



## Durham Parent Perspectives Summer Reading

Parents have an important role to play in supporting children's summer learning. Understanding what resonates with parents and what they need to support their children's summer reading can help summer reading programs better engage parents.

The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) gathered and analyzed parents' perspectives on summer reading to support Book Harvest in using messages and tools that are accessible and responsive to parents. Book Harvest is a Durham, NC nonprofit organization that provides books to children in need through programs like Books on Break, which allows elementary school students in high poverty schools to select and keep 10 books at the end of the school year to support summer reading. This report was funded by the United Way of the Greater Triangle.

### Key Findings

- Parents have big dreams for their children and they identify education as playing a central role in those dreams.
  - English-speaking parents want their children to be happy and successful adults and be the “best that they can be.” They say education and reading will help their children achieve those dreams.
  - Spanish-speaking parents want their children to be educated and have a professional career and/or career they love. They say hard work and parental encouragement will help their children achieve those dreams.
- Parents want to support their children's learning during the summer, but feel constrained by limited time and limited access to books.
- Parents may be aware of summer learning loss, but less so about the role of reading in learning loss prevention.
- Parents say more information about the benefits of summer reading, tips on how to read with children and access to more books would most help them support their children reading regularly during the summer.
  - Spanish-speaking parents want greater access to books in Spanish. They also want specific help with supporting bilingual children as some parents may not be able to read in English.
- The messenger matters. English-speaking parents said information coming from their peers would be more credible than information coming from program professionals.

- “Parents, you are your child’s first and most important teacher,” is not an effective message. Some of the English-speaking parents found it offensive and said that they did not relate to it. In addition, Spanish and English-speaking parents interpret the meaning of this phrase differently.
- Parents preferred positively framed messages about the importance of summer reading combined with information about summer learning loss.
- While English- and Spanish-speaking parents have much in common, they also interpret messages differently and have differing needs.

## Approach

Parent outreach was targeted to three schools in which Book Harvest partners for its Books on Break Program:

- Glenn Elementary School
- Lakewood Elementary School
- Y E Smith Elementary School

Almost all students attending these three schools are from economically disadvantaged families and the majority of students are Black or Hispanic. The table below provides demographic and achievement information for the three schools.

Table 1<sup>i</sup>

	<b>Glenn</b>	<b>Lakewood</b>	<b>Y E Smith</b>
Black Students (2015-16)	46.8%	37.1%	45.4%
Hispanic Students (2015-16)	46.1%	54.9%	48.7%
Economically Disadvantaged Students (2014-15) <sup>ii</sup>	> 90%	> 90%	> 90%
School Performance (2014-15)	F	F	F
Read to Achieve Retained (2014-15)	47.5%	12%	41.1%
Students Proficient on EOG Reading Grade 3 (2014-15)	29.2%	21.6%	24.7%
Economically Disadvantaged Students Proficient on EOG Reading Grade 3 (2014-15)	27.3%	23.1%	22.8%

NCECF surveyed parents at each school (See Appendix A for the survey instrument). Surveys were provided in both English and Spanish and were distributed via flyers that went home with students in the beginning of January 2016. A total of 1,647 surveys were distributed with 246 parents completing and returning the survey for a response rate of 15 percent. Fifty-four percent of surveys were completed in Spanish and 46 percent were completed in English.

A subset of survey respondents was invited through email and phone calls to attend a Literacy Night at their child’s school, which included a focus group. Focus groups were scheduled at the three schools in March 2016. Two focus groups were scheduled per school. One was held in English and one Spanish. The focus groups for Spanish-speaking parents were conducted in Spanish, rather than simultaneous translation. Questions were informed by parent responses to the survey questions. NCECF provided dinner and child care. (See Appendix B for the focus group protocol.)

	<b>Glenn</b>	<b>Lakewood</b>	<b>Y E Smith</b>
English-speaking Participants	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
Spanish-speaking Participants	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>

Due to the low number of English-speaking participants in two of the schools, an additional six phone interviews were held with parents who were unable to attend and are accounted for in the numbers above.

