start to FINISH

Bring the Joy of Reading to Your Struggling Readers with Start-to-Finish Books

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We know students who struggle with reading need time to read.

All the drill and practice to improve skills would be in vain if we did not provide a way for students to read books. It is well documented that those that read, get better at reading (Stanovich, 1986 "Matthew Effect"). When children fail at reading, they begin to dislike reading and read less, which continues them on the cycle of failure. They fall further behind in reading, writing, vocabulary and general knowledge.

Our goal was to put the joy back into reading, and this was accomplished by providing additional interventions using Start-to-Finish books from Don Johnston Inc.

The Northwest Suburban Special Education Organization is a cooperative between eight school districts in the northwest suburbs of Chicago and serves students with a wide range of disabilities. Many of our students struggle with reading and have deficits in decoding, fluency and comprehension. Students who struggle with reading are often taught using direct instruction remediation programs that focus on discrete skill acquisition. These programs teach the necessary skills to be successful in reading, but struggling students don't often get the chance to read novels or chapter books. We wanted to provide quality age-appropriate books for struggling readers that they could read for enjoyment.

As part of the instructional technology team, we helped provide support to classrooms and staff incorporating these books into the curriculum and

in our RTI triangle as interventions for struggling students. We helped teachers integrate Start-To-Finish books into the curriculum in a variety of ways, including independent reading, novel studies, author studies, and P.O.W.E.R. Hour – Positive Outcomes When Everyone Reads.

In order to accomplish our goal, we needed to get enough copies of a variety of titles to provide teachers with classroom sets and to allow students to have a choice for independent reading. We also needed to offer professional development to demonstrate features and the data collection tools.

The Start-to-Finish library has been around for many years. We believe they are a tried and true method to provide students with quality text so that they will find success in reading. Our teachers like them because they are easy to implement and they provide data on student progress. Our students like them because they have engaging stories and are easy to read. The Start-to-Finish novels are high interest books that are written with a low readability level using considerate text. The authors of the books, Jerry Stemach and Gail Portnuff Venable, suggest six markers for considerate text in their article, Inconsiderate Text, A Struggling Students Nightmare:

Mature story themes that "connect" with student's maturity level

Engagement so that books are relevant and compelling

Considerate text limits the density of new vocabulary and introduces new words, new meanings of old words and idioms carefully

Considerate text assumes little prior knowledge and anchors the reader using familiar examples and analogies and, when appropriate, builds mental models by providing considerate photos, illustrations, maps and other graphics that are properly labeled and captioned

Considerate text simplifies sentence structure, but makes the logical connections between ideas clear. It does not use short, choppy sentences

Adding technology can make the text even more effective. An audio CD or MP3 file can add human-recorded, digitized speech to model phrasing, rate, intonation and stress, irony, sarcasm, humor and the pronunciations of new names and unfamiliar words. A computer book can display on-screen text that is highlighted as it is read.

The books are provided in three formats, which include paperback book, audio book and computer book. A new online version has recently been released and makes books accessible from wherever you have Internet connection. Books can even be read on the iPad!

The books are written in two readability levels:

The Gold books are written at second- to third-grade-level readability with a fifth- to 12th-grade interest level.

The Gold books have the following features:
- Opportunity for students with lower skills to have a literacy experience with full support of the computer book
- Syntax and vocabulary of conversational speech
- High-frequency and topic-specific vocabulary
- Careful introduction of unfamiliar vocabulary and idioms
- Limited number of ideas per sentence
- Auditory support for individual words
- Word-by-word highlighting

The Blue books are written at a fourth- to fifth-grade readability with a fifth- to 12th-grade interest level.

The Blue books have the following features:
- Opportunity for students with lower skills to read with full support of the computer book
- Syntax and vocabulary of more formal or literary English
- More complex or abstract vocabulary than the Gold Library
- More ideas introduced into longer sentences
- More varied sentence structures
- Mastery of first- and second-grade level words assumed; auditory support for individual words above this level
- Sentence-by-sentence highlighting

Our students love the wide variety of engaging stories

Fiction and non-fiction titles include classics, adventures, biographies, mysteries, natural disasters and many more. Our students would never have an opportunity to read Tom Sawyer, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, Treasure Island, Romeo and Juliet, Black Beauty and short stories, by authors such as Mark Twain and Edgar Allen Poe, without access to these books. They are proud to list these titles as books they have read.

The Start-To-Finish books were incorporated into different aspects of the student's curriculum. Some teachers used them during guided reading lessons with the whole class or small groups. They tied them into author studies, novel studies and thematic units. They were also used during independent reading. This helped students to build their confidence as a reader, provide access to a wide variety of titles and to practice reading to become a better reader.

At one of our programs, Miner School, a strong need was identified to provide all the students with opportunities to read for enjoyment. The goal was to start a school-wide book club in which students would be exposed to age-respectful reading material, with an emphasis on building oral language skills. The reading club that began was called P.O.W.E.R. Hour – Positive Outcomes When Everyone Reads

Students met in small groups (three to five students per group) on a daily basis for 30 minutes. One novel was chosen each month to be read by the entire school. All staff members participated by leading a group, including classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists, support staff and even the P.E. teacher! Students were grouped by reading level, age level, type of adaptation or support they required and level of oral language skills. Novels were provided in a variety of formats, including the Start-to-Finish novels by Don Johnston. Some of the novel titles that were chosen were Treasure Island ,Building Wings, A Christmas Carol and Tom Sawyer.

