

Starting the Student in the Reading for All Learners Program

The research reports that approximately 20% of students will experience difficulty learning to read. To ensure that these students do not fail, the *Reading for All Learners Program* (RALP) is built around a well-tested sequence of 150 "little books" that takes a non-reader to reading independence at the 3.5 grade level. The books combine decodable text with instruction to ensure that the student can read the text with at least 90% success before moving to the next "little book." The decodable text in the little books provides immediate application of the phonemes, word attack, and comprehension skills taught at the beginning of each book.

The researchers supporting the use of decodable text as a central and critical component of the most effective reading programs consistently stress the importance of the 90% success level for **ALL** learners. Because all learners are experiencing the 90% success level--or higher--the difference between high achievers and low achievers in a classroom lies with their individual position in the curriculum continuum. All students should be spending the maximum time possible in reading instruction that (a) provides at least 90% success, and (b) ensures students are spending the time learning important new content and consolidating, applying, and reviewing important content previously introduced.

Time spent in high success settings, while learning important new content, is described by researchers as academic learning time (ALT). The presence of large amounts of academic learning time is an important indicator of the most effective teachers and instructional programs.

To consistently ensure that all students experience the maximum amount of academic learning time possible, the teacher must use curriculum sequences that are carefully crafted to move the student in small, successful steps through the most important content. Such successful movement through the curriculum requires that (a) the student be placed appropriately in the curriculum sequence, (b) the student's progress be carefully monitored, and (c) instructional adjustments be made immediately to ensure the maximum amount of academic learning time for all students. The following procedures are suggested for placing students in the *Reading for All Learners Program*.

Decide on a Placement Strategy

Placement Tools. There are six sets in the *Reading for All Learners Program* sequence of 150 "little books." Most students will begin instruction in the first four sets, which take students to the 2.0 grade level. The program contains several monitoring and placement tools. Most of these tools can be used for both monitoring and placement purposes.

Placement in the program can be done quickly through a series of placement tests. There is a placement test for each set. The placement tests can be used to place students at the beginning of the set most appropriate for their needs. Students start taking placement tests until their success level drops below 90%. If, for example, the student has 95% success on the Set 1 placement test, and 74% on the Set 2 placement test, then instruction would begin with the first book in Set 2.

The following testing guidelines apply to all the testing and monitoring tools in the first four sets. Placement tests for Sets 5 through 9 add a ~~fluency criteria~~, (hot link) requiring students to achieve at least 90% within a specified time limit.

Guidelines for Testing the Student

Both the student and the tester should start with a copy of the test. Seat the student at a table, with the placement test directly in front of the student. The table should be in an area free from distractions and noise. The tester should place the tester's test sheet where it can be easily marked during the test, but where the student cannot see it or be distracted by it.

Tell the student: "I want you to read this passage. Start reading here." Point to the first word. "Start reading when you are ready."

Student Mistakes. A student may work on a word as long as necessary. However, if the student requests help or looks at you for assistance, say: "If you don't know the word, just go on." ~~**Do not correct student mistakes.**~~

A word is read correctly if the following apply:

1. Pronunciation of the word is correct.
2. Student self-corrects an error.
3. Student correctly or incorrectly reads the word the slow way, but correctly pronounces the word the fast way.

A word is read incorrectly if the following apply:

1. Pronunciation of the word is incorrect.
2. Student correctly or incorrectly reads the word the slow way, but incorrectly pronounces the way the fast way.
3. Student skips a word.

The tester circles all mistakes on the tester's copy. Count the allowable mistakes and decide if the 90% success level was met or exceeded. Always conclude the testing with a positive comment, regardless of the score.

One of the most important tools for monitoring and placement purposes is the series of curriculum-embedded tests entitled, 'Looking Back' progress checks. These tests typically occur at the end of every fifth or sixth book. In Set 1, the 'Looking Back' progress checks are at the end of books 6, 11, 16, 21, and 26.