## **Findings**

Below is a summary of the findings from the surveys and focus groups.

### ***Awareness of Summer Learning Loss***

Almost all parents (96 percent) said that it is very important for children to read regularly over the summer, including 95 percent of English-speaking and 97 percent of Spanish-speaking parents.

In the survey almost all parents also said they had heard that during the summer children can lose a lot of what they learned during the previous year, including 97 percent of English-speaking and 94 percent of Spanish-speaking parents. Of note, during a focus group conversation, parents shared that they had not previously heard of summer learning loss. The discrepancy could be in using the term “summer learning loss,” or parents may have felt that the correct survey response was to answer yes.

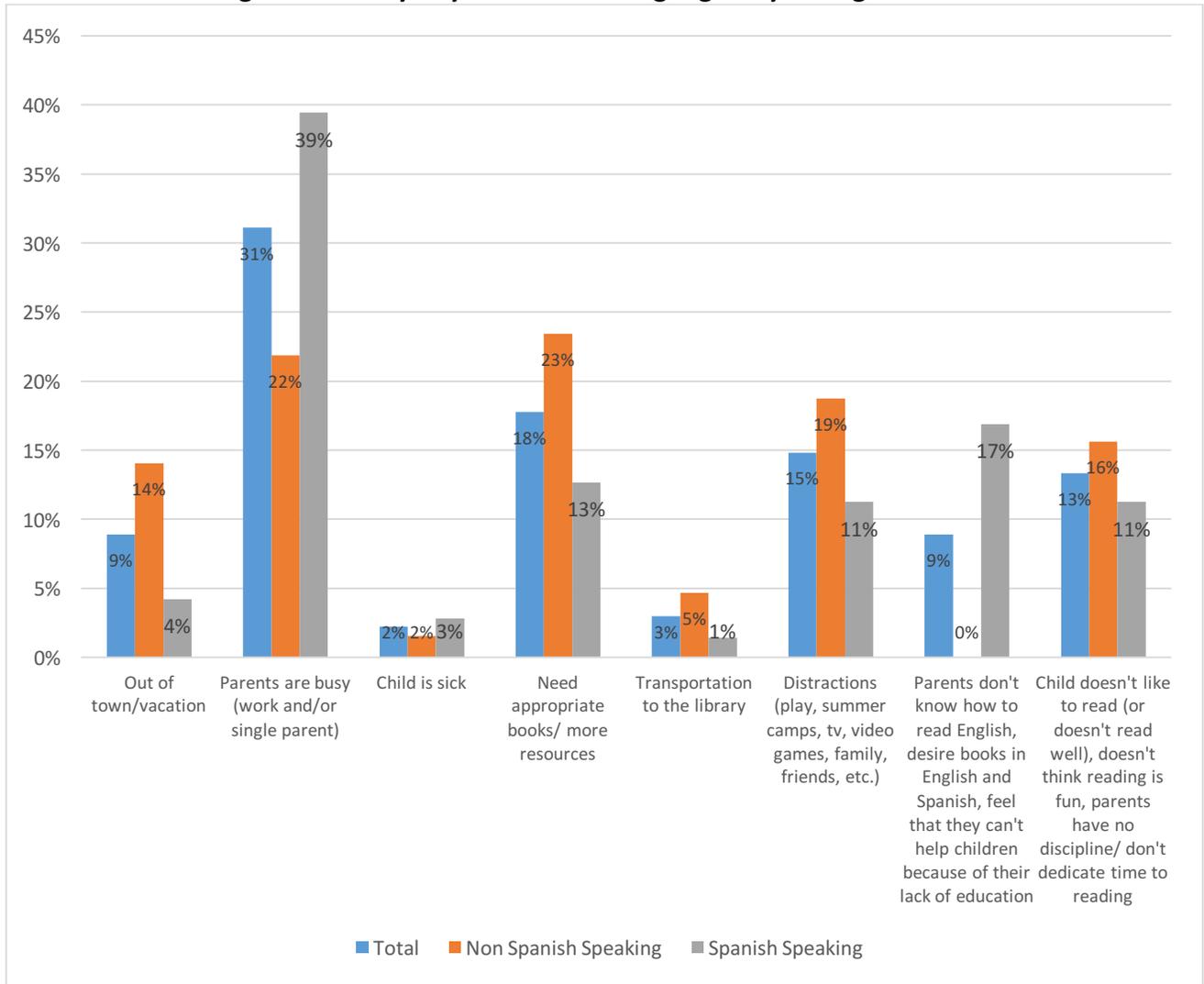
Spanish-speaking parents were less likely (although still had high rates) to be aware that reading regularly over the summer can keep children from losing what they learned during the previous school year. Eighteen percent said that they had not heard this statement compared to 5 percent of English-speaking parents.

