



Building Reading Skills Step by Step

BY REBECCA LASH

Girls and Boys Town
Reading Is FAME®

PREVIEW

A reading program builds upon the strengths of students who are reading below grade level, increases their success in school, and reduces their risk of dropping out.

Students in the program make roughly a one-year grade equivalent gain for each semester of instruction.

The program stresses low student-to-teacher ratios, teacher-student conferences, and parental involvement.

Look what I got for Christmas!" said Anna, one of my ninth-grade students, as she excitedly waved an envelope. "It's a gift certificate from Borders!" Though seemingly insignificant, this conversation was a milestone for Anna. As an incoming ninth-grader, Anna's standardized test scores and subsequent batteries revealed she was reading around the third-grade level. At the start of the year, Anna peppered her comments about reading with statements like, "I just hate reading" and "I've never read a book." Though she was resistant, I persuaded Anna to enter Reading Is FAME, the reading program our district had adopted. Because of the Reading Is FAME program, five months into the program Anna had been transformed from a self-proclaimed non-reader to a Borders-gift-card-toting book lover.

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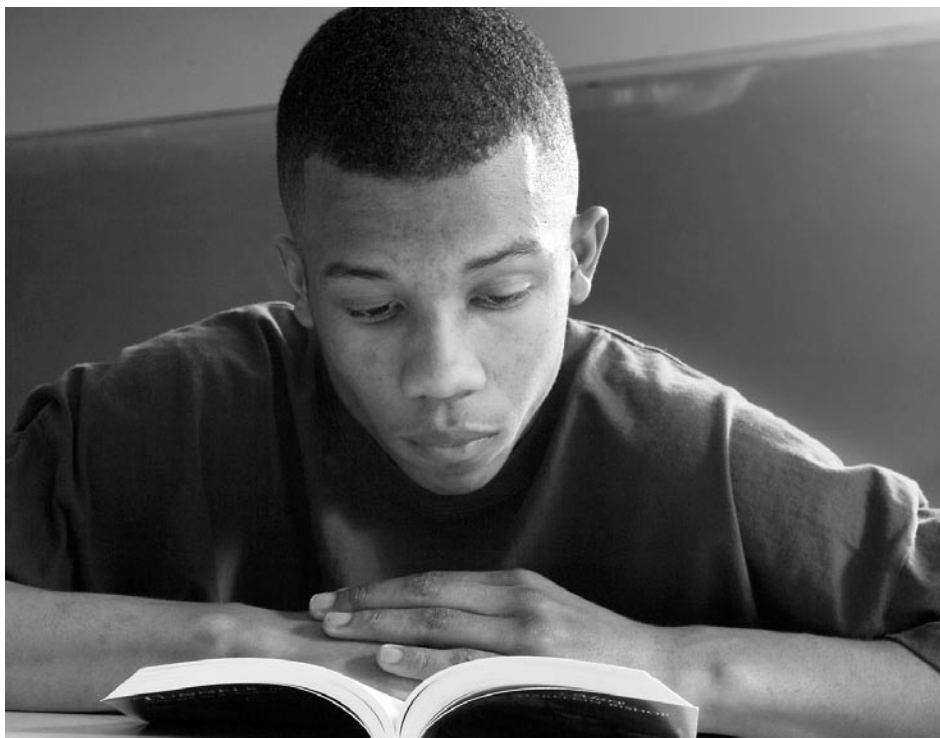
What Is Reading Is FAME?

FAME is an acronym for a four-course program titled Foundations, Adventures, Mastery, and Explorations. Reading Is FAME is a research-based, developmental reading program for adolescents reading below grade level. The program incorporates a series of four courses designed for students in grades 7-12. The FAME curriculum helps students by addressing problems at each stage of reading development. Students learn to decode, build fluency, improve vocabulary, and refine comprehension skills. Reading Is FAME was developed in the mid-1980s by Mary Beth Curtis and Ann Marie Longo. Curtis and Longo were recruited from Harvard University to develop Reading Is FAME as Girls and Boys Town's proactive response to address reading deficits within the student population.

