

Independent Readers

Educators' Ultimate Literacy Goal

***Program Methodology and Implementation
for Global School Wide Success***

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Executive Summary

We all spend too much time staring at the screen of our smart phones. I try to use my phone pragmatically by reading local, national and world news updates and daily language learning lessons via the Duolingo App; however, I compensate my smart phone activity by engaging for at least an hour per day reading a book. I have enjoyed reading both fiction and non-fiction since I was in the third grade. A good book can be addictive. It is similar to watching a series on Netflix, Amazon, or Hulu. A good serial can easily turn into a very late night of episode binging. A well written or interesting book is no different. The novel or non-fiction book pulls a person in, and they decide to read one more chapter – just one more chapter! But there is a catch – to love and thoroughly enjoy reading, a person must usually get ‘hooked’ at a relatively young age.

One of the biggest failings in all aspects of core subject pedagogy is when students are given tasks, and they are unsuccessful due to dependent skill or knowledge gaps. They struggle to connect to the main tenets of the activity/task since the missing prerequisite background knowledge limits deep understanding. When humans struggle due to poor preparation, knee-jerk oppositional behavior often kicks in, and the mass of people avoid tasks at which they are not highly skilled. This avoidance behavior frequently occurs during ‘free-time’ reading or independent reading in many of today’s elementary and middle schools. Children who are not enjoying the act of reading simply do as little as possible. Thus, it fomented into a habit – a bad one, and it continues into their adult years.

Elementary and middle school language arts educators cannot afford a student’s literacy maturation and love for life-long literacy to materialize by mere chance. There must be a schoolwide plan for ALL students’ literacy success as independent readers regardless of campus’ socioeconomics. Or, as previously mentioned, children - like adults - will avoid what they are not good at. Of course, educators face a practical reality in the means that their students’ reading ability is assessed on standardized testing. Due to time constraints, students are provided short grade level passages to assess reading ability. It is a pragmatic factor since students cannot be assessed via long novel readings. However, if children are only exposed to short reading standardized test passages, it is doubtful they will enjoy reading as adults. Testing is a necessary evil in today’s schools, but it can be readily handled, and students can simultaneously discover reading as a relaxing pursuit of contentment, excitement and enjoyment.

This paper provides the educator – regardless of campus’ socioeconomics – a plan that not only prepares the students to read independently, but it allows them to discover the pleasure of reading. With low-income children, there is a bit of extra work due to the existence of a literacy word gap. ***However, the eradication of the word gap does not cost money for resources - only a plan, consistency, time and effort are required.*** With both reading fluency and independent reading, it is imperative that a school-wide program target each student individually. If each student is NOT targeted and monitored in real time, students are ‘thrown to the literacy winds of probability,’ and the school and classroom pedagogical philosophy evolves toward, “*if they get it, they get it. If they do not, they don’t.*” As the majority of adults are aware, a simple plan is necessary to consistently make good things happen. This document provides an easy plan to follow and provide for equitable student outcomes. Moreover, students discover that reading is inherently interesting, and books provide useful information that leads them to more lucrative and engaging career options and professional interests. Most importantly, students learn to enjoy the act of reading and become a life-long reader – which is every educator’s goal.

Finally, proven outcomes are important in any assertion or proposition in any professional field. The process and pedagogy presented in this document helped produce two (2) urban Title 1 National Blue Ribbon Schools, and both schools are featured for academic excellence by the United States Department of Education as National Blue Ribbon Profile Schools. Graham Elementary and Blackshear Elementary Fine Arts Academy in the Austin Independent School District (Austin, Texas) have also earned multiple-year Gold Ribbon School (Children at Risk – Houston) awards and a myriad of Texas Education Agency (TEA) high academic performance recognitions.

About the Author

Blaine Helwig is a locally, state and nationally recognized campus administrator and was the J. Walter Graham Elementary Principal in Austin ISD for over 9 years. In that time period, J. Walter Graham Elementary (an urban Title 1 school) experienced dramatic and sustained academic success with typical inner city challenging student demographics. From 2009 to 2016, Graham Elementary School's academic performance earned exemplary accountability ratings and every possible academic distinction by the Texas Education Agency. The school was honored as a 2012 National Blue Ribbon School recipient, and the campus was featured as a National Blue Ribbon Profile School for academic excellence on the United States Department of Education's website - one of only four schools in the country to receive this prestigious honor. The Graham campus has also been recognized annually by Education Non-Profit Organizations for high and sustained academic performance. Finally, the language arts, mathematics and science stop-gap resources implemented at Graham that produced heightened student success are currently used in many other Title 1 campuses and districts with similar high percentages of English Language Learners, minority and low socioeconomic student populations.



