Rethinking Seasonal Reading Challenges for Year Long Learning

Zoobean and Gwinnett County Public Library

Over a six-year period from 2012 and 2018, Gwinnett County Public Library (GCPL) in Georgia experienced a significant change in their Summer Reading Program. "We had a 59% drop in participation," said Youth Services Specialist Don Giacomini. "We have about a million people in our service area, so 59% amounts to about 20,000 registrations. Obviously, that was concerning."

To revitalize their program, in 2018 GCPL tapped Beanstack to move their summer reading challenge online, while keeping many of their traditional programming and incentives intact. But when COVID hit, library leadership realized that they would need to do more. "Obviously, the biggest change was [the fact that] we had no ability to do in-person programming," Giacomini reflected. "That meant no ability to communicate with people in person and hand-sell the program, remind people to log, remind people to register, remind people to do activity badges." With all their traditional engagement strategies off the table, the GCPL team had to recreate their annual reading challenge—and fast.

Their solution, as fellow Youth Services Specialist Sarah Martin put it, was to shift from a summer challenge to a "never-ending reading challenge." With Covid altering everyone's schedules, GCPL leadership thought, why not find a way to engage readers all year? The new solution was not one reading challenge lasting a full year, but rather a series of shorter multimedia challenges, with thematic videos embedded directly in the Beanstack app, that aligned with the public school curriculum to support year-long reading and learning. It also transformed how the GCPL team thinks about online community engagement. This is the story of how this shift transpired.

Keeping Readers Involved During Covid

During the pandemic, 98% of libraries in the US reported closing their physical branches, **according to a recent ALA survey**. Like so many other libraries, GCPL had to find new ways to engage their community virtually overnight. To do this, Giacomini reported, "we adopted a content-creator mindset."

As an immediate change, the Youth Services team at GCPL decided the best way to connect with patrons during the pandemic was to simplify and shorten their reading challenges and pack them full of fun, engaging content. Rather than spending a few months on an extended summer reading program, they designed challenges that were often over within a single week. Then they developed weekly themes and started churning out content on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Beanstack's digital badges were a critical part of the campaign to get people more involved online. Readers earned badges for watching and answering questions about weekly videos, which GCPL embedded directly into the Beanstack app, and for participating in virtual summer camps. GCPL also kept patrons engaged by offering random "pop-up" badges. Readers had to keep an eye on GCPL social media and answer a question of the day to earn unique badges that were only available for 24 hours. GCPL loved the way they could embed social media content, library news, and original videos in the Beanstack platform. "Rather than just being a place to host programs, [Beanstack] can be a whole platform for library services in and of itself," Giacomini said.

At the end of the summer, GCPL surveyed participants on their experience—with overwhelmingly positive results. "78% of [respondents] said it positively impacted their experience," Giacomini reported.
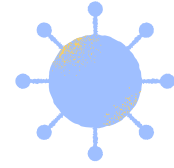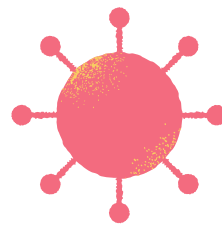
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Making an Impact With School Partnerships

After the success of their virtual summer challenge, GCPL wanted to use Beanstack to keep kids reading, despite the unexpected transition to distance learning. To do this, the library partnered with the local school district to align their challenges with the existing curriculum, so kids could hone their literacy skills while logging their books.

For kids under the age of five, Giacomini designed a new challenge called "Kindergarten, Here We Come." This program took GCPL's existing challenge for this age group (to read 1000 books by kindergarten) and married it with the **Every Child Ready to Read program** and Play to Learn, Gwinnett County's free preschool curriculum. This partnership with the public school system helped GCPL promote its programs and attract new families. "It's given the school district an extra incentive to promote our services through Beanstack," said Giacomini.

For older readers, Martin paired up with Katharine Russell, GCPL's teen-focused librarian, to design shorter themed challenges, lasting anywhere from a few weeks to seven days. One example was a week-long challenge to celebrate the Mars Rover landing in February 2021. This challenge included eight badges that readers could only earn during that week. With shorter challenges and one-of-a-kind badges, readers are now motivated to keep engaging with library programming all year long.

By partnering with the school district, GCPL reached more students and made a bigger impact in the community. "The schools have been just amazing for us throughout our history," said Giacomini. "My suggestion to anyone is really to work on building strong partnerships with your school, and finding ways you can activate each other's networks so that you can promote for them and they can promote for you."

Building a Community of Readers

Motivated by reaching community members during the pandemic, GCPL went above and beyond to build an innovative year-long reading challenge powered by Beanstack. "We want a continuous program, so people always have something to participate in," Giacomini reflected. "But it can be daunting if it's overly complicated." With Beanstack's versatile, easy-to-use platform, Giacomini, Martin, and Russell were able to deliver a series of engaging reading challenges that keeps families reading all year long.

To learn more about how your public library can partner with Beanstack to improve virtual programming, go to **beanstack.com/libraries**.

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About Beanstack

Beanstack helps educators build a culture of reading in their schools and districts through the power of reading challenges. Many common reading programs focus too heavily on assessments, which can discourage students and make reading less enjoyable. With Beanstack's reading challenges, educators can encourage independent, choice reading time - the number one way to build strong readers.

Beanstack is the flagship product of Zoobean, Inc., created to help people read more and read together. Beanstack is licensed by over 10,000 public libraries, school districts, and corporations around the world. Zoobean's investors include Kapor Capital, Mark Cuban, RevUp Capital, the AT&T Aspire Accelerator, and Amazon's Alexa Fund. Its founders were previously Washington, DC's Teacher of the Year and Google's first Head of K-12 Education Outreach.
Learn more at **beanstack.com.**