Each 'Looking Back' progress check reviews the content of the previous five or six books. For monitoring and reteaching purposes, the student who exceeds the allowable mistakes on a 'Looking Back' progress check returns to the book immediately after the earlier 'Looking Back'. For example, the student who does not meet the criteria for the 'Looking Back' check at the end of Book 16 in Set 1, would return to Book 12. These 'Looking Back' progress checks can be used for placement purposes, using a fast-track placement procedure. In a fast-track placement procedure, the students take a 'Looking Back' check well below rough estimates of their placement in the series of little books. If the student performs comfortably above the 90% success requirements, the practice requirements are reduced to a fast review of the phonemes and words in the first part of each book and only one reading of the story content. Students continue these reduced instructional procedures and take the 'Looking Back' checks until they make more than the allowable mistakes. Teaching is begun in the first book of the block of books reviewed by that 'Looking Back' progress check.

Placement strategies. Typically, most students will require one of the following three placement strategies:

- " **Strategy 1:** This strategy will be used for young, non-readers. Most students in preschool or kindergarten, with no history of reading instruction, will benefit from *Strategy 1*.
- " **Strategy 2:** This strategy will be used for young students with some reading instruction experience. Most of these students will be in Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2.
- " **Strategy 3:** This strategy will be used for the older reader who experienced difficulty in past reading instruction. Most of these students will be in Grades 2, 3, and 4. These students and their parents are usually aware that the student has not done as well as their peers in past reading instruction.
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1.0 Strategy 1: Placing Young Non-readers. The Strategy 1 placement procedures emphasize the importance of prerequisite skills and experience necessary for a successful start in the program.

1.1 Is the Student Ready for Formal Instruction? Before any formal instruction in any academic area, the student must acquire the social participatory skills. For example, if the student has not adjusted to being separated from the home setting, it is unwise to introduce beginning reading instruction. Most students who have attended preschool will have the needed participatory skills early in the kindergarten year.

1.1.1 Teach Needed Instructional Participation Skills. For the students who do not have the needed participatory skills, the teacher should provide the setting in which these skills can be acquired. One of the best settings for teaching these skills is the small-group setting in which simple discriminations such as colors, shapes, symbols, and interesting figures-- such as animals-- can be taught and named. In these settings the student learns to take turns, to respond in unison, to focus on the object, and to respond to more open-ended questions about the object, e.g., 'Why do you think this animal looks so happy?'

For the effective teacher, the teacher-led, small-group session with three to six students, is an ideal setting. In this setting, effective teachers use unison group responses to allow the timid student to practice responses with anonymity. In this small-group setting, the teacher makes extensive use of teacher and student modeling to provide the examples needed by the low achiever.

1.2 Is the Student Ready for the Reading for All Learners Program? Reading consists of deriving words from a series of letters and then deriving meaning from a series of words. The first prerequisites are the perceptual skills associated with recognizing and labeling symbols, whether the symbols are shapes, such as circles, squares, and stars, or individual letters. Researchers know that the ability to give the names of the letters of the alphabet is predictive of success in reading instruction. The underlying causal relationship lies with the ability to attach sounds to letter symbols. Most students who have the ability to attach names to letters can also attach sounds to the letters. The act of reading places far more importance on the sounds of letters rather than the names of letters. Most beginning readers will have these perceptual, symbol-labeling skills. If the student cannot give the names or sounds of at least five different letters of the alphabet, most beginning reading instruction will have modest success until symbol-labeling skills have been taught.

For most students, the skills needed for successful entry into most reading programs are the phonemic awareness skills. These skills provide the student with knowledge and skills on the role the sounds (phonemes) attach to letters. When students understand that the sound of every letter symbol in a word is important in determining the word, then they know what to focus on and why. The student must understand that the sounds of letter symbols are the gateway to each word, and the words are the gateway to meaning.

In teaching phonemic awareness, an emphasis is placed on demonstrating the role of each letter sound. For example, when we replace the 's' sound in 'sat' with the 'm' sound, we get a new word, 'mat.' In listening to the two words, the student with phonemic awareness should be able to state that it was the first, and not the last, sound that changed.

For most students, the instruction in the first six books of Set 1 of the *Reading for All Learners Program* will provide the needed phonemic awareness instruction. For some students, such as those with cognitive disabilities (e.g., students with an IQ below 75), additional, intense instruction on phonemic awareness may be needed. (**Note:** Because IQ is such an imprecise

predictor of future reading success, IQ should never be used to deny any student access to reading instruction.) If the student knows the names or sounds of several letters of the alphabet and still has difficulty succeeding in the first few books of Set 1, then provide additional phonemic awareness instruction. The following instructional procedures are suggested for phonemic awareness instruction.