In 1985, after completing a Bachelor of Science degree in Architectural Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin, Mr. Helwig worked for seven years as a senior structural design engineer, analyzing and designing state and federal highway bridges. He was also employed as a civil engineer in California and Utah with the United States Department of Defense as a lead project technical engineer overseeing earthen and hydraulic dam construction and large civil works projects. At present, Mr. Helwig retains his license as a registered professional engineer in Texas with a structural engineering specialization. Finally, Mr. Helwig is extremely appreciative of the United States Military for their financial support for his college education. He is a proud veteran of both the United States Army and the United States Air Force.

Mr. Helwig was conferred a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting in 1992. During this period of business study, he pursued additional and concentrated coursework in both economics and finance. After working as an accounting director for a large library system in central Texas, he was alternatively certified to work as an elementary teacher by the University of Texas. He taught fourth and fifth grade self-contained classrooms in the Round Rock Independent School District for six years. It was during those professional years that extensive language arts, science, social studies and mathematics curriculum were developed. The initial design work on the numeracy and literacy stop-gap resources was completed, implemented and beta-tested in intermediate classrooms. Those stop-gap intervention programs significantly evolved during his Title 1 school experience and are currently used by tens of thousands of elementary students in both traditional public schools as well as charter schools across the State of Texas.

In 2004, he was awarded a Master's degree in Educational Administration from Texas State University and worked for two years as the assistant principal at Charlotte Cox Elementary in the Leander Independent School District, a suburban school district near Austin. He began work in the Austin Independent School District in 2006 as an Elementary Program Supervisor under the direction of the Associate Superintendent's Office. A year later, he started his principal assignment at J. Walter Graham Elementary and maintained that capacity until his retirement in the fall of 2016. In 2012, Mr. Helwig was recognized by the United States Department of Education as one of seven recipients in the country with the prestigious Terrel H. Bell award for school transformation for producing outstanding student achievement for all students regardless of race, language proficiency and socioeconomic status. He was also the 2012 recipient of the Central Texas HEB Principal Excellence in Education Award and a five-time nominee and a two-time finalist for Austin ISD Principal of the Year.

Currently, Blaine Helwig is a curriculum writer and a Title 1 education consultant in rural and urban school transformation. He is a cofounder of Celestial Numeracy, a daily numeracy program that presently serves over 90,000 elementary and middle students each day as well as a cofounder of The New 3Rs Academic Transformation.

Independent Readers – Educators’ Ultimate Literacy Goal

By Blaine Helwig

Beginning in third grade, every Tuesday night, my mother would load my two brothers and me in the family car and drive us to the city library. My mother required that my older brother and I check out at least two (2) chapter books, and that both books be read by the following Tuesday – our return visit. From my earliest memories, my mother was and remains a voracious reader, and I am sure her reading habits inspired and influenced her children’s life-long reading habits.



However, after my elementary school years, my mother no longer took me to the library. I was in junior high, and I continued to read on my own accord until the end of seventh grade. During my last year of middle school, I had grown much more social, and I did not read with the frequency of past years. In the spring of my 8th grade year, I sat for the Iowa Test of Basic Skills assessment. While taking that test, I was keenly aware that I could not read nearly as quickly as I had in previous years. On the 7th grade Iowa Basics, I was in the high 90’s percentile range in reading proficiency, but on the 8th grade assessment, the words and sentences did not flow as smoothly and effortlessly. Simply put, I had not practiced free reading for the last year, and when the standardized assessment results arrived a short time later, I was not surprised on how poorly I had scored. More on the need for practice a bit later.

When I left structural engineering and finance/accounting in the early 1990’s to enroll in the University of Texas at Austin’s teacher certification program, I was first exposed to the reading instructional approach of ‘look at the first letter and insert a word that makes sense’ described in the podcast ‘Sold a Story.’ At that time, I was not a young college student like most of my undergraduate classmates. I was in my early thirties with a decade of professional experience, and I openly questioned this pedagogical literacy approach much to the chagrin of my reading method’s professor. It made no sense to me from a pragmatic standpoint that when a



child encountered an unfamiliar word, they would mentally scroll through a rolodex of possible words and magically insert the exact one in the sentence that yields the correct meaning. It was an illogical and inefficient approach – dependent upon guessing, instead of simply reading the unfamiliar word via its letter sounds.

