



### **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 (BFK) 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.

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. Books for Keeps continues to leverage and engage one of the co-authors of the study to identify opportunities and ways to evaluate the main program, *Stop Summer Slide*.

### It grows with intention.

Since its founding as a grassroots program, Books for Keeps has grown to add three employees, engage more than 1,000 volunteers annually, and to serve 20 elementary schools in four counties. Books for Keeps added the final two schools (out of 14) in the Clarke County School District in the 2019/2020 school year, fulfilling a commitment made in the previous strategic plan, which covered the years 2015 through 2019. As of spring 2020, Books for Keeps is serving 9,000 students in Athens, Atlanta, Elberton, and Warrenton, Georgia, giving away 108,000 books annually. Since its informal founding in 2009, Books for Keeps has given away 550,000 books – and growing. The organization has, additionally, been able to replicate growth in students’ reading scores as a result of choosing books through *Stop Summer Slide*.

### Our Program

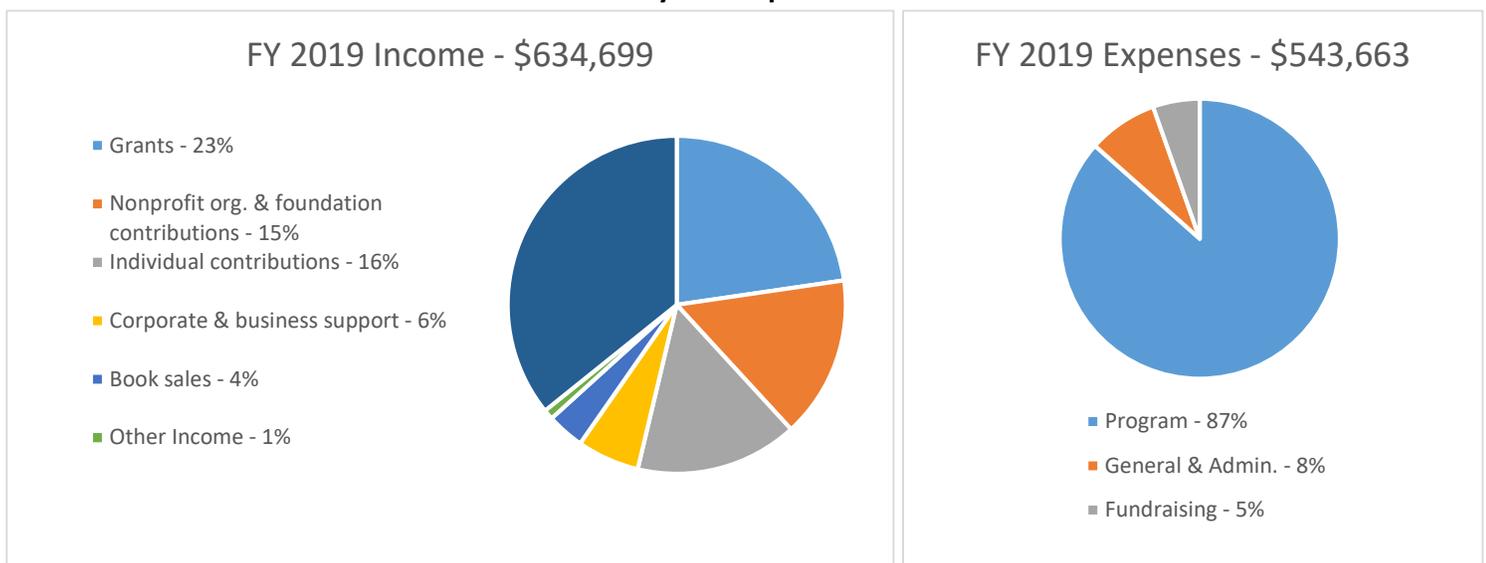
Our core program, *Stop Summer Slide*, is an elementary school-level summer reading program based on the three-year study described above. It follows the methodology used in the study, and is designed to prevent summer slide and positively impact reading achievement in elementary school students.

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 spring, 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. In every 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, we increase the likelihood that children will actually read the books, stopping summer slide in its tracks. In recent years, BFK staff and volunteers have also engaged with students during other times – summer, after-school, and extended learning time – to emphasize the joyful pursuit of reading.

### Last year snapshot



## Planning process

In January 2019, the Books for Keeps Board of Directors identified an ad-hoc Strategic Planning Committee with two tasks: to update the previous strategic plan to ensure its ongoing relevance and to engage in a new strategic planning effort. The committee was comprised of three board members, plus the three full-time staff members of Books for Keeps. As an opening task, Executive Director Leslie Hale completed a PEST (Political, Economic, Social, Technical) analysis and presented it to the board in February 2019. Subsequently, board and staff members were asked to complete their own SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analyses. The aggregate results of that SWOT analysis, including staff input and comments, were presented to the board in March 2019. Together through this process, the board and staff identified the following:

- **Strengths** – Talented, dedicated staff; Committed board; Strong reputation, message, and social media presence; Great use of volunteers; Strong relationships with publishers and book wholesalers
- **Weaknesses** – Lack of consistent, renewing funding stream; Staff & board spread thin; Limited resources; Low parent/family awareness of program; Limited timeline for book give-aways
- **Opportunities** – Telling the BFK story to new groups & in new ways; Strengthening branding & marketing; More grants & long-term grants; Expanded relationships with UGA groups; Growth of publisher relationships
- **Threats** – Large number of Athens-area nonprofits; Possible economic downturn/market correction; Non-recurring funding; Tenuous nature of donated office space; Shifting partnership parameters with key partners

The Strategic Planning Committee reviewed the results together in March 2019, and identified the core strategic goals for the organization to engage in during the coming years. These core goals were presented to the Books for Keeps board of directors during the April 2019 board meeting, and the board affirmed the direction of the new planning process. Following that, Executive Director Leslie Hale drafted the initial plan to receive input from the committee in June 2019 and made an initial presentation to the full board in July 2019. At the August 2019 board meeting, with 11 out of 13 voting members present, the board voted unanimously to approve the draft strategic plan and adopt it to guide the organization's work from 2020 through 2023.