1.2.1 Teach Needed Phonemic Awareness Skills. Most of the important phonemic awareness skills identified in the research on the causal relationship between phonemic awareness and later reading success can be described as either (a) segmentation or (b) blending skills. The needed blending skills are an important part of the *Reading for All Learners Program*. For a few students, it may be necessary to teach segmentation skills more directly to a small percentage of the low achievers. These segmentation skills are most efficiently taught in combination with the letter-sound and blending skills taught in the first six books of Set 1. The first five sounds taught in the program should be used for the early segmentation instruction. These sounds are "a," "e," (long sound, as in the letter name), "m," "s," and capital "S." The use of flash cards of these letters to teach the blending and segmentation skills allows you to provide a concrete representation of the deletion, addition, and replacement of individual sounds. There should be little need to continue segmentation skills for the student who successfully completes Set 1.

Examples of Phoneme Segmentation Skills

- a. The teacher says: "I am going to find the 'm..m..m..' sound. What sound am I going to find?"
- b. The student responds, "m..m..m.." If the student has difficulty saying and holding the sound, the teacher and student say the sound together, and then the student says the sound. Use this same prompting procedure on any other responses the student has difficulty with.
- c. The teacher places the "m" flash card in front of the student.
- d. The teacher says, "I am going to add 'ã..ã..ã..' to 'm..m..m..' to make the word, 'ã..ã..ã..m..m..m..'"
- e. "What sound will I add?" Student responds, "What word will I make?"
- f. Place the "ã" flash card in front of the "m" flash card.
- g. Use the above procedures to add more letters, e.g., add "S" to make "Sam."
- h. Use the above procedures to delete letters and replace letters.
- i. Make only one letter change at a time.
- j. For teaching additional segmentation skills, work from the sound or the spoken word to the concrete representation, namely the flash cards. The *Reading for All Learners Program* provides plenty of opportunities to work from the visual, concrete form of a letter or word, to sounds and spoken words.
- k. Never be afraid to experiment with nonsense words such as "sem," as long as you tell the student it is a nonsense word. These can be fun experiences. Applying segmentation and blending skills to nonsense words are important checks on the extent to which the

student can generalize to words they have never met before.

- l. Never move beyond three-letter words until students are fluent with short words.
- m. In the early stages of teaching blending skills, never use "stop" sounds (plosive consonants), e.g., "p," "t," "b," "d," particularly as the first letter in the word. These sounds are very hard to isolate and blend because the sound cannot be held, like continuous sounds such as "m" and "s."

1.3 Start Student in Book 1, Set 1. Follow the *Reading for All Learners Program* guidelines for the specific instructional procedures. The most frequent instructional error is not following the reteaching and practice requirements. It is very important that students receive extensive high success practice. Students cannot successfully acquire new reading skills with ease and confidence if they are not fluent with past skills. High levels of comprehension are not possible for students with a labored approach to decoding words.

Comprehension questions built into the program provide the minimum amount of discussion of content required. Do not hesitate to add to and personalize these discussions of content. Always remember that the student looks forward to the reading sessions because they are building confidence and competence in reading, and because they are spending quality time with a highly valued adult. Taking time to discuss story content allows for some of the personal interchange that enhances the quality of time spent with a valued adult. Only when word recognition is quick and effortless will the student be able to focus on, and enjoy discussions of content.

In the first three grades the oral language of most students is superior to their written language skills. If the comprehension activities in the program are successfully met and exceeded, then the monitoring of reading accuracy and fluency will also reflect competence in comprehension. For the few students whose oral language skills are not keeping up with written language, comprehension checks must be added to the formal assessment and monitoring of progress. The tutoring and small-group instructional formats used in the *Reading for All Learners Program* effectively build competence and confidence in both oral and written language.

1.4 After Book 6, Consider Fast-track Placement for the Very High Performers. As a general rule, it is better to underestimate the starting point in the instructional program and then allow students to move through the program to a point where they are acquiring new skills. Students who are placed too high in the instructional sequence will not experience the consistent high success required, and the first impressions of the program will be negative. When in doubt, start with the less difficult books.

Students may move more quickly through the instructional sequence because initial placement was far too low, or they have access to more instruction outside of school and are highly fluent in the skills presently taught to them in school. In many schools the "little books" have also been placed in the local library, particularly for summer use by parents and students.