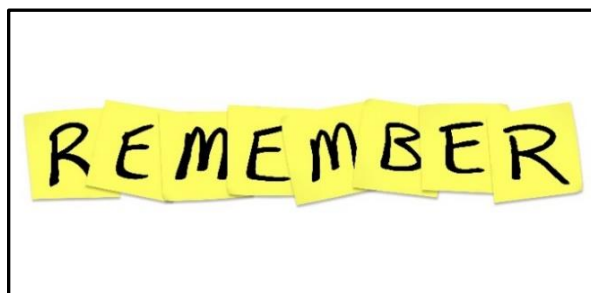
The podcast, “*Sold a Story*” by host and education journalist, Emily Hanford, is out this fall. I listened to the podcast in its entirety, and it is an exquisite piece of journalistic work on the

whole language versus phonics’ approaches to reading instruction over the last 40 years. Like many educators over the past three decades, I have fought this literacy battle, internally. It is refreshing and hopeful that possibly the tide may turn on the nonsensical literacy approach of word insertion and guessing as opposed to sounding out the word via a focused decoding approach as children move beyond the kindergarten years. This podcast has received heightened attention from authors that have not produced academic results as educators. The American public education system weathers internal challenges and objections against many of its nonsensical curriculum, methodologies and pedagogy simply by discrediting or ignoring its detractors. Apparently, the only means that the public education system appears incentivized to change ineffective methodology is when they are exposed from an external source.

I was also strongly opposed to the whole language reading methodology because when I was in first grade, my teacher used a series of books entitled ‘Dick and Jane’ student readers – the whole word literacy approach. Throughout that school year - 1967, I had not learned to read those books independently without heightened

frustration. I can distinctly recall sitting at my desk crying profusely because I could not read the ‘books’ by myself. However, soon enough, my sister and my second-grade teacher would come to my literacy rescue. Unlike my first-grade teacher who was in her mid-twenties, my second-grade teacher was much older – probably more than twice as old as my first-grade teacher. My other teacher was my older sister. She was seven (7) years older than me, and she taught me at home what my second-grade teacher taught me at school – how to sound out the unfamiliar words by their individual letter sounds. And, it worked! I was a reader!

In third grade, I can recollect a personal reading triumph. I was reading a chapter book and encountered the unfamiliar word, ‘remember.’ I did not recognize that word in print, but I started sounding out the word slowly using my sister’s and second-grade teacher’s decoding method, and in a second or two, I had it! *Remember*. Actually, I knew the word ‘remember’ orally, but I did not recognize the word in print.



Pragmatically, it is important to note that it is quite common in language acquisition when a learner can orally pronounce a word, but not recognize that same word in print form. It is especially valid if a language’s historical and linguistic evolution has occurred in which many word spellings do not match their oral pronunciations. Since the English language Germanic origins 1,500 years ago to the current day, it is a prime example of this linguistic incongruence – in particular to the most common, everyday words, such as: made, tough, make, because, debt, doubt, house, enough, island, while, said, etc.

Thus, in 1992 and 1993, at the University of Texas, I rejected my professor’s instructional reading philosophy for first and second graders out of common sense and logic as well as my own personal elementary aged reading experience a quarter century prior. I believed then, as I do today, that beginning readers must be taught letter sounds to decode unfamiliar words they encounter especially when the contextual picture aids are no longer present as during their early childhood prekindergarten and kindergarten school years. My lack of confidence in the prescribed reading methodology in my university coursework opened the door at a critical juncture in my early educator days to press phonics and aggressively pursue more analytical and pragmatic processes when teaching children to read. As a matter of fact, years later when I became a Title 1 elementary principal, my first action at the campus was to purchase a structured first and second grade phonics program.

Educator’s Goal – Independent Readers and a Love for Reading

**I want my students
to LOVE reading
and become life-long
readers.**



**But, will it happen
by accident without
a plan and effort?**

In my nearly three-decade career in public education, I have never met an elementary educator that does not desire students to become fluent independent and life-long readers. They all do! The problem with this desire is that it is not happening by accident for the vast majority of children. I have always divided children by reading acquisition into three groups. One group seems to catch-on to reading regardless of the method they are taught. Those children ‘just’ get the code and figure it out. The second group learns with consistency, practice and solid reading instruction methodology, and the last third, teachers have to expend a lot of effort to assist them to become good readers. The last group struggles, but with a logical and structured plan, consistency, motivation and practice, those students also can become capable independent readers.