Furthermore, of Spanish-speaking parents that did know that their children could lose what they had learned over the summer, 13 percent did not know that reading regularly over the summer could help. This was true for 3 percent of the English respondents.

### Supporting Reading During the Summer

Parents identified a number of barriers that prevent their children from reading regularly during the summer. The top barrier was time – many identified themselves as single parents and/or noted that their work hours interfered. Spanish-speaking parents (39 percent) were more likely to identify time as a barrier than English-speaking parents (22 percent). Eighteen percent of parents said access to appropriate books was a barrier. English-speaking parents identified book access as a greater barrier (23 percent) than Spanish-speaking parents (13 percent). However, book access for Spanish-speaking parents was at the heart of the most significant distinction: 17 percent of Spanish-speaking parents said that they could not read English and wanted access to books in Spanish as well as English.

**What can get in the way of your child reading regularly during the summer?**



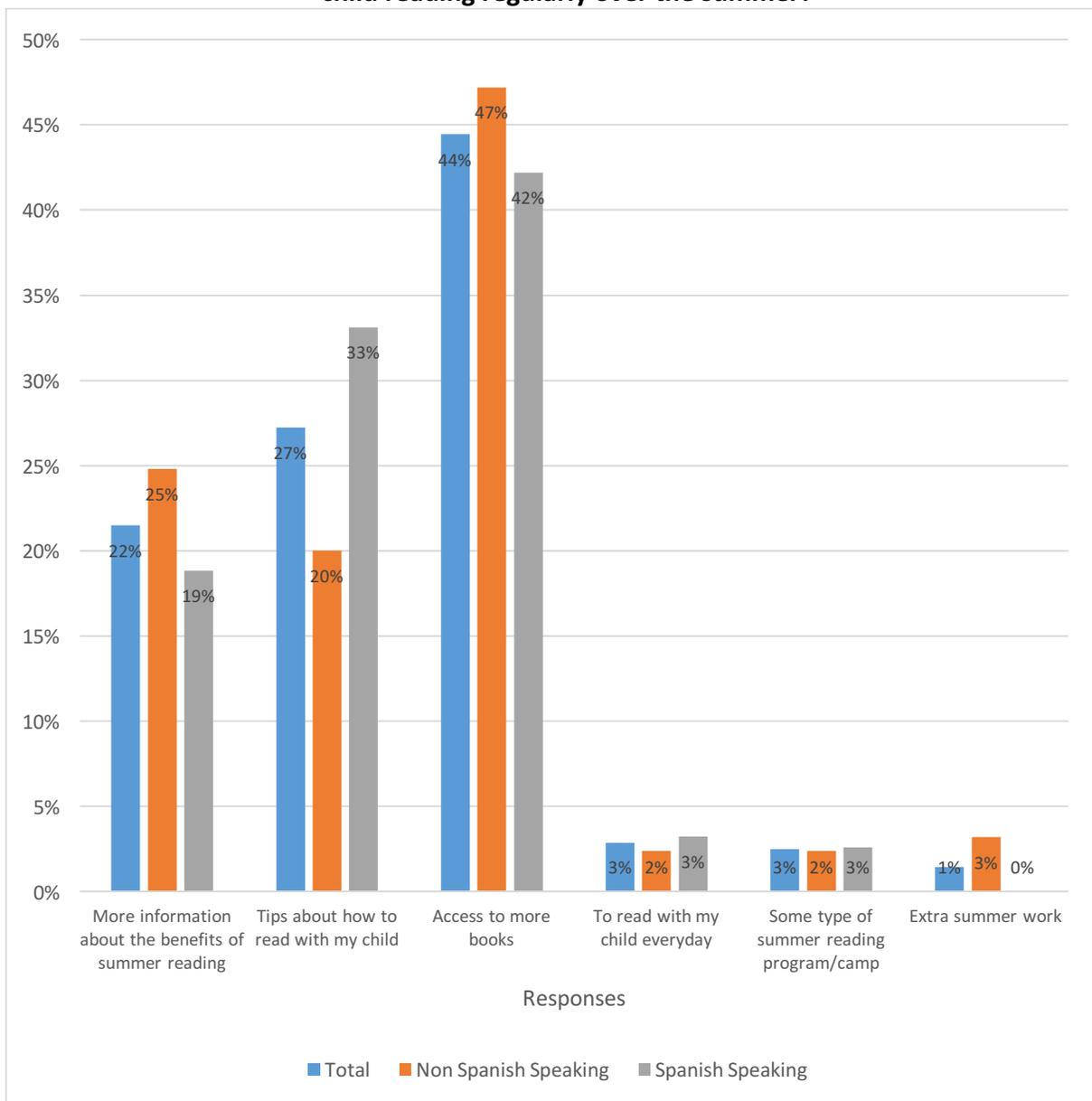
These findings were reinforced in the focus group conversations.

