



Our Mission

Books for Keeps works to improve children’s reading achievement by addressing barriers related to the accessibility and appeal of reading material. We give books to children whose reading opportunities outside of school might be otherwise limited due to income, geography, or other factors.

Our Vision

We envision a world where all children have equal and consistent access to books, love to read, and develop and maintain reading skills for life.

What We Believe

We believe books are a gateway to understanding the universe and the boundless possibilities contained within it for every person, regardless of their life circumstances. By bringing the world to a child’s doorstep, reading pulls a child into the world as a critical thinker, an empathic individual, and an engaged citizen. **We believe providing children with open, equal access to books allows them to connect the joy of reading with the thrill of discovery, laying the foundation for a successful, fulfilling life.**

Our Story

It started almost by accident.

Books for Keeps began as one woman’s effort to help a second-grader who loved to read but didn’t own a single book. In the process of inquiring about how to help, Books for Keeps Founder Melaney Smith learned of a well-documented achievement gap between children from low-income families and their middle-income peers. Much of this gap, known by researchers and educators as “summer slide,” is due simply to limited access to reading material.

Melaney began a grassroots effort to provide books to second-graders at Alps Road Elementary School in Athens, Georgia, providing books to 80 children in 2009. Word of her effort spread via social media, and books began arriving at her home from all over the country. In 2010, Melaney distributed 2,400 books to students in every grade at Alps. Shortly after that, she learned about research that underlined the importance of giving books to low-income students.

It continued with a purpose.

A three-year University of Florida study identified a simple solution to summer slide: give them books. 12 books each, to be precise, at the end of the school year. This simple solution side-steps accessibility issues such as income, proximity to a library, and parental involvement or abilities. After three years, elementary school children receiving books showed reading achievement gains that were statistically similar to attending summer school.

Melaney engaged one of the co-authors of the study to review the key aspects of the model and develop a formal program for distributing books. Books for Keeps incorporated, obtained IRS 501(c)3 charity status, and in May of 2011, the *Stop Summer Slide!* program launched, distributing 12,000 books to 1,000 students attending three Athens elementary schools, using methods developed from the study.

It grows with intention.

Books for Keeps doubled its reach from 2011 to 2013, serving 2,000 Athens children annually, using 100% volunteer resources. The board of directors hired Executive Director Leslie Hale in June 2013, with a goal of again doubling the number of children served, and experimenting with expansion beyond Athens. Since then, the *Stop Summer Slide!* program has expanded to serve 7,900 children attending 18 schools in Athens, Atlanta, Elberton, and Warrenton, Georgia – 95,000 books per year. Since its informal founding in 2009 until the end of calendar 2018, Books for Keeps has distributed more than 450,000 books to children in need in Northeast Georgia.

Our Program

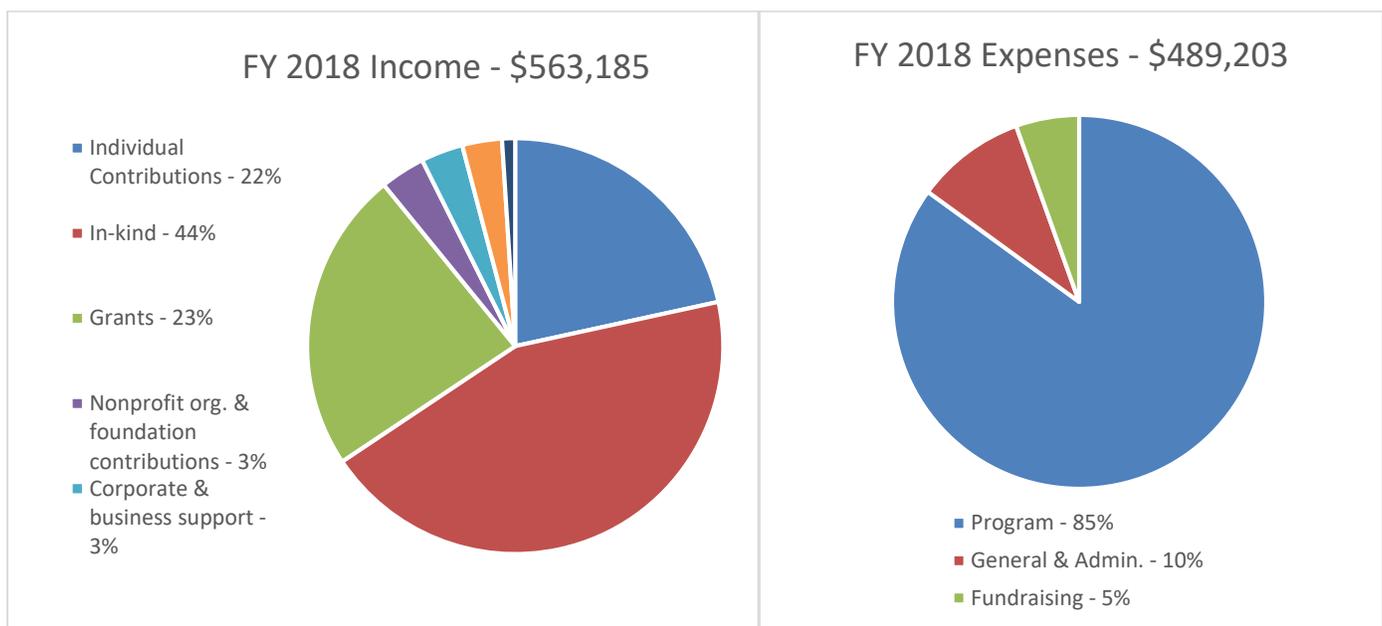
The *Stop Summer Slide!* Program is an elementary school-level summer reading program based on the three-year study described above. It follows the methodology used in the study, and is designed to prevent summer slide and positively impact reading achievement in elementary school students.