It is usually not enough that students become independent readers by teachers recognizing that there are five (5) pillars of reading instruction – phonics, phonemic awareness, word fluency (*including sight word automaticity*), vocabulary development and comprehension. With those elements soundly taught, a child is off to a good start, but it takes more since so

many low-income students are academically behind when their parents enroll them in prekindergarten or kindergarten. Of course, when teachers implement poor reading instruction methodologies as adeptly described in the podcast, “*Sold a Story*,” many middle- and high- income children also struggle with learning to read. However, more affluent parents – more often than not – possess highly educated home support as well as financial resources to hire personal tutors and afterschool commercial tutoring vendors to assist their children. Absolutely, it may still be a problem as described in the referenced podcast – no doubt about it! But, the number of low-income elementary children that do not fluently read and comprehend on grade level is shocking to outsiders unfamiliar with Title 1 elementary school classrooms. Consequently, this blog or essay concentrates its focus on Title 1 elementary and middle schools that matriculate low-income children. Of course, the described methodology works equally well with struggling readers of their more affluent children as well.

Preparing Children to be Capable and Successful Independent Readers – Chapter Books/Novels

If the goal is for students of any socio-economic background to read on grade level, then children must be placed in a position to BE READY and ABLE to engage successfully as independent readers. There is one primary reason that children are not successful to actively and independently engage in the act of reading. It is because they were not prepared to read independently. This reasoning may sound simple, and it is indeed. Many poor readers were not taught decoding and fluency skill automaticity/mastery, and they read so slowly and choppy it is difficult for them to read for an extended period of time. They possess little reading stamina. The entire process of reading has evolved into an arduous task, and they avoid the task as often as they are able because it is so difficult and unsatisfying. Thus, they rarely discover the excitement of reading interesting fiction and non-fiction literature and its inherent satisfaction. In short, students never reach the stage of the literacy process to discover that they actively enjoy reading. Thus, if independent reading is the objective, then there must be a plan to prepare students so they are reading ready and are able to discover the joys of reading.



In students’ primary school years, phonics and phonemic awareness programs are essential ingredients in the classroom. There are many commercial programs that are viably available. However, students should have fundamentally sound reading methodologies to practice and apply their phonics and phonemic awareness lessons – read aloud sessions, guided reading (i.e., that focus on decoding, letter sounds, blends, diagraphs, etc.), aligned decodable readers, word studies, rhyming words, etc. It is imperative that beginning in first



grade, students are held accountable to these programs’ learning objectives with rapid, daily spaced repetition lessons so all students are held accountable for content mastery.

However, students hailing from low-income homes present an added challenge. Many of these children are academically behind the instant they enroll in the early childhood grades at their elementary campus in comparison to their more affluent peers. Thus, the five (5) central tenets of ‘*The Science of Reading*’ is **usually not** sufficient as a standalone to academically ‘catch-up’ the mass of impoverished children. Many of those children require specific instruction of sight word fluency.

In short, the majority of low-income children possess a literacy word-gap – a correctable one. There are many common English words that they do not know by sight, and they do not read well and are not fluent readers because of it. Their mental ‘CPU’ processing is expended on attempting to pronounce so many of the most

The most common pedagogical error is NOT preparing children to be capable independent readers.



Students invariably dislike reading because they are not good at it.

commonly occurring English words that many are overwhelmed. In fact, a majority of these students read so slowly trying to discern the simple, everyday English words such as “they, because, for, any, some, and said” that their overall comprehension is exceedingly low. In fact, many of these elementary students read so slowly that by the time they finish reading a sentence they are unable to verbally respond to its meaning. I believe it is also important to note that adults learning foreign languages experience the same phenomenon. They are equally and mentally overwhelmed in the pronunciations of similar common words in another language when they read. Hence, it appears to be a common developmental experience in language acquisition at any age.

This situation is exacerbated for low-income children that are also classified as English Language Learners (ELLs/ELs), or the latest common classification – Bilingually Emergent. Many of these immigrant students miss out on large swaths of foundational English content in the primary grades due to poor bilingual curricular programming, and the majority of children do not academically catch-up. The fault of this learning process is on the bilingual educational system that has aligned itself with research that is not empirically correct, and it continues to this day. In general, children who speak a non-native English home language are placed in predominately native tongue language programs in elementary school. From the outset of their literacy acquisition in Title 1 elementary schools, these children miss much of the structured language

instruction in English. Unfortunately, the school classroom is the only place that most non-native English speakers learn structured language development in the English language. Accordingly, it is imperative that immigrant students be taught aggressively in English instruction with the use of their native tongue as language support – unless the school day is extended to afford equal instructional time in two languages.

