in any of those categories unlocked unique badges, certificates, rewards, and tickets for grand prize draws. Along the way, participants worked up from an initiate to an expert, master, or even champion of summer reading.

The library's promotional materials and tactics emphasized the adventure aspect of summer reading. Clothier and his team put up posters and decorations, posted on social media and the library blog, and advertised in classrooms and newsletters at local schools. Even the summer reading brochure they gave out was titled "The Adventurer's Guide," drawing from the Dungeons & Dragons rulebook for inspiration.

Their promotions honed in on the ease and fun of participating, and focused on kids' developing their own goals, independent reading habits, and relationships with the library. Creating their choice-driven, adventure-focused program with Beanstack's suite of challenge customization options helped Wellington's '21-22 program garner more than five times more participation than previous years' programs.



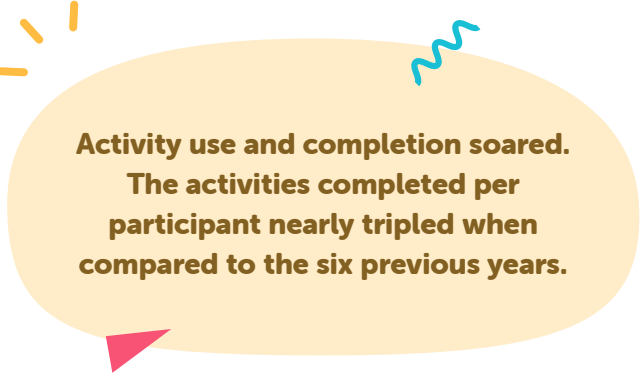
Make It Local



Another particularly engaging aspect of Wellington’s summer reading program was its local focus. “We wanted to have a version of the adventure that was extremely specific to Wellington, that would reference local landmarks and the environment here,” Clothier explained. So he developed activities as “questlines” that incorporated different aspects of the Wellington community. Some could be completed at the library, while others could be done at local parks, nearby gardens, or even kids’ backyards.

The Beanstack activities included links to library resources like movie catalogs and local author collections, as well as maps, scavenger hunts, and more. Some promoted in-person events in the Wellington Libraries system, and many required staff interaction with kids in order to complete them. For example, to unlock the penultimate activity badge, readers had to input secret codes given out from librarians at their local library branch.

Activity use and completion soared. The activities completed per participant nearly tripled when compared to the six previous years: On average, each kid completed three enrichment activities in ‘21–22, compared to one in previous years.



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Amp Up Branch Motivation



Clothier built up staff knowledge and buy-in throughout the library system with an ingenious “Summer Reading Champion” staff program and a little friendly competition. Wellington’s 14 library locations are split into five geographic clusters. With locations spread across more than 22 km (13 miles), it was important to recruit staff throughout the city. “Each cluster put forward somebody to be their ‘Summer Reading Champion,’ to work closely with me and help iterate on some of the challenge design ideas,” Clothier explained. “But more importantly, they were in charge of administrating across their cluster of sites.”

The five “Summer Reading Champions” helped Clothier build excitement throughout the network and spread out the administrative burden. They monitored book reviews, activity responses, and prize levels. Their involvement, coupled with in-person and online training sessions, branch cheat sheets, and a tutorial video with bookmarks and timestamps for easy reference, boosted staff buy-in for the new and improved Summer Reading Adventure. “Most staff seemed to get the hang of it really really quickly, which was awesome,” Clothier said.

To get staff even more invested, Clothier also fostered friendly branch competition. Using Beanstack’s scheduled reports, he emailed out weekly location rankings across the network. “The staff got really into it, hanging with bated breath to wait for the next weekly report to come out and see if their site had inched up in the rankings,” Clothier chuckled.

All his efforts at building staff knowledge and involvement paid off. Across all Wellington locations, staff had 20 times more interactions with readers during the ‘21–22 Summer Reading Adventure than in previous years, forging strong bonds between the library and their readers.



Use Prizes as Promotion



Turning each earned badge into a low-cost collectible prize was a huge hit in Wellington. Along with tickets to grand prize draws and more traditional rewards like gift certificates, Clothier printed out badge images for kids to pick up at the library each time they hit a big milestone.

“Collecting all the badges was really big for our kids,” he said. “I had always said, ‘If the badges become like playground currency, that’s when you know that you’ve won.’ And when I was going out and doing visits to branches, I actually heard some kids exchanging badges in the stacks, like, ‘Oh, I’ll trade you two librarian badges for my voyager badge.’”

Not only did the badges get kids excited about participating, but it also helped stretch out the rewards in a low-cost, high-visibility way. This, in turn, encouraged kids to participate for longer and reach for higher milestones. Wellington saw a huge uptick in prize redemptions in ‘21–22 when compared with stats from past summers: Each participant earned an average of 4.5 rewards, up from their previous average of 1.3.



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Analyze Participation and Deep Engagement



To quantify their summer reading gains and gather recommendations for next summer, Clothier pulled together a comprehensive final report using Beanstack's detailed reporting tools, past Beanstack white papers like the 2021 Summer Reading Report, and feedback from the Wellington community.

"There was another benefit of Beanstack that we hadn't even really anticipated, which was the wealth of recorded material and rich array of evidence you can harvest," Clothier said. "What an amazing way to understand how a program has impacted people."

Clothier identified basic participation data in Beanstack, but then went beyond registration totals and book completions (impressive as they were) to look for evidence of deep engagement.

Using more Beanstack reports, he exported all the text responses and book reviews, ran them through an audience engagement and impact model, and analyzed the results.

"There was really deep engagement with the whole process," Clothier said. "There was evidence of kids and families who had changed their entire relationship with the library as a result of taking part. It was now part of their daily routine to visit the library and to log into Beanstack and log their reading and write reviews. That was really heartening for us to see."

After the success of their first Beanstack summer, Clothier and his team are expanding their Summer Reading Adventure to Wellington community members of all ages for summer '22–23. They're sticking to an accessible, local, and badge-filled experience for their readers, all within Beanstack's intuitive app and supported by an engaged and excited staff.





About Beanstack

Beanstack helps public and school libraries effortlessly facilitate reading challenges and reading fundraisers. The flagship product of Zoobean Inc., Beanstack is licensed by over 10,000 public libraries, school districts, and corporations around the world.

Its investors include Mark Cuban from ABC's Shark Tank and its founding members were previously Washington, D.C.'s teacher of the year and Google's first head of K-12 education outreach. To learn more, visit beanstack.com.