The leisure reading habits of urban adolescents have not been widely studied. Research indicates a strong relationship between leisure reading and school achievement, so educators should develop an understanding of the leisure reading habits of these youth.

The literacy needs of urban adolescents are urgent (McGrath, 2005). It is not unusual for 70% of eighth graders in high-poverty, high-minority middle schools to comprehend at “below basic” levels (Balfanz, Spiridakis, & Neil, 2002). Difficulty with reading negatively impacts achievement in all areas of the curriculum. According to Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (2000), many adolescents, hit a “literacy ceiling” when they reach middle and high school. That is, they are unable to “independently access the knowledge and information embedded in the books and other printed materials that are part of a curriculum” (Schoenbach et al., 2000, p. 5). This inability interferes with their capacity to accomplish the challenging work necessary to meet high academic standards. Teachers and students alike become frustrated. Students come to think of themselves as nonreaders or poor readers. Many avoid reading, waiting for the teacher to tell them what they need to do. Others attempt to become invisible, while still others act out, creating distractions to cover up their inadequacies.

Schools have begun to tackle the problem of reading in the middle and high school years by initiating adolescent literacy initiatives. Among the common elements found in the most well-regarded programs is a focus on building the habit of leisure reading (McGrath, 2005). Both qualitative and quantitative studies demonstrate a correlation between success in school and the amount of leisure reading students do (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Krashen, 1993). The amount of leisure reading done outside of school has consistently been found to relate to achievement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and content knowledge (Krashen, 1993; Short, 1995). Students who read in their spare time become better readers, score higher on achievement tests in all subject areas, and have more content knowledge than those who do not (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Krashen, 1993). According to Krashen (1993), “although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level” (p. 84).

Leisure reading is the reading students choose to do on their own, as opposed to reading that is assigned to them (Mellon, 1990). Also referred to as voluntary reading, spare time reading, recreational reading, independent reading, reading outside of school, and self-selected reading, leisure reading involves personal choice, choosing what one wants to read, and reading widely from a variety of sources—not just books.

While numerous researchers have surveyed the leisure reading habits of adolescents (cf. Hart,
The leisure reading habits of urban adolescents

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To collect data for this study, teachers were asked by the school librarian to administer a 5-page, 20-item questionnaire focused on factors related to reading by choice: whether or not adolescents read in their leisure time; if so, what, when, and why do they read; the topics and types of characters or people they like to read about; how they obtain their reading material; who encourages them to read; and if they don’t read, why not? The questionnaire contained 16 multiple-choice questions and 4 open-ended questions: (1) What was your favorite book when you were in elementary school? (2) In middle school? (3) What is the best book you’ve read this year? (4) Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about reading? Students were also asked to indicate their gender and age. Thirty-five teachers agreed to participate.

Seven hundred and fifteen students completed the survey. Data was missing from 131 of the surveys, leaving 584 to be analyzed for the study. Forty-seven percent of the respondents were male; 53% were female. The students ranged in age from 10 to 15 with the median age being 13.

Data were analyzed to determine what percentage of respondents, both overall and by gender, claimed they did or did not read in their spare time. For nonreaders, reasons they gave for not reading were examined. For readers, factors relating to types of reading material chosen for leisure reading were analyzed: what, when, and why they read; the topics and types of characters or people they like to read about; how they obtain their reading material; and who encourages them to read.

Findings

Reading as a leisure activity

Seventy-two percent of the students indicated that they engaged in reading as a leisure activity, a finding that is consistent with other studies of adolescent reading. Twenty-two percent said they read “constantly,” and 50% indicated they “read when they get a chance.” Six percent of the ado-
Lescents indicated that they do not read; the other 22% said they read only for school.

Females were more likely to read for pleasure than males (78% versus 64%). This finding is consistent with previous studies that found that female adolescents were more likely than male adolescents to engage in leisure reading (McKenna et al., 1995; Moffitt & Wartella, 1992; Simpson, 1996). The findings differed, however, from previous studies in terms of reading preferences. In most studies, girls indicate that they prefer to read realistic fiction, mystery, and fantasy, while boys tend to prefer adventure and action-oriented texts whether choosing fiction or nonfiction (Zirinsky & Rau, 2001). In this study, both males (68%) and females (76%) showed a strong preference for magazines.

The majority (69%) of the students reported that they read more than two books per month outside of school. Sixteen percent of the students indicated that they read less than one book per month, and 15% reported that they did not read books except for school assignments. The reading incentive program, which has been in place for five years, rewards students for reading books. This may account for the large percentage of students who indicated that they read more than two books per month outside of school.