In Title 1 classrooms, the literacy word gap that is endemic to the majority of low-income children must be reduced and closed so students possess word automaticity or word fluency. The pronunciations and associated spelling incongruities must also be similarly addressed. It is recommended that primary teachers implement supplemental fluency and non-negotiable word spelling programs to significantly reduce and hopefully, eradicate the literacy word gap. The white paper entitled, “How to Improve Word Fluency and Heighten Reading Proficiency,” can be downloaded for free at the website provided in the footer. Finally, a pedagogical application that presses all language arts programming is Guided Novel Instruction (GNI). This daily language arts activity applies all facets of the five (5) tenets of reading as well as the fluency supplemental program in an authentic novel setting that promotes students’ independent reading interests. GNI is a vehicle to expose children to rich literature that speaks to their culture and identity. Its exposure promotes and prepares students for grade level reading proficiency, but students discover reading as a worthwhile and rewarding pursuit. A white paper on “*Guided Novel Instruction (GNI) – Improving Literacy Outcomes*” can also be downloaded for free at the website address in the footer of this document. These supplemental literacy fluency/non-negotiable word programs, GNI and the *Science of Reading* methodology will prepare reading-ready students for an independent reading environment.

The ELA program must target every student’s Fluency, so they are NOT left academically behind.



It is important to note if schools implement GNI and the other aforementioned language arts' supplemental programs, principals frequently make the mistake of continuing their current curricular resources that have proven ineffective. Time is a valuable resource in the core language block, and instructional minutes and tasks cannot be lost on ineffective curricular programming. If the activity is not yielding an impact on student achievement, its use should be discontinued. Please note, if an elementary school's standardized reading scores are chronically low each school year, it is highly likely the current literacy curricular program and instruction is NOT effective.

Independent Reading – Title 1 Elementary and Middle School Reading Program

Ironically, this section – the crux of the essay – begins here; however, the preceding content was necessary so the reader understands the essential preconditions to implement a successful student *reading-ready* independent reading program. Without taking the initial steps of a global language arts program and supplementing a hyper word fluency approach and GNI methodology, low-income children's ability to read independently will be moderately effective as it is currently at the vast majority of American Title 1 elementary and middle schools.



As a former Title 1 elementary principal, the initial program I implemented for independent reading was of my own design, and since all the aforementioned elements were sound in place, it worked fairly well. I had monitoring accountability of students' independent reading progress with the purchase of a commercially web-based digital program called Accelerated Reader (AR) by Renaissance Learning. My program design was simple and grade level dependent: 1st grade readers read for 10 minutes per night, 2nd graders read for 20 minutes per night, 3rd graders read for 30 minutes per night, and so on to fifth grade. The program worked well, and I had no intention of changing it. My urban, Title 1 elementary school was one of the highest academic performing campuses in the State of Texas with standardized reading 'passing' scores well above 90% and mastery scores hovering between 30 and 40 percent. The campus student demographic percentages were challenging. The economically disadvantaged population was approximately 95 percent, and 65 percent of students were classified as English Language Learners (ELLs/ELs). However, over 98 percent of intermediate grade level students were assessed in English on the spring standardized assessment. Consequently, there seemed no reason to change the school's independent reading program.



In 2013, one of my classroom teachers, LaTrese Smith created a different approach to independent reading student accountability. After a couple months of action-research implementation, she brought her classes' student data into my office. I was more than a little surprised. She was still using the Accelerated Reader (AR) program to digitally track students, but a much different process to encourage, motivate and hold **EACH** student quantifiably accountable. She had abandoned the unaccountable methodology of

minutes per night of my independent reading program, and she had replaced the nightly minutes **with nightly page limits** – 40 pages per night for each fifth grader with IEP adaptations when necessary. The program was simple and replicable – the first requirements of any global schoolwide program, and the AR points were more than doubled for each student in comparison to my program. Before I would make a wholesale change of our school's independent reading program, I implemented her program in a third and fourth grade classroom to ensure her classroom results were not an anomaly. After 6 weeks of implementation in the other two

classrooms, the student reading data was clear. Her program design was more productive than my independent reading program. Our elementary campus was based on data-driven student outcomes, we changed the independent reading program, whole-sale, in the middle of the school year.

