

GUEST | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Commentary: COVID stress, learning loss and summer reading

Mary Ellen Icaza Special to the Canton Repository

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The past year has been challenging for our community, especially those families with school-aged children.

The pandemic forced us all to change the way we live, work, and learn — and we've asked a lot of our children: To stay home, avoid friends, wear masks, wash hands, social distance, and the list goes on.

Our kids did what kids always do. They adapted, but it came at a cost: Stress, isolation, and learning loss.

Educational experts have identified this learning loss as the "COVID Slide." This phenomenon is similar to the learning loss that we often see during the summer, when students may read less and have fewer quality learning experiences. Coincidentally, we call this the "Summer Slide."

Whichever slide your child is on, the library is here to help with summer reading and learning programs, Summer FUN School, Grab-and-Go meals, virtual and in-person programs, and so much more.

Summer Challenge

This summer, it's more important than ever to engage students of all ages to help them prepare for success in school. The Tails and Tales Summer Challenge is open to all ages and reminds us that reading isn't only for learning — it's fun too.

When families sign up, they get a list of activities to keep the entire family busy all summer long.

This year, kids can earn points and win prizes by reading and completing activities like going on a scavenger hunt, researching their favorite animal, writing a book review, attending

library programs, pretending to be a veterinarian, or entering the photography contest.

The Summer Challenge runs from June 7 through Aug. 7 and is an excellent way for families to come together and make learning fun.

Canton Summer FUN School

Some kids in our community may not be able to come to the library for the Summer Challenge, so we're bringing the Library to them.

Because of support from the Sisters of Charity Foundation, our Bookmobile will visit specific locations in Canton, providing books, activities, and summer activity kits to Canton City School kids from kindergarten through third grade.

The activities are designed to build reading, math and science skills. Families can track their progress to enter a weekly drawing for a gift card for necessities such as groceries or gas.

I am so grateful to my friend Joni Close, director of Sisters of Charity, who was instrumental in bringing Summer FUN School to the Canton community.

"As a community, we are all concerned about the impact of the last year on our students," Joni told me. "We are excited to support the library to combat this learning loss and ensure the families in our community get the support they need. We want our children to keep reading and learning and to have the skills they need to succeed in school and life."

The bookmobile will visit the following locations:

Schreiber School, 1503 Woodland Ave. NW: Mondays from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

Jackson Sherrick Homes, 1315 Gonder Ave. SE: Tuesdays from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Linwood Acres: 3331 14th St. SW: Tuesdays from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

Skyline Terrace, 635 Alan Page Drive SE: Wednesdays from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

Mahoning Manor, 1800 Regent Ave. NE: Fridays 10:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Ellisdale Homes 3809 31st St. NE: Fridays from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

Summer meals

When summer starts and school ends, many children are faced with food insecurity because they can no longer access meals at school. Parents shouldn't have to worry about where their child's next meal is coming from.

In addition to offering meals from our Bookmobiles at the Canton City Summer FUN School, this summer, we are offering free Grab-and-Go meals at three of our library locations through a partnership with the Children's Hunger Alliance. Please visit our website for details.

All of the libraries in Stark County work tirelessly throughout the summer to help the children and families in our communities learn while school is out, and I am proud of the work we all do. I am grateful to our staff, community, and partners who support the Library and enable us to continue our mission in Stark County.

Mary Ellen Icaza is the CEO and executive director of the Stark Library.