The students seemed to do most of their reading after school or at night. Only 17% of the students indicated that they read on the weekend. Reading during summer vacation was also not popular with either gender. Only 15% of the males and 20% of the girls reported that they continue to read for pleasure during the summer months. This is particularly troubling because research shows that summer reading is critical to summer learning, especially for low performing or disadvantaged students (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Kim, 2004; Schacter, 2003).

### Students' attitudes toward leisure reading

When students were asked if they enjoyed reading, 36% responded “yes,” 57% responded “sometimes,” and 7% responded “no.” Again there was some difference between the attitudes of males and females—42% of the girls responded yes as compared to 31% of the boys. When asked if they had more time would they read more, 41% of the students said “yes” and 45% responded “probably.”

As Table 1 shows, the majority of the students indicated that they read in their spare time for three main reasons: fun and relaxation, to learn new things, and because they were bored. Fun and relaxation were described in a variety of ways. According to one young woman, “reading is really exciting because you can get into the book and imagine the story’s characters.” A young man echoed her feelings: “I love making my own adventures and fantasies while I read.” Others described reading as “fascinating,” “colorful,” and “better than TV.”

The students who read to learn new things did so “to get better at it [reading],” and “to gain knowledge.” Many of the students recognized that the more they read, the better readers they become. Comments included, “Reading is good for everybody because you learn more about reading,” “You can do better at reading if you read;” “I learn new strategies;” and “Reading helps your level get improved.” The adolescents who read to gain knowledge were interested in satisfying their curiosity about special topics, improving their grades in school, or learning how to cope with obstacles in life. One student, for example, said she liked to read about “fashion tips and also hairstyles.” Another one mentioned his favorite hip-hop recording artists. Some students saw reading as a way to improve their grades in school. According to one young woman, “Books are fun to read because you can put your grades up.” Others used reading as bibliotherapy. One student explained, “I like reading books about
kids my age that have been abandoned and abused. Like I was. It helps me find new ways to deal and confront it.”

Forty-six percent of the adolescents saw reading as a way to relieve boredom. As one adolescent put it, “Reading is fun if you don’t have nothing to do.” Escapism was another component of their leisure reading. Reading “keeps you from stressing yourself out,” “takes your mind off your life problems,” and “takes me to places I never been.” One student even mentioned that “reading keeps you out of trouble.”

Those who did not enjoy reading seemed to prefer other activities rather than to reject the act of reading (see Table 2). Respondents indicated that they would rather watch television, spend time with their friends, surf the Web, or play video games. Several students mentioned “going clubbing” and “flirting with boys” as preferable to reading.

Variations on the statement “I have trouble reading” appeared on the questionnaires of 29% of the nonreaders. One student’s response was particularly poignant: “I need help reading because I am not good. Please help me.” The lack of appealing resources was another common theme.

Comments included, “Libraries should have better books;” “For me reading is fun, but I can’t always find the books I like;” and “I wish there were magazines.” Among other reasons given for not reading were, “It makes my head and eyes hurt” and “I would read more if my little brother wasn’t always bothering me.” Several of the students also indicated that they read better in Spanish, and wrote their comments in Spanish.

### Leisure reading materials

Magazines were clearly the preferred leisure reading material for both males and females (see Table 3). Top choices for males included magazines about sports, video games, and music. The females chose music magazines as their favorite, followed by fashion/beauty and video games. Comic books and the Internet were also favorites for leisure reading, with 44% of the students indicating that they liked to read comic books and 37% choosing the Internet. Books accounted for only 30% of the students’ leisure reading materials.

Celebrities, “people or characters like me,” sports figures, and musicians are among the most popular topics for the respondents’ leisure reading (see Table 4). Fifty-six percent were interested
in celebrities, especially girls. Sixty-three percent of the boys liked reading about sports figures, and 50% of the girls reported an interest in musicians. While both genders expressed an interest in reading about other adolescents ("people or characters like me" or "people or characters my age who..."), there were differences in their preferences. Tables 2 and 3 provide a more detailed analysis of their reading habits:

**Table 2**

*If you don’t read, why not? Check all that apply.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rather watch TV</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather spend time with friends</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like other activities better</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble concentrating/not good at reading</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather surf the Web</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too busy/no time</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t find a good book</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather play video games</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading makes me tired</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much school work</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls more interesting</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys more interesting</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading is boring/not fun</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t get into stories</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

*What do you like to read? Check all that apply.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion/beauty</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News, like <em>Time</em> or <em>Newsweek</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video games</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzle</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books for pleasure</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are wrestling with tough issues”), girls showed a slight preference. The least popular topic for both genders was historical figures.