Books for Keeps purchases current, popular books at significant discounts from publishers and other sources. These books are supplemented with like-new, donated books obtained from book drives. Volunteers inspect, sort, and box the books. Each May, the books are set up in each school's media center. In Spring 2016, Books for Keeps piloted a partnership with Scholastic Book Fairs that is now replicated in its rural and Atlanta schools. Those students choose from a curated selection of books that are packed and delivered by Scholastic, with specific input and oversight by Books for Keeps. Regardless of the book provision model used at a school, all students come in one class at a time, and are given 20-30 minutes to select 12 books each.

Volunteers take notes on the children's selections, and conduct exit surveys as the students prepare to leave with their books. Two simple questions: "Was there anything you wanted that we didn't have?" and "What book are you most excited about?" have become powerful tools in determining the organization's purchasing priorities for the next year.

By targeting schools where high percentages of students qualify for free/reduced lunch, and distributing books at in-school events, Books for Keeps has the highest probability of reaching students most in need. By providing high-interest, current books based on student feedback, Books for Keeps increases the likelihood that children will actually read the books, stopping summer slide in its tracks.

Last year snapshot



Planning process

In January 2015, the Books for Keeps Board of Directors identified an ad-hoc Strategic Planning Committee consisting of the executive director, the founder, and three other board members. The committee asked the executive director to complete a PEST (political-economic-social-technical) analysis and present it to the board at the March 2015 meeting. Following that meeting, each board member was tasked with completing their own SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis and to submit their analyses ahead of the April 2015 board meeting. The executive director compiled all individual SWOT analyses into a single document, and at the April meeting, board members assigned their own weighted votes to the items in each category. Collectively, the board identified the following:

- Strengths – Compelling story & vision; strong relationships with schools served; high quality/availability of books
- Weaknesses – Lack of strategic plan; limited staff capacity; need for a signature fundraising event
- Opportunities – Reliable, repeat fundraising; Grant writing/prospecting; Engagement of UGA students, organizations
- Threats – Availability of low-cost books; inadequate warehouse; competition within saturated nonprofit “market”

Once the SWOT votes were compiled, the Strategic Planning Committee met in May to discuss themes and identify strategic directions. The full board of directors reviewed the core strategies drafted by the committee and unanimously voted to approve them in June. Following that vote, Founder Melaney Smith wrote a rough draft of the plan, which was edited and refined by Executive Director Leslie Hale following an August 2015 meeting of the committee.

The Strategic Planning Committee has re-convened twice: in early 2018 and 2019. The reconvened committee is comprised of the executive director and three board members, including one board member on the original committee that wrote the plan. Their directive: to revisit the goals and strategies identified in the original plan, in light of the successes and challenges encountered by the organization within the first two years of the plan period. In 2018, revisions were made to the strategies around geographically specific expansion goals, in order to provide the organization with more flexibility to find the right fit between available resources and target service populations. In 2019, the committee added one year to the strategic plan’s timeline, in order to update the organization’s intentions to add the final two Athens schools, but with an additional year of implementation time.