Do not consider a "fast-track" procedure unless the student is making virtually no mistakes. In most cases a "fast-track" is best achieved by successfully doing all activities at least once and by reducing the practice requirements, particularly the second reading of the story.

2.0 Strategy 2: Young Students with Some Reading Skills. If there is a strong probability that past instruction was successful and stressed systematic phonics, then the student may be placed higher than Book 1 of Set 1.

2.1 Use Placement Tests to Find Beginning Book. There is a placement test for each set. The quickest way to use the placement tests is to place the student in the first book of a set. For example, if the student achieves better than 90% on Set 1, and less than 90% on Set 2, then start instruction in Book 1 of Set 2.

2.2 Start Students in the Set and Book Selected. To participate successfully in the program, both content and instructional participation skills will be necessary. Knowing the sound associated with a specific letter is a content skill. Being able to respond to a teacher's request to "Say it fast" is an example of an instructional participation skill. The placement tests emphasize content skills. If students lack instructional participation skills, the teacher may wish to go back to easier content, and practice or review the instructional participation skills. For teachers introducing new content in intensive small-group instruction, such teaching of the instructional participation skills will be important to ensure that student can participate with success and dignity in the intensive small-group setting.

2.3 Make Immediate Instructional Adjustments. The *Reading for All Learners Program* has the curriculum-embedded student monitoring tools to allow the teacher to make immediate instructional adjustments based on the specific needs of individuals. Perhaps the most important of these monitoring tools are the "Looking Back" progress checks that occur at the end of every fifth or sixth "little book." The allowable errors are listed at the bottom of the page on each of these progress checks. The prescribed reteaching should be done immediately if the student does not experience at least 90% success on any "Looking Back" progress check.

When time is short, it is tempting to delete the prescribed reteaching for the student who has improved considerably from 50% success to 80% success. Unfortunately, while the consequences may not be immediately obvious, the student will have considerable difficulty closing the gap with peers. There are enough checks of student competence with every "little book," that teachers soon anticipate when a student will have difficulty achieving 90% on a "Looking Back" progress check. In such cases it is better to increase practice during lessons to increase the probability of meeting the 90% criterion the first time a "Looking Back" progress check is taken.

2.4 Continue in the Reading for All Learners Program. When monitoring and recording progress, the student's results on each "Looking Back" progress check should be documented along with notes on any additional reteaching that was done. Many teachers also

give the placement test as a posttest at the end of a set. This serves to review the new content taught in the set and increases the validity of the monitoring process.

As a part of the monitoring, it is very important to make sure that student success is consistently recognized by persons the student considers important. When major milestones, such as the completion of a set, are achieved, this information should be shared with parents and the building principal. If the student is to be presented with a certificate and milestone book (hot link) at the end of the set, the presentation should not be done in a competitive setting. The ideal presentation would be one in which the principal does the presentation in the principal's office, with parents present.

3.0 Strategy 3: Older Students with Reading Difficulties. While older students with reading difficulties will need many of the same skills as younger students, these older students will require additional careful instruction and monitoring. The instruction must counter the years of failure experiences and destructive habits, such as wild, irrational guessing that develops in the absence of instruction that effectively teaches and applies decoding skills.

Even the best-designed reading programs can be poorly implemented, and lead to student failure. For this reason one should avoid using the same programs that the student associates with past failure experiences.

The older, failing student lacks confidence and trust in the instructional process. The instructor must introduce the program with confidence. Do not disguise the need for hard work and the need for extra time. Never use phrases such as, "Let's try this and see if it will help." Be positive and confident, always expressing high expectations of success.

3.1 Place the Emphasis on Something Missing from Previous Instruction. Older students with reading difficulties are usually very aware that they lack the reading skills of their peers. The instructor must make it very clear that past reading failures were not the fault of the student. **Place no guilt on the student.** One of the most effective ways to confront past reading failure is to discuss such problems as a failure of past instruction. Introduce the present reading instruction as a search for the things that were missed in past instruction. Invite the student to join the search for the things that were missed in past instruction.

3.2 Stress the Decoding/Detective Role Rather Than the Story Content. By placing an emphasis on "breaking the code," the maturity of the story content becomes less important. Reading for content will increase in importance as students achieve the needed code-breaking skills. Make reference to the code-breaking approach faced by ancient civilizations. Use the following points to add interest and enhance the adult challenge.