Three of the open-ended questions asked students to tell us their favorite book—in elementary school, middle school, and this school year. Favorite books in elementary school included *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957); the Arthur series by Marc Brown; *Green Eggs and Ham* (Seuss, 1960); *Clifford, The Big Red Dog* (Bridwell, 2002); and the Goosebumps series by R.L. Stein. Only four multicultural titles were mentioned by the 500 students who answered this question: *A Chair for My Mother* (Williams, 1982); *Jimmy Lee Did It* (Cummings, 1985); *The Black Snowman* (Mendez, 1989); and *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999).

There was a great deal of overlap between the titles the adolescents listed as their favorite book in middle school and the best book they have read this school year. Many of the titles on both lists were from the school’s required reading list: *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), *Crash* (Spinelli, 1996), *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987), and *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbit, 1975). Again, few multicultural titles were listed. The exceptions included two 1987 titles by Mildred Taylor (*The Gold Cadillac and The Friendship*); several biographies about sports heroes, rap stars, and famous African American heroes; and six novels set in inner-city neighborhoods, including several titles referred to as “street literature”—*The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), *True to the Game* (Woods, 1994), *Flyy Girl* (Tyree, 1996), and *Drive-By* (Ewing, 1996).

### Sources

Students indicated that they get their reading material from three primary sources: the school library (71%), the public library (53%), and the classroom (53%). Forty-three percent of the students also checked bookstore. There is a bilingual Spanish-English bookstore in the neighborhood that hosts a monthly Meet the Author series, regular poetry readings, and an annual book fair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports figures</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters like me</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People my age who have done some cool or amazing things</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy characters</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters my age who are wrestling with tough issues, like drug abuse or crime</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters a lot different from me</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical figures</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

**What do you like to read about? Check all that apply.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports figures</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters like me</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People my age who have done some cool or amazing things</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy characters</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters my age who are wrestling with tough issues, like drug abuse or crime</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/characters a lot different from me</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical figures</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students may also be frequenting bookstores because the street literature titles they mention are often not available at school libraries due to age-appropriate issues.

**Specific influences**

The final factor studied was who encourages these adolescents to read. It was not surprising that parents and teachers topped the list, with 70% of the adolescents choosing parents and 63% selecting teachers. Librarians were chosen by 40% of the students—27% of the students chose school librarian and 13% chose public librarian. Fifteen percent of the teens indicated that their friends encouraged them to read.

**Implications for teachers and librarians**

The March 2005 issue of *Educational Leadership* challenges educators to look to urban schools for solutions to school problems (Scherer, 2005). The adolescents who completed our survey are clearly able to aid educators in this endeavor and provided several recommendations we need to consider as we strive to support their literacy development.

**Provide the types of materials students prefer.**

Theses materials include magazines, comic books, and the Internet. Teachers should recognize this type of reading as legitimate. Adults often send the message that the only reading that is reading is books (Beers, 1996; Mellon, 1990). If we want urban students to engage in leisure reading, perhaps the first thing we need to do is expand our definition of reading.

Magazines are without question the favorite leisure reading material of these students. Adolescents are drawn to magazines for a number of reasons, including the number and quality of pictures, the speed with which information can be gathered from magazines, the “coolness” factor, and the reading level (Jones, Gorman, & Suellentrop, 2004). Our research suggests that teachers and librarians promote magazine reading by providing and circulating magazines in both library and classroom collections. The best way to select magazines is to involve students. Survey students, but also browse grocery stores and local bookstores to observe the magazines adolescents are buying. *Black Beat, Jet, Latina, Low Rider, Sister to Sister, Slam, Source, Teen en Español, Urban Latino, Word Up, WWE,* and *XXL* are among the magazines popular with urban adolescents. Many of these magazines are also available online, thus increasing accessibility, interactivity, and reader participation.

Comic books were also listed as a favorite reading material. Many teachers and librarians have successfully used comic books to engage reluctant readers (cf. Norton, 2003; Versaci, 2001). Marvel and CrossGen currently have comics available on DVD. The DVDs include original comic-book art, enlarged word balloons, voice-overs reading the text, and music. This format not only appeals to visual learners but also makes it easier to circulate comics.