Ms. Smith's program was a simple reading accounting process for EACH student that took place at the end of school day – near dismissal time. Each grade level teacher would assign nightly reading via a page limit requirement. For example, first graders were required to read 10 pages, second graders – 15 pages, third graders – 20 pages, fourth graders – 25 pages, and fifth graders – 30 pages. Students would still be required to 'pass' a simple AR reading test on their book as before. As is common knowledge, the questions on a typical AR assessment are basic and usually do not delve deeply into main idea, inferences and summary questions; however, students were consistently practicing as well as building reading stamina. It is also important to recognize that the students received higher order questioning and text analysis in their daily language arts reading and writing activities. The AR software from Renaissance Learning assured both the school's administration and classroom teacher that the child actually read the book.



As a professional in three discrete fields and a former athlete, there is much improvement to consistent practice in any human endeavor. Similarly, I believe my mother's Tuesday's trips to the library were a major factor in my development as an independent reader. As expected, a child's monitored and accountable nightly reading is invaluable practice – providing the necessary repetition to improve task performance.

At the end of the class day, each teacher would use a clip board and an 'Accountability Sheet' containing the children's names, and she would check to ensure EACH student was on track to finish their book by the required nightly page limits. For instance, Student A – a fifth grader – was reading a book that was 150 pages in length. At 40 pages per night, the student should complete and sit for an AR comprehension test in approximately four (4) days. The teacher can monitor the independent reading process each day in real time

– inquire, press and motivate the student directly if they were on track to complete the book. In practice, it is best to use two (2) of these accountability pages simultaneously since students are finishing books at different times. A sample version of the accounting process is located at the end of this document. After the teacher sets up an organized page-limit accountability system, he or she can monitor a class of nearly 25 to 30 students on their nightly reading each day at dismissal time – individually – in only 2 to 3 minutes.

If the student is not keeping up their nightly reading, and they do not possess a known or suspected learning disability, the teacher has options. Several of these options are as follows: make an agreement with the student to finish the book at some point near the expected date to finish, call the parent and discuss viable solutions.

Version 1: AR Weekly Accountability Sheet.

<i>Ms. Gonzalez's AR Record – Home Room – Week 1 (Sample) – V1</i>				
STUDENT NAME	CURRENT BOOK	TOTAL PAGES - PTS	DAY TO TEST	AR OUTCOME
1.) Apple, Johnny	Number The Stars	124 – 11 points	4 Days - Friday	Passed/Not Passed
2.) Banana, Cindy	Rats of Nimh	210 – 18 points	7 Days – Next Wed.	Passed/Not Passed
3.) Grape, Jesus	Holes	145 – 12 points	5 Days – Next Mon.	Passed/Not Passed
4.) Orange, Priscilla	Bridge of Terrabithia	93 – 9 points	3 Days - Thursday	Passed/Not Passed
5.)				

Version 2: AR Accountability Sheet – Tracking Pages Remaining.

<i>Ms. Gonzalez's AR Record – Home Room – Week 1 (Sample) – V2</i>						
STUDENT NAME	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday/Sunday
1.) Apple, Johnny	NtS – 124 pgs	Pg. 87	Pg. 62	Pg. 25	Test	New Book
2.) Banana, Cindy	RofN – 210 pgs	Pg. 205	Pg. 176	Pg. 144	Pg. 124	Read on Weekend
3.) Grape, Jesus	Holes – 145 pgs	Pg. 134	Pg. 110	Pg. 83	Pg. 74	Read- Test Monday
4.) Orange, Priscilla	BofT – 93 pgs	Pg. 54	Pg. 22	Test	New Book	Read
5.)						

Other options include that the student choose to read during lunch, or the student and teacher agree that the child may come back to the classroom and read.



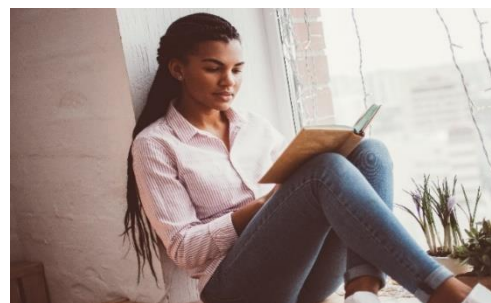
Ms. Smith's independent reading process is superior since EACH student was held accountable for nightly reading as well as their basic comprehension of their selected novel via an AR assessment. It is important to emphasize that students *were prepared to be proficient grade level readers because the school's global language arts program was designed to create adept independent readers.* I believe it is imperative to stress that every student must be pressed and encouraged to read. Once they discovered that reading was inherently satisfying, the number of students followed a similar

pattern to reading as I did in my sixth and seventh grade middle school years. Students read because it was enjoyable.

