



CLOSING THE GAP

Online reading intervention can dramatically improve ACT scores and college readiness

BY MARY SARGENT

In almost every school, there are students who struggle in reading, despite multiple interventions. As a result, far too many students graduate from high school ill-prepared for the academic rigors of college or the literacy requirements of today's entry-level jobs.

According to "The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015" report by ACT, only 46 percent of all ACT-tested high school graduates nationwide met the ACT college readiness benchmarks in reading.

To close the gap between college eligibility and readiness, Conner High School in Hebron, KY, launched a course in 2010 called "Reading for College Success." The semester-long course was designed for students who aren't meeting benchmarks on ACT's EPAS® (Educational Planning and Assessment System) tests. Since launching the course, our struggling readers have made tremendous progress—increasing their ACT scores and achieving gains of up to six grade levels in reading in a single school year.

TO IMPLEMENT A READING FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS COURSE AT YOUR SCHOOL:

- Limit the course to a maximum of 20 students.
- Choose a teacher who will be the students' biggest cheerleader and create a positive atmosphere in which students can build confidence and feel comfortable enough to take risks.
- Encourage students to track their own progress to boost accountability for their success. First, explain what the student's starting level is in reading. Then, have the teacher work with each student to set a goal for the semester and ensure they chart their progress each week.

Reading for College Success

At Conner High School, we share a vision that all students will graduate college- and career-ready. So, it's a tough conversation when I have to tell parents their child isn't meeting our reading benchmarks. When I tell them we have an intervention that can help their child advance up to six grade levels in reading, many don't believe it. But we have the data to show that it's true, and that it works.

Reading for College Success is a one-credit elective. All students who have a reading score below 15 on ACT's Explore benchmark assessment in the eighth grade or ACT's Plan benchmark assessment in the 10th grade are required to enroll. During the 90-minute class, students have 50 minutes of classroom instruction with a language arts teacher. Then they spend 40 minutes working independently on one or two online reading programs.

A Positive Atmosphere

Most students in Reading for College Success have been struggling for years, and many say they don't like reading. So, our first priority is to motivate them. Each day, language arts teacher Wendy Karle strives to create a fun, high-energy atmosphere. She compliments students' efforts and offers positive reinforcement. She distributes certificates and awards to celebrate students' growth. She also works very hard to establish a comfort zone so they're not afraid to take risks in front of their peers. After a while, students say they enjoy the class so much that it almost feels like they're learning "by accident."

Classroom Instruction

Reading for College Success is organized around five units: foundations, reading for information, text structure, reading literature, and vocabulary. During the classroom instruction, Karle breaks down each lesson into small

chunks. In a regular classroom, a teacher might cover several components at once in a shorter amount of time. In contrast, Karle will spend several days delivering explicit, detailed instruction on just one part of one unit.

Another key strategy is to get students to slow down and pay attention to what they're reading. It's important to remind them that reading isn't about speed or getting through an assignment as quickly as possible. So, Karle uses a document camera and Smart Board to show them how to annotate. This helps them think about what they're reading, instead of racing through it.

Online Reading Interventions

In our Reading for College Success course, we also assign students to one or two online reading programs, based on their individual needs. We use the Reading Assistant program by Scientific Learning to provide individualized reading coaching. The online reading



tool uses speech recognition technology to correct and support students as they read aloud. This helps them build fluency and comprehension with the help of a supportive listener. We also use the Fast ForWord program to help students build foundational reading and language skills, as well as cognitive skills such as memory, attention, and processing speed.

When students begin Reading Assistant, they take a pretest that places them at the appropriate level. Within the program, they preview and read silently, answer guided reading questions, and listen to a model reading of the text. Then they read aloud and record their reading. The program intervenes with support as needed. There's no way we could provide this level of one-on-one support in a class of 20 students without the use of technology.

Helping students with immediate feedback on errors and private playback of their reading has been instrumental to their success. Many students simply don't realize that they're not reading something correctly. But when they can listen to their own recording, they can suddenly hear and understand their errors in a way they never could before.

In our first year of the Reading for College Success course, 92 percent of students achieved gains of one to six grade levels, according to reading progress indicator, a computerized reading assessment in the Reading Assistant program. Since then, students have continued to make strong gains. For example, from August to December

ACT Gains 2010–2015

ACT GAIN	# OF STUDENTS	% OF STUDENTS
10+ points	86	20%
5–9	114	26%
1–4	149	34%
No gain	91	21%

NOTE: PERCENTAGES HAVE BEEN ROUNDED UP AND MAY TOTAL MORE THAN 100.

2015, ninth-grade students in the course went from an average mid-fifth-grade reading level (5.6) to a mid-ninth-grade reading level (9.6).

For students with an ACT Explore or ACT Plan Reading score between 15 and 17, our school also created a pullout program, where students work on Reading Assistant or Fast ForWord for 30 minutes a day. Students are released when they score 23 on the reading portion of the ACT practice test. That way, we don't waste their time once they've achieved mastery.

As part of a study conducted during the 2011–12 and 2012–13 school years, students in the Reading for College Success course used Reading Assistant for 37 days over a period of four months on average. At the beginning of the study, the students' average Explore or Plan score was 12.3. After using Reading Assistant, the average score on the students' best-effort ACT practice test improved to 18.3. Reading scores improved for 89 percent of students, and 33 percent of students met or exceeded the ACT benchmark score.

From 2010–2015, 20 percent of students made gains of 10 points or

more on the ACT after participating in our programs.

Achieving ROI

Thanks to Reading for College Success and our pullout program, we've helped students boost their reading skills and close persistent gaps. We have hundreds of students reading on or near grade level who would not have been able to do so without these programs. Students' self-esteem, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning have increased as well. Plus, for students who go on to college, these courses actually save them money, since they no longer have to pay for remedial reading courses.

Students, particularly those who have struggled for years, need clear, tangible goals. They need constant motivation and a pat on the back when they're making progress. And that's the great thing—with the right support, they will make progress. 

Mary Sargent is assistant principal at Conner High School in Hebron, KY, which is a part of Boone County Schools—Kentucky's third-largest school district.