- a. Around 3,000 BC, the Sumerians developed an ideographic system of writing. In this system a symbol or group of symbols, represented a specific word or short phrase.
- b. The Sumerians abandoned this system. Why? Because the thousands of words and

- phrases required the learning of thousands of symbols.
- c. An alternative to the ideographic system was a phonetic system in which a symbol represented a sound instead of a word. This was a new type of code.
 - d. Around 1,600 B.C. the Phoenicians brought a phonetic alphabet, with 22 sounds--all consonants-- to the Greeks. Where do you think the term "phonetic" may have come from?
 - e. The Greeks added vowels to the consonants used by the Phoenicians. Did the addition of vowels make the blending of sounds easier? The Greeks also changed the direction of writing. Before, words were read from right to left. The Greeks reversed the process and read from left to right.
 - f. The Romans used the Greek alphabet to develop the Latin alphabet. This alphabet is the basis for Modern English and most European languages.
 - g. In the Roman system the letter names and the letter sounds were the same. Would this make reading easier?

Enhance the above-listed facts with a little drama and make the point that the use of the 44 phonetic units (phonemes see inside covers of "little books") in the *Reading For All Learners Program* provides the code that allows us to come up with thousands of words in many languages. Also point out that the code-breaking experiences of the student continue a challenge handed down from the greatest minds in many different civilizations through thousands of years.

By emphasizing the adult nature of code-breaking, we are de-emphasizing the fact that we may have to use stories with limited vocabulary and less mature content to help break the code.

3.3 Use Placement Tests. Use the placement tests and start in the set in which the student drops below the 90% criteria. When in doubt about placement, start low in the sequence. It is most important that the initial instructional experiences be highly successful. It will take a large amount of highly successful practice to counter the years of failure the student has experienced.

3.4 Start Students in the Set and Book Selected. These students, based on past experiences, will be expecting to fail. The first minutes and hours will be critical. The students must succeed, and the success must be recognized. Discuss the code-breaking mission by showing how the sounds and the blending skills introduced and practiced in the first part of each "Little Book" are applied in the stories that follow.

3.5 Continue in the Reading for All Learners Program. Monitor and record progress carefully. Monitor the instructional sessions carefully. The older student with reading difficulties develops very counter-productive habits. Typically, the older student in difficulty has not developed the phonic decoding skills. If the student starts wild guessing or looks to pictures for help, return to earlier content where guessing is not necessary, or cover the pictures until the student generates the word.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD THE STUDENT BE LEFT

UNSUPERVISED AND UNSUPPORTED TO READ CONTENT THAT DOES NOT DELIVER THE 90% SUCCESS CRITERIA.

For the older student, the countering of past bad habits will be as big an instructional challenge as acquiring new skills.

3.6 Ensure All Success Experiences Are Recognized by Important Others. The older student with reading difficulties—more than the younger student—needs to have success recognized by “important others.” Many of the older students will be aware of specific words and phonemes that give them problems, e.g., the “ou” vowel combination. Any moves by the student to diagnose and address their own problems should be recognized. Detective work by the student to break the code, should be heavily supported.

Extensive encouragement and recognition will be important to address another reality: older students with reading difficulties can not catch up with peers if they do not have access to successful instruction for far more time than their peers. Without the extra time and practice, the best they can hope for is to stop the gap from widening.

The good news is that time invested in an effective reading sequence that delivers code-breaking skills and high success experiences is time well invested. These investments will have life-long positive consequences.

(Hot Links)

Milestone Books and Certificates

If possible, give milestone books to students to keep. The milestone books serve to recognize success and allow students to demonstrate reading achievements in a range of family settings. These books provide students and parents with valid evidence of student progress in the reading curriculum.

*The Following Milestone Books are Available			
1	<i>We Will Run</i>	Grade 1.2	For students who successfully complete Set 1
2	<i>The Bat</i>	Grade 1.4	For students who successfully complete Set 2
3	<i>Ann and the Hat</i>	Grade 1.5	For students who successfully complete Set 3
4	<i>Snap Plays A Song</i>	Grade 1.9	For students who successfully complete Set 4

*One copy of each milestone book is included in each order of Sets 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Milestone books can be ordered separately, in any quantities.

Students Look Forward to Coloring Their Own Milestone Books

Certificates

Certificates are available for successful completion of all Sets: 1-9.

Certificates can be ordered in packages of 10 (ten).

Chart: Placement Strategies