FAME is based on Chall's (1967) stages of reading development. Chall posits that reading is a process of acquiring different skills and then building on them. This is an important component of the program because successful implementation is greatly affected by determining the cause, rather than the consequence, of students' reading difficulties and then placing students in the appropriate course to allow for differentiated instruction. Figure 1 details targeted skills and grade level equivalents for each course.

When FAME was first used in Girls and Boys Town schools, data from norm-referenced tests showed that there was more than a one-year grade equivalent gain per semester of instruction. When the program was implemented in a public school setting, students achieved similar gains. Because the

Literacy classes for struggling readers must set students up to succeed and acknowledge them for their efforts.



program proved replicable, nationwide dissemination began, and to date, it has been implemented in schools in 24 states.

Helping At-Risk Students

According to the National School Safety Center (NSSC), such school-related influences as an inability to read, an inability to keep up with other students, and the resulting feelings of low self-esteem are reasons why students leave school. For many students, truancy is the gateway to such dangerous behaviors as drug and alcohol use, gang involvement, and violence (NSSC, 1994). Even more troubling, at-risk nonreaders are at greater risk for future criminal behavior and incarceration (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999).

At the high school I taught in, students who were considered at-risk for dropping out were assigned to a specific counselor. Most of our at-risk students had histories of truancy, and when I was a FAME teacher, I remember a colleague looking at my roster and telling me I had invisible classes because many of the students were notorious for truancy. Happily, many of these chronically truant students

attended their reading classes regularly. Why? First, many of these students experienced academic success for the first time since elementary school in my class. The program builds on students' strengths and sets them up for success by providing a fast-paced, positive classroom environment. A student who attends his or her FAME class is a student who will succeed. More important, students see concrete proof of their success weekly because they take pretests on Mondays and posttests on Fridays. If attendance is consistent throughout the week, these students show significant gains.

Weekly student-teacher conferences that focus on students' achievements are an important part of the program. The goal of these conferences is to praise



Figure 1

COURSE	SKILLS TAUGHT	GRADE LEVEL
Foundations	Decoding, Word Recognition	2–4
Adventures	Fluency, Basic Vocabulary	4–6
Mastery	Advanced Vocabulary, Silent Reading	6–8
Explorations	Comprehension, Synthesis	8+

students’ accomplishments, build positive relationships, and set concrete, attainable goals. The authors of FAME, Curtis and Longo (1999), explain the importance of the weekly conferences by stating that “students who can be shown how much progress they’ve made are much more willing to believe that further growth is possible.”

In addition to the more formal weekly conferences, students benefited from the low student-to-teacher ratios required. Foundations and Adventures requires a ratio of two teachers to 10 students and Mastery and Explorations requires one teacher for up to 15 students. Low student-to-teacher ratios may present financial obstacles to schools adopting the FAME program. However, it can be more cost effective than many other reading interventions that rely on one-on-one instruction. Moreover, because the inability to read is linked to increased truancy and a greater risk of criminal behavior, the cost of reducing class size and hiring a paraprofessional is insignificant when compared to the average cost (\$43,000) of housing a juvenile inmate for one year (Juvenile Justice FYI, n.d.). Research also shows that “allowing one youth to leave high school for a life of crime and drug abuse costs society \$1.7 to \$2.3 million” (Juvenile Justice FYI).

Building Reading Skills

Armed with degrees in English and history and a brand new teaching certificate, Amy was ready to begin her teaching career and lead her students down the path of literary enlightenment. However, like me, college had not prepared Amy for students who lacked the basic skills (e.g., decoding, fluency, and vocabulary) needed for comprehension-based tasks. When Amy’s sophomores finished reading *Lord of the Flies*, she assigned a theme by simply handing out a half-sheet of paper with a few topics. She gave the due date and the class promptly began a new unit. Amy explained this rapid transition: “I had this same topic given to me when I was a freshman. We had discussed the book in detail and the knowledge was there. We didn’t talk about *how* to write it. We all just knew. We were freshmen, after all. Aren’t you supposed to know how to write a theme?”

Most of Amy’s students were abuzz with panic. Some of her students were also in my FAME Explorations class.