Two other popular formats related to comic books are the graphic novel and manga. Both are good for youth who read English as a second language or on a lower reading level, because the simple sentences and visual cues allow the reader to comprehend the story (Jones et al., 2004). Graphic novels are book-length stories published in comic-book style. In addition to outstanding artwork, many feature complex characters, well-developed story lines, and literary devices like foreshadowing and allusion. Manga is “typified by characters with large eyes, most often published in black and white, and increasingly printed in the Japanese fashion—reading right to left” (Jones et al., 2004, p. 131). Selecting graphic novels and manga has become easier now that *Voice of Youth Advocates, School Library Journal,* and *Booklist* regularly feature reviews.

It was not surprising that another popular medium listed by these students was the Internet. The Pew Internet & Life Project found that 87% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 are online.
The widespread use of the Internet by adolescents means our definition of reading has to expand to include websites, e-books, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, and listservs (Schmar-Dobler, 2003). One way to legitimize and promote Internet reading is to develop websites for students. Websites can be used to connect urban adolescents and recommended websites about their favorite topics, but they can also be used to extend the reading community. The Internet has made it possible for students to interact with readers from around the world, communicate with authors, and explore the “text-worlds” of their favorite books (Mackey, 2001). Many school and public libraries have established book discussion blogs aimed at adolescents. The Parent Child Book Club Blog provides a forum for adolescents to discuss young adult literature with their parents (parentchild.blogspot.com).

Respect students’ culture and heritage. Teachers can do this by providing multicultural resources that are relevant to students’ lives, as well as resources in their first language. The number of multicultural titles published each year, while still inadequate, has increased steadily over the last decade, and there are a number of authors, including Walter Dean Myers, Jacqueline Woodson, Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, Rita Williams-Garcia, Jess Mowry, and Sharon Flake, who are specifically writing young adult novels set in urban communities. Novels such as these offer confirmation and validation of the lives of urban youth, as well as legitimation of their inner-city cultures. The best of these books also counteract stereotypes of urban adolescents by creating characters that, in the details of their lives, challenge social expectations borne of stereotype. They do this by featuring adolescents, both male and female, who, for example, are successful in school and plan to attend college, understand and choose to avoid the dangers of drug use, and leave gang life behind (Hughes-Hassell & Guild, 2002; Tatum, 2005; Younker & Webb, 2005) provides a list of young adult titles set in urban communities.

Many of the students in this study indicated that they read best in Spanish. If our goal is to foster their love of reading then we need to provide materials in their first language. Given their preference for magazines, educators who work with urban youth might consider buying magazines and newspapers in Spanish. This has the potential to accomplish two goals: it can get students to read and can engage them in conversations about reading with their parents, many of whom only speak Spanish.

Talk to students. Find out what they are passionate about. As we invite urban adolescents to read, we must remain open to their reading interests by providing and promoting the reading materials about topics that are of interest to them. As Allington (1994) pointed out, personal interest “remains the most potent factor in the development of reading processes” (p. 21).

Reading about celebrities, sports figures, and musicians is popular with these students. In addition to magazines and the Internet, nonfiction books can also provide students with avenues for exploring pop culture. For many adolescents, nonfiction serves the same purposes as fiction does for other readers: “it entices, provides escape, sparks the imagination, and indulges curiosity” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 44). Nonfiction books published today contain quality pictures, lots of captions, and sidebars—features that make them especially appealing to students who have short attention spans, prefer visual mediums, or are reluctant readers. While many professional journals contain reviews of nonfiction, the real “pop” stuff often does not get reviewed. The best way to locate it is to visit a bookstore or, better yet, have students select titles from an online bookstore (Jones et al., 2004).

Graphic nonfiction is also popular with adolescents. Similar in format to graphic novels, graphic nonfiction covers a range of subjects, as demonstrated by the following titles: Still I Rise: A
Cartoon History of African Americans (Laird & Laird, 1997) and Dignifying Science: Stories About Women Scientists (Ottaviani, 2000). Again, visual cues make graphic nonfiction especially appealing to reluctant readers and English-language learners (Jones et al., 2004).

Give students time during the school day to read. This is particularly important for economically disadvantaged urban students who often have to work to improve financial conditions at home and may not have a place or the resources to read texts of their choice outside of school (Fisher, 2004). Sustained silent reading programs have been found effective with at-risk students if they are thoughtfully designed and consistently implemented over a sustained period of time (Fisher, 2004; Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Key factors include professional development for teachers, access to a wide variety of appealing reading materials, follow-up activities that encourage further voluntary reading, modeling by teachers and administrators, informal accountability, and time to read (Fisher, 2004; Pilgreen, 2000).

