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# Emphasize fluency over comprehension? Yes. New program shows promising results

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For the cost of only commitment, Keystone Area Education Agency in Elkader has created a promising literacy program that focuses on specific skill-building techniques.

A few bellwether measures look extraordinarily good. Consider: Some students who initially weren't expected to exit special education are doing just that. And educators are seeing students apply their new-found literacy skills in classes beyond literacy. All of this despite the fact the fledgling program does not yet have comprehensive statistics.

It's called Functional Academic Assessment, or FAA, which is a program that focuses on matching a student with precisely the right intervention. There are no one-size-fits-all interventions or worksheets because, after all, students learn by different means and at different paces.

A walk through Tara Duerre's Decorah middle school class shows FAA in action. Seven students work intently, quietly, individually and in pairs. One repeats a passage from a computer. Another two trade reading to each other. Yet another works one on one with Duerre.

No chaos. Just learning. Real learning. Learning, Keystone folks say, that is making a real difference.

"The No. 1 thing I see is confidence," Duerre said. "One student came and told me, 'I used (my intervention) in science – and I understood it!'"

Keystone personnel developed FAA through borrowing liberally from other research-based programs.



“In a nutshell, FAA is the application of applied behavior analysis techniques to academic instruction,” said Pam Fields, Keystone sector coordinator. “We are figuring out how to get to the most effective reading intervention for kids.”

In essence, they experiment with just what intervention works for the individual child.

“Let’s say we have three different ways that we could teach you how to be a more fluent reader,” Fields said. “What we do is get in there and try each one out, see which one we get the best results with, and go with that approach.”

In the four years since Keystone has launched the program, educators are seeing increases in reading fluency or words per minute read correctly.

The focus on fluency initially bothered Duerre.

“I was concerned that comprehension was being left behind,” she said. “Typically comprehension is the forefront of my instruction. But when we started focusing on fluency, I was expecting the comprehension to drop. To my surprise, they both grew at greater rates than we thought they would.”

That’s because readers struggling with fluency focus too much on trying to figure out words, and comprehension becomes a casualty. When fluency improves, it enables a child to better understand what he or she is reading.

One of the chief architects of FAA, Keystone trainer Barb Plime, said the program takes a definitive step away from relying on instinct.

“Honestly, initially we were very surprised at the results we were seeing,” Plime said. “I always trusted my teacher intuition. I would find myself being surprised by results, saying ‘I would have never pegged this strategy with this kid.’ But the data speaks for itself.

“When training teachers, I tell them to test each strategy on the students. You have to test every strategy to be sure you have the best one – or the best ones, since you can incorporate more than one – for the student. Instinctually, this may seem wrong. I have had teachers say, ‘Oh, no, that won’t work for this particular student,’ and I’m ‘no, no, no, you have to try all of them.’ Later, I frequently hear, ‘I would have never guessed that easy strategy would help that kid.’”

Preliminary results from Keystone’s efforts look promising.

“Of the 60 students who have gone through the process, 74 percent of the interventions for fluency were effective or very effective,” said Michelle Hinzman, a Keystone trainer. “We have found that the interventions are most effective for third and fourth graders because that’s when fluency really comes into play.”

Keystone intentionally started the program on a small-scale basis.

“We didn’t put this out there en masse and instead started a pilot with Western Dubuque,” said Keystone Special Education Director Doug Penno. “We talked with the special education director and individual teachers before we started. It was critical that we had everyone on board, and that implementation would be done with fidelity.”

It’s for that reason that Keystone is growing the program slowly. And though there are strong indications of success, Penno said Keystone still has plenty of work to do on the program.

“We have to look at aggregated data to see whether we are closing the gap,” he said. “We need to look at multiple factors, not just decoding and fluency, but their grades, their assessments. That is going to be a big task. The time frame for expanding the program will be that we will go as fast as we can do it – and do it well.”

Moving forward, Keystone will expand into schools and districts as educators embrace the intervention system.

“If a teacher doesn’t believe it will work, then we will need to convince them,” Penno said. “The way we will do that is by showing them the case studies. Our program is an aggressive approach, it helps to make students independent.”

As for the Keystone trainers and participating teachers, FAA is a slam dunk.

“It is not just picking a strategy because we think it might work,” said Abby Nauman, a special education teacher from Bryant Elementary in Dubuque. “We really know that it is best for the students. Today, one of my students can tell me exactly what he needs to do to get out of special education. I feel like because I know more, he knows more about what he needs to do.”

Engaging students in their progress is critical, said Keystone Trainer Chami DeLong.

“We need to make sure teachers are showing the graphs of progress,” she said. “Even if you are working with a motivated student, that student can be even more motivated by seeing progress. One student was so surprised with how well he was doing – there is so much to be said for that – seeing your progress. It is really fun to hear those students say, ‘well Ms. DeLong, how did I do last time? I wonder if I can do even better.’”

## Specific strategies

- **Listening Sentence Preview.** The student first listens to the computer read a sentence, and then reads the entire sentence for him or herself.
- **Partner reading.** Students pair off and each take turns reading one sentence. Partners are encouraged to help each other out through rough patches.
- **Listening Passage Preview.** The student first listens to a full passage on the computer, and then reads the entire passage for him or herself.

And it's fun for the teachers.

"I have a student who Michelle (Hinzman) had tested last year, and he has grown a year and a half in grade-level passages," Nauman said. "He also has grown by 30 words per minute. He was a kid that you thought wouldn't have a lot of motivation – we really struggled finding strategies for him. Today he is more confident, he has seen his growth, and now he is willing to try new things. He's pretty much functional at grade level."

It's also success for teacher and student alike.

"One student who exited special education dropped by and showed me a book and said 'guess what? I read this book in a month and it is an adult book!'" Duerre recounted, adding that it was a book on World War II. "And he said to me, 'would you like to read that? Oh, wait, no, you read kids' books.'"

And only for the cost of commitment.

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