In the middle of this planning process, the Athens Wellbeing Project began sharing the results of a community-wide survey conducted in 2018 and 2019 that asked residents critical questions relating to parental involvement in and aspirations toward their children's education. Two findings of note have been incorporated into how this strategic plan intends to address community needs:

- Parents without a post-secondary degree are five times more likely to say they lack confidence in their ability to help their child with schoolwork at home
- Individual parents' aspirations for their own children's educational attainment is directly tied to their own level of education

Meanwhile, literacy rates among children in the Clarke County School District remain stubbornly low, hovering around 30 percent proficiency by the end of third grade – an important measure that correlates to eighth grade math scores and prospects for graduating from high school. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, children who are not reading on grade level by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school, reducing their lifelong prospects for employment and earning potential.

## Three-Year Goal and Core Strategies

### Our Goal

Books for Keeps has spent the past decade making **equal access to books** among elementary school students in four communities its core goal. In the coming years, the organization will maintain this focus and, in fact, **go deeper within service communities** to bridge another critical need in our vision and “We Believe” statements: **growing the opportunities and environments for the children we serve to fall in love with reading as a joyful pursuit, which in turn helps students develop reading skills for life.**

### Core Strategies

- I. **GO DEEPER: Engage families, caregivers, and children in the communities we serve – throughout the year**

Books for Keeps is well-known and respected in many pockets of the communities we serve – but we are perhaps least well known among the families we serve. The opportunities for better awareness – not just of the Books for Keeps mission and needs, but also of the benefits of reading in the home, how to nurture love of reading among children of all ability levels, and how to infuse more caregiver confidence and capacity into this practice – are endless.

  1. Education and pace-setting: Books for Keeps will develop caregiver training and engagement to address the criticality of reading together at all ages and stages, the importance of a child’s choice in identifying what to read, and the need for high-success-rate reading: reading books that are “below” a child’s reading level in order to build confidence and mastery.
  2. Family capacity-building: Program staff will build out tools, tips, encouragement, advice on how to make reading fun and part of a routine. Books for Keeps will take existing tip sheets and grow the formats (including non-English language versions), as well as leverage existing resources and grow opportunities for sharing these tools with families.
  3. Fundraising: We will focus on engaging with those families that can support the program – and also benefit from Books for Keeps – to create buy-in from school communities, to nurture school-based ambassadors for BFK, and increase sustained support.
  4. Evaluation and data gathering: Books for Keeps will focus on collecting more information about reading proficiency, student engagement with books (from Books for Keeps as well as other sources), reading motivation, parent involvement in reading, and awareness of Books for Keeps. This data collection will be used to strengthen and improve the program, as well as identify further barriers to full enjoyment of books. The data gathered in the coming years will establish a baseline against which the future success of the program is measured.
  5. Other age groups: We will explore ways of reaching, engaging, and partnering with students who have aged out of Stop Summer Slide – including through the possible provision of books, program delivery, engagement with elementary-aged counterparts, and advisement on *Stop Summer Slide*.
- II. **PARTNER: Grow & leverage robust, structured partnerships with peer agencies to innovate service delivery**
  1. Meeting families where they are: We will reach caregivers and kids through the agencies that are already doing it best and serving families right where they live, work, play, and study.
  2. Work with our peers: As a matter of strengthening our mission and product, and as a matter of our commitment to the wise use of resources, we will leverage existing programs and work to find ways to complement and partner with the work of others.

3. Explore: Research and develop innovative models to grow *Stop Summer Slide* into neighboring communities by leveraging partnerships with peer organizations, while being conservative with existing staff time and organizational resources.
4. Book provision to other groups: Develop processes and eligibility requirements for fellow community groups to secure books needed in outside programs – including free and purchased books.
5. School district partnerships: Focus on growing and nurturing partnerships with school districts, by aligning work to their needs and strategic goals, and providing resources and expertise where appropriate.

**III. SUSTAIN: Expand fundraising efforts to provide a broad, diversified, sustainable support base**

1. Develop a long-term fundraising plan: Build out metrics, targets, and expectations for board members and staff to secure the resources needed to nurture the program long-term.
2. Grow donor programs: Books for Keeps will place special focus on growing incentives, interactions, and recognition among monthly, loyal, and active donors.
3. Leverage the story: We will use the BFK story to generate interest, awareness, and ambassadors for the organization – particularly through volunteer opportunities in the warehouse, in schools, and at the book sale.
4. Multi-year grants: We will grow multi-year grants for sustainable funding base and reliable program provision.
5. Add capacity: Develop fundraising tools and training for board and staff that will leverage strengths, relationships, and passion of our terrific, engaged team.