

New Mexico's Oldest Independent Elementary School Has Taken a New Look at Reading Instruction

95%-100% of All Students Are Now Reading at or Above Grade Level

Founded in 1938, Manzano Day School is the oldest independent elementary school in New Mexico. The school's six-acre campus reflects its vibrant historic past, with adobe buildings, placitas, gardens, and a view of the surrounding Sandia mountains. Inside these storied buildings, however, something new is going on.

Here teachers are embracing innovative teaching programs, and seeing positive results for their students. The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is one such program, and for the past five years the staff has seen significant gains in reading achievement.

The *F.A.S.T. Reading System*, which stands for Foundations of Analysis, Synthesis & Translation, is part of the daily reading curriculum for grades K-5. It provides instruction and practice with phonological and phonetic skills in all reading, spelling, and writing classes.

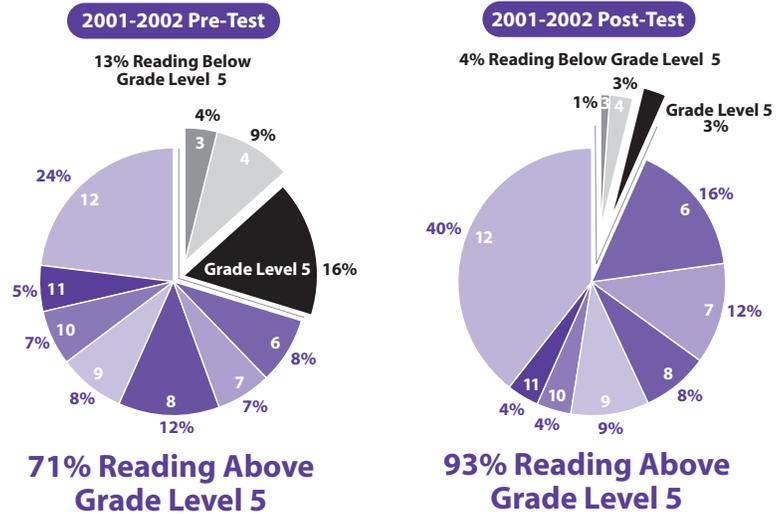
"The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* has provided a lot of structure for our kids and our teachers, and I think it definitely creates better readers," says Deb Benton, assistant head. "We're also able to identify reading issues much earlier than we did in the past in a much more meaningful way. We're able to refer students who need extra help much faster, whether it is to a speech pathologist, a tutor, or whoever we need. We're picking up on difficulties because we can really narrow down where a kid is having problems." Today, Benton notes that by fifth grade 95% of the students are reading independently.

That wasn't always the case.

Reading Achievement at a Low Before F.A.S.T.

In 2000, 25% of Manzano's students were reading below grade level — too many for Margaret Anderson, then assistant head, and Jeannine Comstock, learning specialist.

5th Grade Reading Performance Gates-MacGinitie Grade Equivalent



Pre- and post-testing results confirm dramatic improvement in reading performance among 5th graders following F.A.S.T.'s first year of implementation. The percentages of students reading above grade level increased by 22% with 93% reading at the 6th-12th grade-levels at the end of the academic year. Subsequent yearly post-test results have been equally significant. In 2002-2003, for example, NO students scored below grade level, 80% scored at least 2 levels above grade, and 40% scored at the 12th grade level.

"We knew there was a need for something that was more standardized, more structured that would really help reduce the number of kids who were reading below grade level," says Comstock. "I come from a background of phonics and I know that it works for kids. When we heard about F.A.S.T., we thought it might provide that standard approach."

After observing the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* in action and seeing that it went, in Comstock's words, "well beyond the basic phonics program," the two signed up for training and in March 2000 launched their own pilot program for eight weeks. Comstock worked with the lowest achieving third graders, and Anderson with the lowest achieving fourth graders.