*“I work two jobs. Trying to find books for older son. It’s hard to find the time.”*

*“We have responsibility to teach our kids, but we need time.”*

Parents were asked what would help them support their children reading regularly during the summer. Access to books was the top response (44 percent), followed by tips about how to read with my child (27 percent) and then by more information about the benefits of summer reading (22 percent). Spanish-speaking parents were most interested in reading tips with one-third indicating tips would be helpful as compared to 20 percent of English-speaking parents.

### What would most help you as a parent to support your child reading regularly over the summer?



The focus groups delved deeper into what type of tips parents would be interested in and how they would like to receive information. Consistent with acknowledging that time was a significant barrier, parents want tips on time management.

*“I am short on time and reading is time consuming. I would like tips on managing time for reading with my children.”*

Spanish-speaking parents wanted more tips to support bilingual children.

*“How to support bilingual children with their Spanish and English because I can’t help.”*

*“How can we teach our kids also so they learn English but do not lose their Spanish?”*

*“It’s easy to find a short book written in English, but very few in Spanish. You get tired of reading the same book.”*

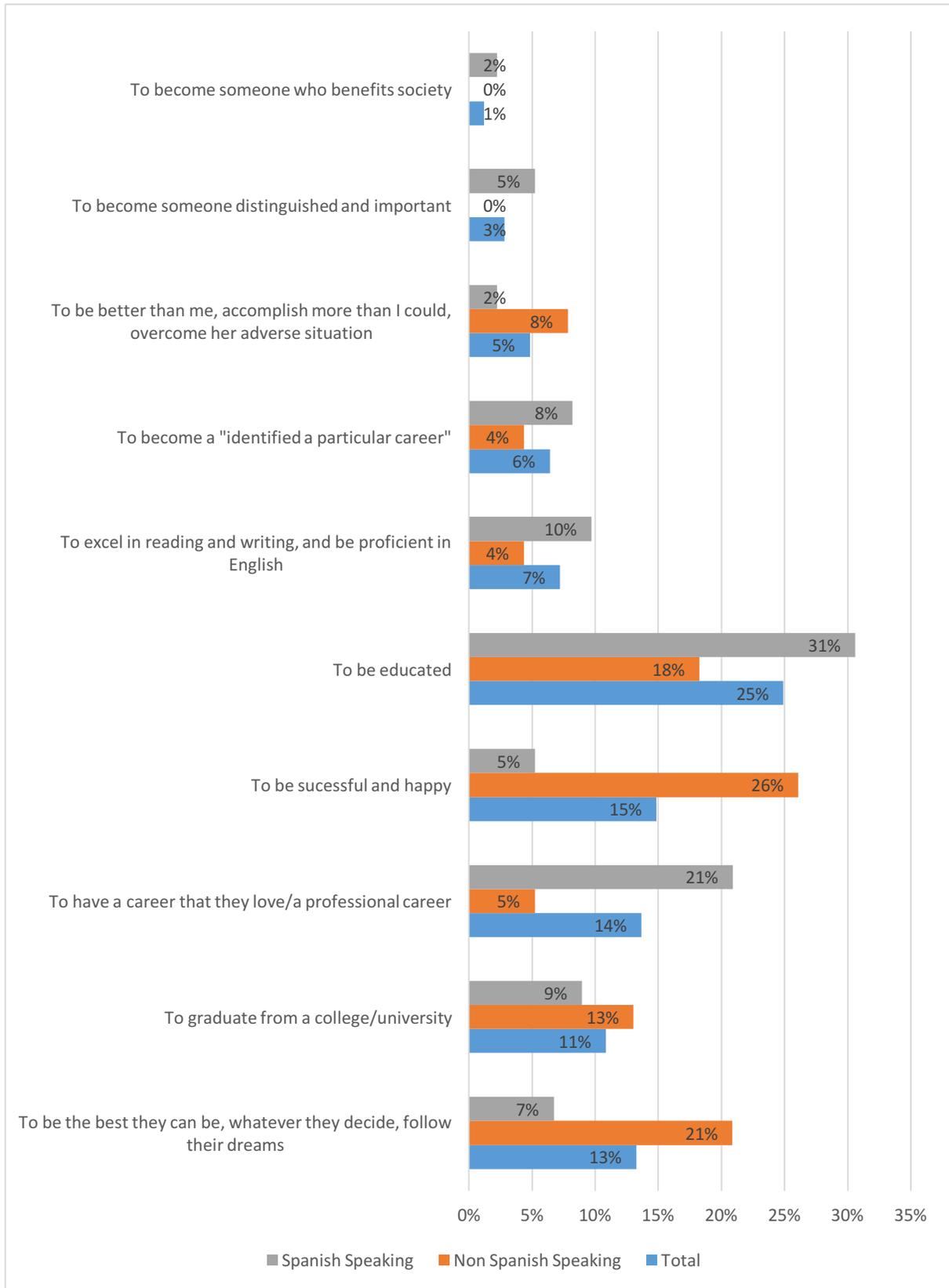
Parents identified a range of methods in which they preferred to receive tips. Responses were fairly evenly spread across texts, emails and phone calls. There was no difference in the feedback from English- and Spanish-speaking parents.

### ***Parent Dreams***

It should come as no surprise that parents have big dreams for their children. Spanish-speaking (31 percent) parents talked most about their children being educated as compared to 18 percent of English-speaking parents. Similarly, 21 percent of Spanish-speaking parents also said that they wanted their children to have a professional career and/or a career they love as compared to 5 percent of English-speaking parents. On the other hand, English-speaking parents talked most about their children being successful and happy (26 percent) followed by being the best that they can be and follow their dreams, whereas a smaller percentage of Spanish-speaking parents said something similar, only five percent and seven percent respectively.

When it came to what it would take for their children to achieve these dreams, English-speaking parents said good education and reading. Spanish-speaking parents said it would take commitment, hard work and parental encouragement as well as access to free programs.

## What are your dreams for your child?



### Message Testing

The focus group tested two messages with parents. The first message was based on typical early childhood messaging and the second was informed by the survey responses.