Explorations, the fourth and most advanced course, focuses on critical thinking and writing as ways to solve problems. Explorations is a research class and students spend the majority of their time reading nonfiction sources, analyzing information, and finally, compiling that information into final products, from one-sentence responses to five-paragraph essays. Their writings served as an indicator for the study skills mini-lessons we covered in class. Although all students were progressing in their skills, I wondered if any would be able to successfully complete the *Lord of the Flies* theme.

I checked with these students on a daily basis to see whether they needed additional help or instruction on the *Lord of the Flies* theme. One of my students, Anthony, looked at me after my fourth or fifth offer and said, exasperated, “I got it.” I was skeptical. Anthony was a Foundations student in our program just three semesters earlier. As a Foundations student, he entered FAME reading at the third-grade level with decoding difficulties. Was he truly ready to handle such a task after such a short time?

As it turned out, the *Lord of the Flies* theme was not a very successful undertaking for Amy’s students, though it did yield some valuable insights. Amy learned the importance of clarification and the danger of assumption; only about half of her students turned in the assignment and only about a quarter of those students passed. My students learned they were capable students, and six of the eight students who were both Explorations and English students passed the *Lord of the Flies* theme. I learned that some-



times the transition from dependence to independence is as difficult for the teacher as it is for the student. When I asked Anthony exactly how it was that he “got it,” he said, with his usual candor, “You showed us how to find things we need.

You make us write that compare-and-contrast essay every two weeks. I just did in English what I always do for you.”

By phoning my students’ parents at the beginning of the school year and reporting only positive and informative news, I empowered parents by letting them know what my expectations were and how they could help their child realize those expectations.

Involving Parents

Foundations and Adventures require that students complete an independent reading assignment each night. Students read a novel of their choice and ask a parent or guardian to sign their reading log. This task not only provides independent practice time for students, but also establishes a home environment that supports literacy.

According to Cotton and Wikelund (1989), there is a strong indication that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those in which parents support students’ efforts on homework assignments.

As a FAME teacher, my classes were small and I was able to call my students’ parents within the first few weeks of school. After I introduced myself, parents responded with a variety of emotions that ranged from resignation (“What did she do *now*?”) to hostility (“Quit calling all the time”) to apathy (“He was with his dad, so I don’t care”). Rather than giving negative feedback in the ensuing conversations, I explained the reading course and asked the parents for their assistance in monitoring completion of the nightly reading assignments. I ended each conversation by praising their child for something he or she had already done, no matter how insignificant the accomplishment.

One student, Jeff, was off to a rough start. By the third day of school, he had visited the principal three times and had earned two detentions. I called his mother last because, honestly, he was one of my more challenging students and I needed time to think of something authentically positive to tell his mother. Jeff soon gave me exactly what I needed. One day, Jeff sauntered into my classroom two minutes before the bell rang. He reached in his pocket and extracted a crumpled word activity assigned the night before. He hurriedly completed the sheet, quickly filling in the blanks with the correct vocabulary words. The bell rang and class began. I asked for students’ homework. With a snap of his wrist and a smirk, Jeff brandished his freshly completed paper. Was this an ideal situation? No. Had Jeff allowed me the opportunity to “catch him being good”? Absolutely.

At the end of the school day, I called Jeff’s mom to pass along procedural information about the class. I finished the call by praising her son for handing in the assignment.

Silence. Then, I heard her breathe deeply and in a shaky voice respond, “That is the only nice thing I’ve heard on the phone about my son since he was in the second grade.”

Although I facilitated the partnership of students, teachers, and parents, each person was of equal importance and value. If parents receive frequent and positive school-to-home communication, they feel more self-confident, more comfortable with the school, and are more likely to become involved (Epstein, 1994). By phoning my students’ parents at the beginning of the school year and reporting only positive and informative news, I empowered parents by letting them know what my expectations were and how they could help their child realize those expectations. Because of this, I made many parents my allies during the first few weeks of school and saw positive results from many of my students.

Providing a Foundation for the Future

According to Lyon (Title I, 1999), “Reading skill serves as the major foundational skill for all school-based learning, and without it, the chances for academic and occupational success are limited indeed.” Reading Is FAME gave my school the gift of reintroducing disenfranchised students into the classroom with the tools necessary to mold their success. **PL**

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Author's note: For more information about the Reading Is FAME program, visit www.girlsandboystown.org/pros/training/education/FAME_program.asp.

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