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Manzano Day School Albuquerque, NM

- Independent/Nonsectarian
- Pre-K-5
- 440 students
- 38% Students of Color
- 25% Socioeconomic Diversity (on need-based financial aid)

Manzano's Reading Achievement Goals

- Strengthen systematic instruction in reading while providing meaningful reading experiences
- Provide children with the skills to read more successfully
- Better prepare Kindergartners for first grade reading in order to have fewer children at risk at the end of first grade

“F.A.S.T. empowers kids. It gives them the tools they need to be successful readers, which in turn impacts all other areas of their learning and their lives.”

—Jeannine Comstock
Learning Specialist
Manzano Day School
Albuquerque, New Mexico

“We did pre-testing and post-testing, and in just that short time we saw a big improvement.” Adds Anderson, “We never looked at the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* as just a program for remediation. We thought, ‘If it can do that for kids who have trouble reading, what would it do for kids who didn’t?’”

After meeting extensively with all of the teachers, getting their buy-in, and conducting training sessions over the summer, the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* was implemented school wide in the fall of 2000.

F.A.S.T.'s Consistent, Flexible Approach Pays Off

“Before F.A.S.T., if I went from classroom to classroom observing teachers, I would sometimes think I wasn’t in the same school,” says Anderson. “Everybody was teaching reading differently. The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is consistent — the language, the instruction is the same throughout the whole school.”

Today at Manzano, there are 24 teachers who are trained in the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* (four at each grade level from K-5). Students are taught in performance groups, going cross-classroom within a grade level. The program offers flexibility, allowing a child to move up or down within various skill groups depending upon their progress.

Comstock emphasizes that the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is not a pullout program, “Everyone is going to F.A.S.T., so there isn’t any stigma attached to it at all.”

Success stories abound at every grade level. Says Comstock, “The F.A.S.T. Learning *First Steps Program* has been phenomenal in preparing the incoming first graders. We get quite a few new admissions in first grade, and many of those children are not nearly as well prepared with the phonological background that our kids who have been in the kindergarten F.A.S.T. program.

“Last year,” she continues, “I taught a fourth grade class... I have never seen a group of kids who just love to read for the joy of reading so much. Other fourth grade teachers have told me the same thing.”

Margaret Anderson notes that in fifth grade last year all of the students were reading at grade level, and 50% were reading at 11th and 12th grade levels. “Our kids are now more prepared for getting into [private] middle school, which is very competitive down here,” she says.

The Benefits of the F.A.S.T. Approach

While all three educators emphasize that the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is not a stand-alone reading program, Deb Benton explains that it’s also much more than a complement to other programs. “If you look at the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* in our lower grades, it’s a much stronger focus, and as kids progress it becomes less and less. It’s on a continuum — if you were drawing a line, you’d have a dark, heavy line in kindergarten, first and second grade and then it would start to fade as you moved into third, fourth and fifth grade — where the literature-based, whole language programs start to take hold. Within this continuum, of course, there are gradients for individual children based upon their skill levels.”

Adds Comstock, “I like the way the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* incorporates all of the modalities — the kinesthetic as well as the auditory and visual. We have a lot of children who have auditory processing problems, so the visual and hands-on component with the magnetic board and word tiles really helps reinforce their learning. It’s such a big improvement over the phonics of old where it was so much skill and drill and workbooks.

“Also vital to the success of the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is the immediate practice and connected text, where the students apply what they’ve learned in real reading.”

Margaret Anderson agrees. “The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* works because it is fast-paced and application-rather than rules-oriented. The teacher teaches. It’s multi-sensory. The kids have that board and they get very involved in terms of making new words as they’re learning a new concept. Then they get right into the little book and practice what they’ve just learned. It’s thorough. It’s so complete. It reinforces itself over and over again with spelling, reading and writing.

“I encourage other educators to do a pilot study just like we did. It takes some effort, but once you see the difference it makes in the kids, you’re sold. I’m not sure that the vast majority of other programs out there can show this much growth this quickly. The kids like it, the parents are happy, and the teachers are inspired. It’s just amazing.”

“The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* empowers kids,” concludes Comstock. “It gives them the tools they need to be successful readers, which in turn impacts all other areas of their learning and their lives.”