Finally, external incentives are motivating to many children. There can be both individual and class goals. Some educators disagree with an incentive approach, but I am in favor of incentives – if they are efficient, effective and earned. One such incentive associated with an aggregated class total for each nine weeks – a pizza party (e.g., for example). However, individual reading recognition is also a possibility based on students completing set AR point totals. For instance, for fifth grade, students could earn a prize for reaching totals of 50 AR points, 100 AR points and multiples of 100 points (and appropriately adjusted point totals for students receiving special education services). It was different for each grade level, and the grade level teams can meet and agree upon the standards that are developmentally reasonable for their students.

Final Commentary

The proposal to surround children in a rich literature environment and then expect students to naturally become readers is the very definition of educator naivete. In general, this thinking or philosophy is foreign to all aspects of human behavior. *Desirable outcomes rarely happen by chance.* For instance, in order to retire comfortably, it requires financial planning and structure over many years. The most successful athletes are not only gifted, but they consistently complete a daily practice regimen at an early age until they mature into high school, university and beyond. Nurturing and building confident life-long readers is no different. It requires a plan from adults who are willing to prepare them for a successful transition to become independent readers.



Reading is the most important skill a student acquires in elementary school. I *valued* literacy above all other subject content as a campus administrator. I allocated much of my personal time, effort and available monies toward literacy at my school, and I elected to selectively allocate campus' Title 1 funds to purchase reading resources. I authorized the purchase of library books, classroom novel sets, Accelerated Reader software and fund classroom libraries. I also purchased a commercial grade level vocabulary program, reading and writing resources for weekly literary elements, and two reading coaches who worked not only with teachers but taught their own small reading groups of students every school day in third, fourth and fifth grades.

The school librarian used volunteers to label every applicable book in the school library as an AR book, so students could easily identify those books. When classrooms visited the library, teachers required students to check out one book of their choosing and one AR book – much like my mother had done when I was their age – two books to be read per week. Our elementary school mantra was, “*Show-up, Work Hard and Read!*” It conveyed to every stakeholder that set foot on our campus, from student to parent to faculty member precisely



what our school deemed important and valued. Moreover, if school personnel desire en masse grade level readers, campus administration and faculty must know what curricular programs yield results. **Performance** in any task is not free, it **requires know-how and effort!** And, as expected, independent reading – the ultimate ending goal of the language arts program is not an exception to these two performance requirements.

There are recommended stages that Title 1 elementary school personnel must follow to prepare their students for a successful independent reading experience and develop an affinity for reading. The Science of Reading’s five (5) components are all essential components; however, low-income and impoverished immigrant children will generally NOT be successful independent or life-long readers without supplemental curriculum. They must be academically accelerated with additional fluency work of the most common English words. Furthermore, the science of reading and the fluency work must be pressed in an authentic novel setting (i.e., GNI – Guided Novel Instruction) for two (2) reasons. First, their foundational literacy learning is consistently applied to automaticity via interesting novels and stories. Second, students discover that books are exciting and enjoyable pleasure in their own right.

One of the primary mistakes that is universally made in the public school system is not adequately preparing students for success at an activity. It is done in all core subjects, and a significant number of children learn to detest mathematics, writing, reading, or science because they are unable to connect to the grade level material. The fault in the learning process is educators **NOT** understanding the developmental and dependent skills that their students require.

**We must PREPARE
students to be
reading-ready or they
will NOT be successful
in an independent
reading environment.**

Conversely, educators are well aware of developmentally layered adult content that requires fundamental skill support in order to garner complete understanding and comprehension. For example, if a mature adult is enrolled in a foreign language class at university, they fully understand that they would not be successful in 4th semester Spanish without successfully completing the prior three semesters of prerequisite Spanish. Those three semesters of Spanish instruction and knowledge created a foundation for preparation for fourth (4th) semester in that language study. It is no different developmentally for elementary students. The language arts program should be designed for students to learn to read independently so that they are competent at the task, or they will not readily engage. When educators do not prepare their students, teachers and parents frequently state,



“My students/children do not like or enjoy reading.” Of course, they do not read well! They are analogously in fourth semester Spanish without the luxury of three sound semesters of prerequisite preparatory language work.