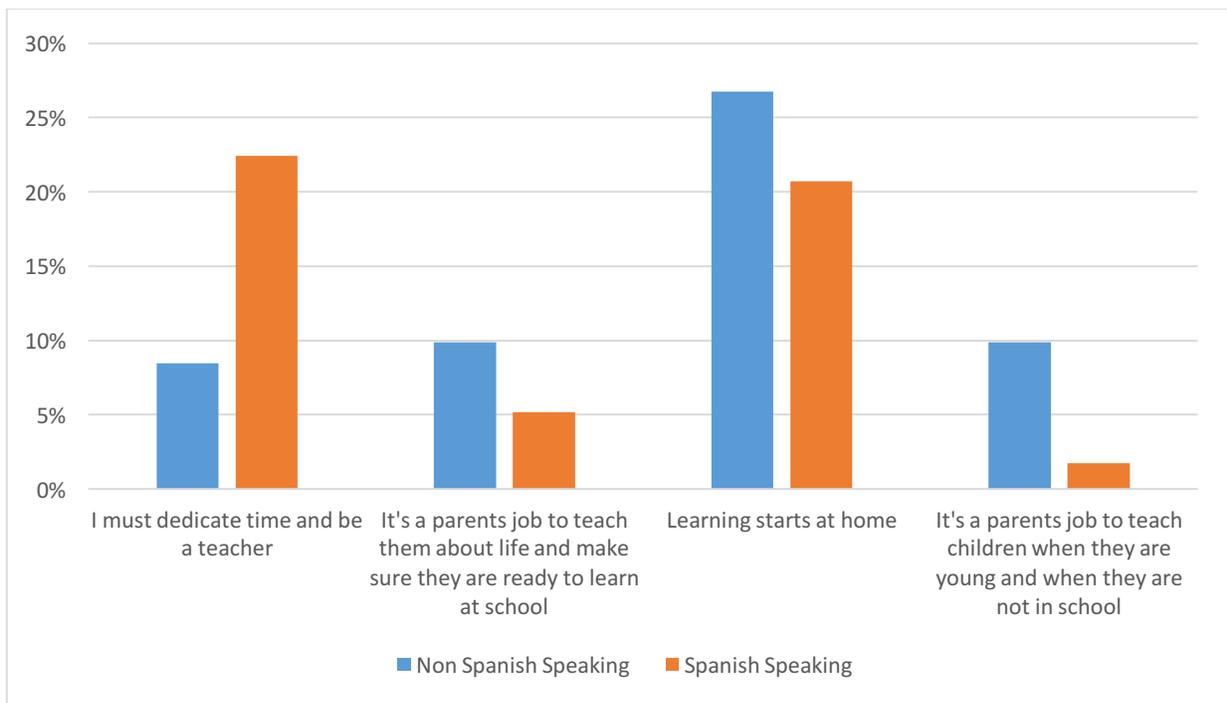
1. Parents, you are your child’s first and most important teacher. Don’t let summer erase gains made in school.
2. You have big dreams for your children! Reading during the summer helps your child do well in school and become a successful adult.

Focus group participants were asked how each message made them feel and which made them want to learn more about summer reading.

#### Parents, you are your child’s first and most important teacher. Don’t let summer erase gains made in school.

This message was first raised in the survey. Parents were asked what the statement, “Parents are a child’s first and best teacher,” meant to them.

The most common answer reflected the idea that children look up to their parents and imitate what they do followed by learning starts at home. There were significant differences in interpretations between Spanish- and English speaking parents as highlighted in the graph below.



The focus group discussions provided further insight. Both groups began by sharing their interpretation of the sentences and identified what they believed them to mean. Spanish-speaking parents seemed to take the message at face value and had little emotional reaction to it. *“Kids do need fun time in summer, but they need practice reading during summer,”* a parent said.

One Spanish-speaking parent did note, *“If I was a mother not paying attention to my children it would make me feel bad.”*

The English-speaking parents tended to have a stronger reaction. Like the mother quoted above, they did not think it applied to them, but did think that parents who were not reading with their children over the summer might feel offended.

