

Turning The Page On Middle And High School Illiteracy

Vanderbilt University



At age 12, Julio Ruiz of Midland, Texas, avoided participating in class. When he was pushed to contribute, or was not able to answer a question, he would misbehave.

“When [my teachers] called on me,” Ruiz says about his sixth-grade experience, “I would get in trouble so I could go to the office.”

Now at 14, and in the eighth grade, Ruiz has made a remarkable transformation. He is eager to join in class discussions, no longer gets scared or nervous in class and, most importantly, his schoolwork has shown improvement.

What happened?

He learned how to read.

Ruiz was one of the thousands of middle and high school students in the United States who slide by year after year with reading skills that are far below their grade level.

“*Most children learn to read by the time they have reached third or fourth grade unless they have*

the added challenge of learning a second language, have a learning disability or a difficult home life.

But what happens when a child has moved through middle school and into high school and still cannot read?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 7,000 high school students drop out every day. That is equivalent to one-third of the entire U.S. high school population. Two-thirds of students in eighth grade read below grade level.

Without the ability to read, students' grades can go down, they may withdraw, act out or lose confidence or interest in what is going on around them.

Ruiz is a good example. While he could actually read words, Ruiz did not comprehend what he was reading. He was not understanding and putting things together.

Until his teacher started him on Read 180.

Interactive Reading Intervention

Back in the early 1980s, before “reading intervention” and “no child left behind” became programs, Ted Hasselbring, Ph.D., a research professor of special education at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, bridged the gap between computer technology and teaching children to read.

Hasselbring first applied his new technology for use in diagnosing spelling errors for special education and special needs children. From there, he and his graduate student team took this interactive program, which utilized video, audio and digitized speech, and applied it to adult learners.

But it was a Department of Education call for grants — and computers donated by Apple — that set Hasselbring’s reading intervention tool on the path to help middle and high school age students. His team applied for, and twice received, grant money to further develop the program. By 1992, the Learning Technology Center had a prototype program that was making a difference with students in the Nashville area.

Word traveled quickly in educational circles and led Hasselbring’s team to a five-year literacy project in Orange County, Fla.

“For every year of intervention, we were seeing two to three years of growth,” says Hasselbring.

A Program — and a Partnership — Is Born

News of the Florida program’s success made it to Boston, where Hasselbring met Margery Mayer, president of Scholastic. They were attending a meeting at the Center for Special Technology and were introduced by a colleague. Mayer saw the potential right away and scheduled a site visit to Vanderbilt.

Hasselbring subsequently visited Scholastic headquarters in New York. In less than two years, with the help of Janis Elsner, associate director at the Office of Technology Transfer and Enterprise Development at Vanderbilt, Scholastic licensed the intellectual property rights in Read 180 from Vanderbilt.

“Ted is the connective tissue between Vanderbilt and Scholastic,” says Mayer. “The roots of this program fit perfectly with Scholastic’s credo that all children can learn, deserve to learn and can succeed at high levels. It’s even woven in our office carpeting.”

What made the program so powerful is that children were working at their own speed, selecting their own subject matter and receiving immediate feedback, says Elsner.

“There really wasn’t that much out there at the time for middle to high school age students struggling with reading,” says Elsner. “Ted had the data, Scholastic was a great partner — they really know publishing and distributing educational technology.” Scholastic took the basic program, added components, and turned it into a comprehensive reading project available for adoption by schools.

“This program enables students to turn their lives around; they take a 180-degree turn,” Elsner says.

Which is how the program got its name.

Breaking it Down Into Parts

Once a teacher chooses Read 180 for the classroom, rescheduling and classroom rearrangement is strongly encouraged for best results. Desks are set up in a conversation layout, not in rows. Beanbag chairs and comfortable couches are often used for the independent reading rotation. In addition, the teachers — and students — need to commit to 90 minutes every day.

Students begin by listening to an introduction session given by the teacher. The students then rotate through small group instruction with the teacher, individual computer tutorial and independent reading sessions. As a student moves through the program, his or her reading level is assessed and the material is customized. Many of the topics are taken from headline news (an incident where whales were trapped in Alaskan ice), from real life situations (how to get your first job) or from history (such as the story of Hiroshima). After students rotate through the sessions, they meet in a large group to conclude the class.

Technology Meets the Page

Read 180 is not only turning literacy around for students who are two or more years below their reading proficiency, the program also created a successful new business arena for Scholastic.

Read 180 makes up the majority of Scholastic’s educational technology sales, which reached more than \$200 million in the first three quarters of 2010.

And there is still plenty of room to grow. According to Scholastic, there are 100,000 middle and high schools in the United States. About 18,000 classrooms incorporate the reading program into the curriculum; some schools have more than one classroom using it.

But it is not just the financial benefits that Hasselbring and others find rewarding. It’s making a difference in children’s lives.

Hasselbring says he has received letters from students saying that before they were exposed to the Read 180 program, they either never read a book or they wanted to quit school. But after experiencing the program, these behaviors and feelings disappeared. “When I’m having a bad day,” Hasselbring says, “I can pick up those letters and remember why I do what I do.”

There is a good bit of teacher enthusiasm too, Hasselbring says. “I also hear from teachers saying that they were ready to retire but once this program was put in their classroom, their job satisfaction went up.”

Readers Are Leaders

Vanderbilt and Scholastic may have co-created a highly effective new reading intervention program, but the real stars are the students. Every year since 2005, Scholastic honors 12 students who stand out from among the many who turn their reading around with Read 180. Ruiz was one such student, however, there are many others.

“These students are an inspiration to all of us,” says Mayer. “Through hard work and the help of their amazing teachers, these All-Stars have proven that there is no goal that they cannot reach.”

Some of the past few years’ recipients of the All-Star Award have reported that they are getting As and Bs rather than Ds and Fs. They are reading at home after school, running for student council and writing skits for classmates to perform. They have overcome shyness and are letting go of self-destructive behavior issues. Most importantly, they are graduating from high school and are college-bound.

“If you can’t read, school is not a great place. No wonder kids drop out of school,” says Mayer. “We’d like to see Read 180 in every single school.”

It is very possible that every school would like to see that, too.

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