When students are engaging in independent reading in class or at home, it is the LAST step of the reading learning process – it is by definition, ‘independent’ work. Successful independent reading programs are dependent upon academically positioning children so they are prepared and capable of completing grade level work.

Equally important is a motivating and organized teacher willing to expend the necessary effort to press EACH of his or her students to become a proficient reader, and ultimately, discover the joy of reading.

Independent Reading Nightly Page Limits – Grades 1 through 5

Teachers should require students to read a minimum number of pages each night based on the recommendations from the table below. The student should be assessed on a *specific day* using an Accelerated Reader (AR) Test on their book based on the total number of pages divided by the grade level page requirement. Example: 5 grade: 156 page book ÷ 30 pages = 5 days. Hence, an AR comprehension test should be taken in 5 days on that book.

Nightly Page Requirements Per Grade Level				
1 Grade: 10 pages	2 Grade: 15 pages	3rd Grade: 20 pages	4 Grade: 25 pages	5 Grade: 30 pages

dismissal each day, the teacher should review each student progress and update the *sample* table(s) below accordingly to *ensure nightly reading accountability*. Each Teacher should create their own AR Record Accountability Sheet. There are two versions to consider using – both are presented below. It is also recommend that a clipboard be used, but each week's student tallies are updated and saved on the teacher's computer. week's sheets should be attached behind the current week's sheet the clipboard for easy cumulative reference.

If a student(s) refuse to read, contact parents. If home reading remains lack luster, contact parent for permission to require their child to read in the classroom during lunch or afterschool as teachers prepare for next day's lessons. It is also recommended to contact administration for administratively leveraged.

Version 1: AR Weekly Accountability Sheet.

<i>Ms. Gonzalez's AR Record – Home Room – Week 1 (Sample) –</i>				
STUDENT NAME	CURRENT BOOK	TOTAL PAGES - PTS	DAY TO TEST	AR OUTCOME
Apple, Johnny	Number The Stars	– 11 points	4 Days - Friday	Passed/Not Passed
Banana, Cindy	Rats of Nimh	– 18 points	7 Days – Next Wed.	Passed/Not Passed
Grape, Jesus	Holes	– 12 points	5 Days – Next Mon.	Passed/Not Passed
Orange, Priscilla	Bridge of Terrabithia	– 9 points	3 Days - Thursday	Passed/Not Passed
5				

Version 2: AR Accountability Sheet – Tracking Pages Remaining.

<i>Ms. Gonzalez's AR Record – Home Room – Week 1 (Sample) –</i>						
STUDENT NAME	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday/Sunday
Apple, Johnny	NtS – 124 pgs	Pg. 87	Pg. 62	Pg. 25	Test	New Book
Banana, Cindy	RofN – 210 pgs	Pg. 205	Pg. 176	Pg. 144	Pg. 124	Read on Weekend
Grape, Jesus	Holes – 145 pgs	Pg. 134	Pg. 110	Pg. 83	Pg. 74	Read- Test Monday
Orange, Priscilla	BofT – 93 pgs	Pg. 54	Pg. 22	Test	New Book	Read

Note Students should be questioned each day on their reading progress. *Both the classroom teacher and the administration must track and monitor comprehension skills through AR chapter book assessments.* Students must realize there is accountability for not reading home. Press Independent Reading – and vast majority of students will comply.

Independent Reading (AR) Accountability – Version 1

Teacher:

Date:

Student Name	Book Title	Total Pages (AR Pts.)	AR Test Day	AR Pass/Fail
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
9.				
10.				
11.				
12.				
13.				
14.				
15.				
16.				
17.				

Independent Reading (AR) Accountability – Version 1

Teacher:

Date:

Student Name	Book Title	Total Pages (AR Pts.)	AR Test Day	AR Pass/Fail
18.				
19.				
20.				
21.				
22.				
23.				
24.				
25.				
26.				
27.				
28.				
29.				
30.				
31.				
32.				
33.				

Independent Reading (AR) Accountability Classroom Chart – V2

Teacher:

Date:

Student Name Book Title	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Sunday
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						
11.						
12.						
13.						
14.						
15.						
16.						
17.						

Independent Reading (AR) Accountability Classroom Chart – V2

Teacher:

Date:

Student Name Book Title	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Sunday
18.						
19.						
20.						
21.						
22.						
23.						
24.						
25.						
26.						
27.						
28.						
29.						
30.						
31.						
32.						
33.						
34.						