Furthermore, this group found the language itself to be problematic and not something to which they related. One parent said, *“It wasn’t written in our language.”* This was echoed by another parent who said, *“They are trying to say I taught your child, all this work your child did during school days when it get’s summer time, please don’t let them forget it – that’s what that means in our way.”*

*You have big dreams for your children! Reading during the summer helps your child do well in school and become a successful adult.*

Both English- and Spanish-speaking parents found this message to be more positive. *“Every parent wants their child to do well to be a professional. You tell your child to read so they can reach their goals and dreams,”* said a Spanish-speaking parent. Another said, *“It’s motivation to do better during the year.”*

In their reactions, English-speaking parents tended to use the word “encouraging.” One parent said, *“Encouraging your kid- what you put in is what you get out.”* One parent did note, however, *“It’s more than reading that will make them successful.”*

Few parents said that the first message (parents as first teacher) made them want to learn more about summer learning. Most said the second one did or a combination of the two. It is our belief that parents preferred both because they did want information about summer reading loss, which the second sentence – *don’t let summer erase gains made in school* – begins to address.

### *The Messenger Matters*

The largest of the English-speaking focus groups reinforced a basic rule of effective messaging – the messenger matters. The quotations below should inform outreach practices. (Please note that the underlined you is used to convey that the speaker is addressing the focus group facilitator.)

*“It depends on who says it.”*

*“When you come in talking about encouraging your child with summer, what do you mean, I do that. It depends who you are talking to and who it’s coming from.”*

*“I wouldn’t get offended. But let’s just say you have a friend named Keisha and you come to her and you are telling her that you need to work on your child’s development during the summer and all you just said, she might get offended because you said it. But if she (points to another focus group member) says it she might take it a different way. That’s the way it is.”*

### **Additional Theme from the Focus Groups**

- Many of the Spanish-speaking parents who participated in the focus groups do not have a background in reading.

*“Sometimes kids now view reading as a chore, instead of reading out of habit. Really American culture says that you need to read. I’m Hispanic culture, it’s not emphasized. We do read, but reading is more for school. Yes, reading is not the same in Hispanic culture. Kids need to read in school, but our culture is more of working.”*

We caution against making broad generalizations based on these statements. That said, for the schools in which Book Harvest is working in Durham County, parents of Spanish-speaking children may not have experience with literacy-rich environments.

## **Recommendations**

1. **Provide basic information defining summer learning loss and the benefits of summer reading (avoid jargon) and use positive messaging that reinforces parents’ dreams for their children.** We recommend the following type of message:
  - *Your child works hard during the school year and learned a lot! Despite that hard work, during the summer children can lose what they learned. When that happens, children start the next school year behind, and then it is very hard for them to catch up. It is called summer learning loss. You can prevent summer learning loss by having your child read each day during the summer.*
  - You have big dreams for your children! Reading during the summer will help your child do well in school and grow into a successful adult.*
2. **Use parent photos and testimonials.** Materials should feature pictures of and quotes from Latino and Black parents. Parents trust other parents like themselves and will be more likely to engage with materials if they know their neighbors think it is of value.
3. **Provide specific tips for Spanish-speaking parents to help them support their bilingual children.** Materials provided in Spanish need to specifically address the needs of Spanish-speaking parents, including highlighting the benefits of reading and talking with

their children in their native language and addressing concerns about children maintaining their Spanish skills.

4. **Expand the selection of books in Spanish.** Spanish speaking families are interested in books in English and Spanish for their bilingual children. Books that are bilingual (the content is written in both English and Spanish on the same page) help Spanish-speaking parents engage in children's reading.
5. **Provide easy tips for parents that help them manage time constraints.** Parents, particularly low-income parents and single parents, have significant demands placed upon them. They want tips that do not feel overwhelming. For example, the campaign to encourage parents to read aloud to their child 15 minutes a day is more specific and feels more manageable than saying read with your child.

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<sup>i</sup> NC School Report Cards, NC Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>ii</sup> Free and Reduced Meals Application Data 2014-2015, NC Department of Public Instruction.  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/resources/data/>