The Start-to-Finish novels were read by students in a variety of ways. Some teachers chose a whole group approach. The digital format of the novel was projected onto a SMART Board and students listened to a chapter of the book and then discussed what they had read. Some groups chose to have their students read the hard copy of the novel and others had their students read along independently with the digital format on individual computers. Extension activities were provided that included drawing illustrations, watching the movie and attending community plays of the story.

The use of the Start-to-Finish novels was so well received that they were identified as a reading intervention on the Miner School's RTI triangle.

The students responded well to the use of these novels and an increase in both fluency and comprehension was noted. When asked what they liked about the Start-to-Finish novels, students responded, "I like it because it tests what I can remember from each chapter and it challenges us," "I like it because they read to you and they're good," and "I like it because they are cool!"

Teachers also responded very positively to including the Start-to-Finish novels in their instruction. Here is what one of our teachers had to say: "The books are age appropriate and seem like teenager books. Kids can relate to some of the characters and the settings are interesting. The books are written in a way that the kids speak with less complicated conversations. They are written with chapters, which makes the kids feel good about their accomplishments of reading chapter books. In regards to some of the settings, I can teach history, geography and map skills. I like the consistent format of the chapter quizzes. Love the audio. The kids are attentive to the voice that is reading. It is at a good pace and inflection."

A long history

We have a long history of using Start-to-Finish books and have had them available for students for many years. When we first started out, we had a small group of books available in our lending library. We chose classroom sets of popular novels that were most often requested from the schools. These started with classics, mysteries and biographies. In the beginning, we had more gold level books in our lending library than blue level books. This was based on the reading level of many of our struggling readers. Soon schools wanted their own sets of books and began purchasing for their school library and computer labs. Schools in our programs often swapped classroom sets so they had access to a greater set of titles or multiple copies of a title. It was a great way to start getting the books into our schools and into the hands of students. As our needs increased and more purchasing options became available, we purchased an unlimited license for one of our schools. This allowed us to burn as many copies of the electronic book as we needed and we were able to send CDs home with students.

In the spring of 2012, the online version was released

We decided to pilot it at Miner School during the extended school year to be able to give students access to books over the summer. Once we tried the online version, we were hooked! Students could access the books on any computer that had Internet access. They didn't need to go back to the same computer where they started because their work was now online. They could access books at home and school. Teachers could log in and see data for any student in their class, and administrators/coaches could log in to see data for multiple classrooms.

In this time of teacher accountability and response to intervention, the data collection in this program is an important feature for our staff.

Data is collected on books read, comprehension quizzes, vocabulary quizzes and words clicked on. Detailed progress reports can be viewed online or printed out. Staff can view and analyze the data to further guide instruction. In the online version, this is easily accomplished by logging in on any computer or iPad with Internet access. In other versions of Start-To-Finish, data is stored on the hard drive of the computer and students and teachers must go to the same computer to retrieve data.

Word got out fast about the online version and we found schools asking if they could switch to this new version, including one of our programs that serves students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Often times, students who are deaf or hard of hearing struggle with reading. Many of the students can benefit from the low readability and high interest, age-appropriate titles. Access to the Start-To-Finish books is also beneficial to students who are included in general education classrooms. It gave our itinerant teachers an opportunity to pre-teach a story before the class reads it. This worked out well in the high school where students were required to read Romeo and Juliet, Othello and other classic books.

Our technology and curriculum training specialists were available to provide staff development in a variety of formats. Hands-on workshops were provided during half day sessions, after school sessions and mini–classes. Staff received credit toward certificate renewal for after school workshops. Our workshops emphasized the differences between Gold and Blue level books, setting preferences and looking at data. In preparing materials for staff development, we didn't re-invent the wheel. The Don Johnston website has an assortment of professional development materials and resources that can be used for workshops or independent learning. Some of our favorites included the Train-in-30 tutorial, quick guides, Show-Me-How videos and the Overview of Start-to-Finish video. Additional resources that our staff found helpful were the Start-To-Finish Lexile Level List, Titles with Advanced Content, Setting the Purpose for Reading, and Why is Start-to-Finish so Readable.

Training materials are available on Don Johnston's website at http://www.donjohnston.com/resources/stfonline_index.html

In August of 2011, we were excited to have Don Johnston as one of the keynote speakers at our opening Institute Day. He shared his personal story of how he struggled with reading with our staff. His inspirational speech set the tone for the year and many staff members chose to read Building Wings, Don's autobiography, with their students. It was even more exciting for our students and staff when Don Johnston came to visit two of our schools. Our students had the opportunity to interview Don about his book and being an author. Some student shared their own stories about struggling with reading. Teachers shared with Don how their students found enjoyment in reading through the use of the Start-to-Finish books.

PRICING AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Start-to-Finish Online
$429/site/per year
Start-to-Finish Library Purchasing Options
Complete Title Sets $59
Start-to-Finish Library Classroom Collection $399
Unlimited Site Licensing $2,565/site

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