CHILDREN IN UNDERSERVED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN SAVE THE CHILDREN PROGRAMS ACHIEVED GREATER LITERACY GAINS THAN THEIR NATIONAL PEERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

US Programs Research Summary

When COVID 19 quarantines shuttered schools in the spring of 2020, education experts worried about the impact missing school would have on children’s academic trajectories.¹ The concern was even deeper for children living in isolated, high-poverty rural communities.² While virtual classes on Zoom ended up being learning lifelines for many children in metropolitan areas, rural communities often lacked the broadband access necessary to support online learning. Save the Children stepped in to fill the gap in many communities where this was the case, helping over 150 schools in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Central Valley and other high poverty regions by distributing learning materials to families and providing at-home summer camps with activity calendars and learning materials and conducting weekly phone check-ins to support progress.

Were Save the Children’s efforts—working in tandem with the rural school districts and families—enough to keep rural children from falling behind their peers during the pandemic? Policy Studies Associates (PSA), an independent education evaluation consultancy, analyzed literacy scores made available by Renaissance Learning, to compare the one-year change in test scores of 5,101 children in Save the Children’s in-school and after-school literacy programs³ with the one-year change among over 5 million other children nationwide who completed Renaissance Learning literacy tests⁴.

PSA found that between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020, Save the Children elementary school program participants in kindergarten through fourth grade:

• Made greater gains in their literacy scores than their grade-level peers nationally, even though most Save the Children programs are located in high poverty and/or rural communities;
• Made greater gains in their literacy scores than is typical or expected even during a normal, non-pandemic year, equivalent to between 1 and 2 months of additional literacy instruction;

Consistent with the broader findings, African-American students in Save the Children programs achieved greater literacy score gains than did African-American students nationwide.

Save the Children is encouraged by these early results. Policy Studies Associates will be conducting an additional analysis of Save the Children program participants’ spring 2021 literacy test scores in order to assess the impact of 2020-2021 school year programming. We expect these results to be available in early Fall 2021.

³ Policy Studies Associates included in their analysis of Save the Children program participants students who attended 30 or more days of in-school or after-school programming during the 2019-2020 school year and controlled for student and community characteristics such as race and ethnicity, poverty, and internet access.