Three-Year Goal and Core Strategies

Our Goal

Expand our program reach in Georgia so no child loses educational ground during summer due to simple lack of access to books. One school at a time, one child at a time, and one book at a time – Books for Keeps will grow into a statewide organization, ensuring that every child served has the tools necessary to retain literacy skills gained during the school year. This, in turn, supports broader educational efforts to get every child reading on grade level before middle school.

Core Strategies

I. Expand the program to all Clarke County School District elementary schools.

Books for Keeps is well known in the Athens community and has the contacts we need to effectively serve this metropolitan city. As a partner in Books for Keeps’ efforts, the Clarke County School District (CCSD) is sharing anonymous student data with Books for Keeps to aid program evaluation. By expanding our reach to cover all 14 CCSD elementary schools, we gain the ability to evaluate the results of a program that covers an entire community.

II. Expand to additional schools outside Athens as resources, need, and mission align.

Books for Keeps will continue to add schools in rural Georgia communities and in Atlanta as the available resources – both financial and in human capital – align with student need and the organization’s mission. As opportunities to add new schools and new communities converge with available resources, the organization will build partnerships to reach additional children in need through their elementary schools. Likewise, the board will formalize the school selection/addition process, including the establishment of need-based service criteria, monetary support requirements from partners, geographic target areas, and timelines for the addition of schools (with the goal of spring book distributions) in order to provide clear guidelines to potential partner schools and communities.

III. Explore collaborative and innovative models for service provision

Books for Keeps staff and board will explore and consider different models under which the organization could serve students, especially in schools outside of Northeast Georgia – including possible franchise or affiliate programs that could allow the *Stop Summer Slide!* program to reach children in cities where BFK staff cannot easily travel to and from in a single day.

IV. Expand fundraising efforts to provide a broad, diversified, sustainable support base.

1. Develop a five-year fundraising plan that takes expansion from launch through to sustainable, ongoing funding.

Multi-year program expansion may be an attractive funding opportunity for foundations and other grant-making organizations. Books for Keeps will capitalize on this, but will also plan for the expected change in funding sources as expansion ends, and the program enters a sustaining mode.

2. Develop a diverse arsenal of fundraising efforts, events, and fee-for-service income that reach untapped sources of support, and diversify the Books for Keeps core support base.

Most of Books for Keeps’ current fundraising efforts are Athens-centric and heavily focused towards individuals or foundations that care about literacy, education, or simply love to read. Books for Keeps will strategically consider and test new event types, campaigns, and sources of funding (such as governmental) to diversify and reach people who might not respond to our historical tactics.

3. Use the Books for Keeps story to generate interest and awareness, and cultivate ambassadors outside of Athens.

This compelling, empowering Books for Keeps story resonates with people and presents opportunities to broaden our support base through PR, speaking engagements, etc. In Athens, this has led to Books for Keeps “ambassadors” who raise awareness and funding, provide key introductions, and open doors for Books for Keeps.

4. Develop fundraising tools and training for the board and staff.

Books for Keeps will complete a financial audit in order to meet the requirements for a larger number of funding sources. In addition, the organization will engage in data analysis to help tell the Books for Keeps story to foundations that expect ongoing evaluation. These and other tools, such as literacy/program facts and figures, along with training, will bolster the effectiveness of Books for Keeps’ fundraising efforts.

V. Build the organizational infrastructure to grow Books for Keeps into a statewide organization.

1. Secure adequate, dedicated warehouse space that allows BFK to operate efficiently. [Accomplished August 2016]

Books for Keeps’ [pre-August 2016] warehouse space worked against the organization, causing inefficiencies in volunteer utilization and leading to opportunity costs as space would not permit all desired activities and events. In an adequate warehouse facility, Books for Keeps has been able to accomplish more from each volunteer hour. If economically feasible in the future, a warehouse with room for staff offices would further improve efficiencies, eliminating the need for staff to drive back and forth.

2. Grow the Books for Keeps board to bridge communities and professions.

As Books for Keeps expands into new areas, the organization will seek board members who represent the communities served. At the same time, the board will work to identify members with professional backgrounds needed to provide a well-rounded perspective to the organization, as well as members with the professional and social ties to make introductions to prospective donors and foundations.

3. Expand staff and volunteer capacity to manage increased program commitments.

As Books for Keeps expands programming, the organization will likewise grow its staff and arsenal of volunteers to handle the increased volume of students served. The organization will seek help from full-time employees, contract professional workers, and unpaid student interns to manage the programmatic and operational aspects of Books for Keeps. Meanwhile, staff will grow relationships with existing volunteers, establish new ties with volunteer groups, and further build out a structured volunteer program that ensures accountability and efficiency.