Provide adequate funds for school and classroom libraries in low-income urban communities. For these students, and many others in low-income areas, school is the primary source for students’ reading materials (Worthy et al., 1998); yet urban school districts are less likely to adequately fund school libraries than their suburban counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Classroom libraries in low-income communities tend to be smaller (Hunter, 2004). Schools need to recognize that investments in school libraries reach all students in the school and that the payoff is improved student achievement (Loertscher, 2005).

Encourage summer reading. Whether measured by the number of books read, the time spent reading, or regularity of library usage, summer reading is critical to summer learning (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Heyns, 1978; Kim, 2004). Only 17% of the students in this study reported that they continue to read in the summer. Perhaps the first step is to increase access to books and other reading materials in the summer for urban youth. Access to books has been found to be positively associated with the amount of independent reading students do in the summer (Kim, 2004), yet there is large disparity between access based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Ferguson, 2002). To address this disparity, school districts might consider keeping school libraries open in the summer (parents could be trained to oversee the libraries), asking private foundations for funding to purchase literacy materials for low-income youth, and developing packets of materials that students can borrow for the summer.

Book clubs focused on the reading interests of urban teenagers also have potential for promoting summer reading. A Teen Street Lit Book Club, formed at one of the branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia, was originally scheduled to run for four weeks. The members enjoyed the book club so much that they kept coming back for a total of 16 weeks—four times the length of time originally promoted. When asked, “Why do you still want to have the book club?” one teen explained that the book club was fun and “kept them off the streets with something positive to do” (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, in press). Many of the book club members had read virtually every title in the street lit genre prior to joining the club, and they already knew of forthcoming titles.

Another program that has proven extremely popular with urban adolescents is the Free Library of Philadelphia’s Teen Author Series (McCaffrey, 2005). This program connects adolescents with a “who’s who” list of American writers, including minority authors like Ilyasah Shabazz and Julia Alvarez. The adolescents receive free copies of the authors’ books and get to interact with the authors as they speak about their books, their lives, and the process of writing.

Partner with parents to promote and encourage leisure reading. Numerous studies show that parents play a significant role in developing and sus-
taining the leisure reading habits of children and adolescents (Kim, 2004; Strommen & Mates, 2004). Chandler (1999) found that this is particularly true for students from working-class backgrounds who often experience confusion because of the disjunction between literary experiences at home and school. She suggested the following strategies that enlist parents as “literacy-teaching partners”: surveying parents to gather data that will help teachers select texts that match the interests/cultures of the students, designing instructional activities in which parents can participate, and inviting parents to join literature discussion groups with their children (Chandler, 1999, p. 236).

**Be passionate about your love of reading.** In order to sustain and encourage the reading habits of adolescent readers—even the most avid readers—educators must extend the reading community. As Zirinsky and Rau (2001) pointed out, “many readers fall away from reading without the support of a mentor or a community of readers” (p. 19). Display the books you are currently reading. Join students in their reading conversations by letting them know what you read when you are on vacation, riding the train to work, or preparing for bed. Be a reader yourself.

**Implications for researchers**

This article has provided a preliminary understanding of the leisure reading habits of urban adolescents and offered suggestions to practitioners based on what the students we surveyed told us. However, it also raises an important question: Why do these adolescents’ reading scores remain low when they reported that they engage in leisure reading?

The simplest explanation may be that the adolescents are not reading as much in their leisure time as they report. Another possible explanation might involve the type of leisure reading they are doing. While there is evidence that light reading provides motivation for more reading (Krashen, 1993; Ross, 1995), perhaps the reading of magazines (by far their preferred material) does not correlate positively with higher levels of literacy. Several researchers have found that light reading does not automatically result in an ability to read advanced material (Hafner, Palmer, & Tullos, 1986). Thorndike (1973) found that, for middle school students, the types of reading that correlated best with improved reading comprehension were (a) humor; (b) history and biography; (c) science fiction, myths, and legends; and (d) adventure and current events.

Yet another explanation might focus on how educators are using, or not using, these students’ preferred reading materials in the classroom. When educators use magazines, comic books, graphic novels, nonfiction, and the Internet as instructional materials, does it affect the reading levels of students? And finally, perhaps the assessment instruments we use do not provide a way for students, such as these, who primarily read magazines and comic books, to demonstrate their strengths as readers. How can we expand our assessment strategies to allow us to understand the strengths developed by these materials and use the results to develop instructional strategies that help them become better readers?

**REFERENCES**


**LITERATURE CITED**


