

F.A.S.T. Is Helping Mission Avenue Elementary Accomplish Its Goals for Reading Success

In 2002, the staff at Mission Avenue Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, took a hard look at their reading program and decided something had to be done to better meet the needs of its student population, a group with extremely low socioeconomic status, high mobility rates, and English language deficits.

Principal Stephen Pino had heard about the success of the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* through a colleague at a neighboring private school, Manzano Day School, and arranged for all of the Mission Avenue teachers to observe the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* in action. "The initial reaction was one of uncertainty," says Pino. "They thought it would be one of those programs that would eventually run its course. However, our staff has experienced many success stories that have made them believers. They are sold!"

Instructional Coach Mary Ann Steffens is one such believer. "We had some resistance, but 80% of our teachers said they wanted to do it, the other 20% said if the majority voted for it, they'd go along." Today, Mission Avenue has 7 teachers who are certified *F.A.S.T. Reading* instructors and are, in Pino's words, "fired up with these new reading tools in the classroom."

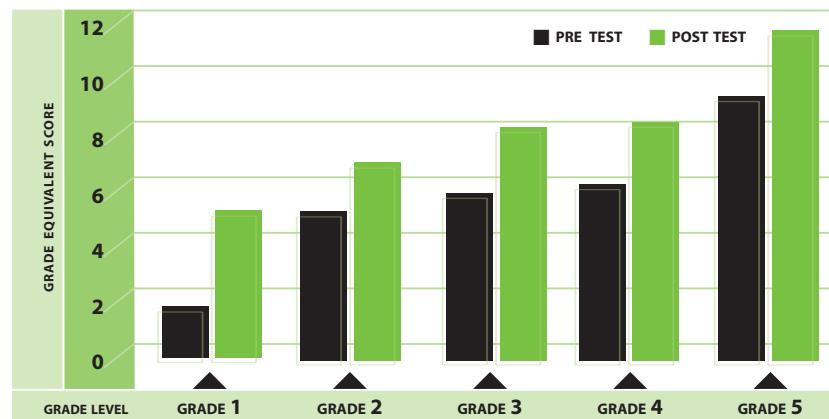
"The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is my passion," continues Steffens. "I said to some people, I'm staying in APS (Albuquerque Public Schools) longer than I meant to because I've finally learned how to teach kids to read. I have a Master's...this is my 35th year of teaching, some of it at the college level...but I've never seen anything like this. I'm just thrilled. The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* has totally changed my focus, my career."

The *F.A.S.T. Reading System*, now in its third year at Mission Avenue Elementary, is integrated into every reading class at every grade level. Within each grade level, there are three to four flexible ability groups (beginning, middle and high) where children can progress as their word attack, vocabulary, and comprehension skills improve. This year, because of higher scores, the fourth grade was able to start with just one *F.A.S.T.* class, with the remaining two

(continued on next page)

Mission Avenue's 2003-4 Test Scores Reveal Significant Reading Gains in Grades 1-5

Woodcock-Johnson Word Attack Scores Show Students Performing 3-4 Levels and More Above Grade Level



The above data clearly shows the impact of *F.A.S.T.* instruction on Mission Avenue's first through fifth grade readers. All students, except for first graders, had one prior year of *F.A.S.T.* Pre-test scores are from Spring 2003, post-test scores are from Spring 2004.

“The thing I want to emphasize with the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is that the average scores at grade level with all of our children are much higher than they used to be,” says Instructional Coach Mary Ann Steffens. “[Before *F.A.S.T.*] our second-graders never went in with an average that was above 2. Now they’re starting the year far better prepared and they’re still making significant progress. Look at our second-graders, for example. They came in at a pre-test level of 4.5 — that’s a fourth grade level — and they left second grade with an average 6.3. That’s amazing! Our teachers say they’ve never seen the kids quite so well prepared.”

Mission Avenue Elementary School Albuquerque, NM

- Albuquerque Public School District
- Pre-K-5
- 445 students
- 74% Hispanic
15% White/Anglo
6% Native American/Indian
3% African American
2% Other
- School wide Bilingual Education Program
- School wide Title 1 Program (90% of students on Free or Reduced Lunch Status)
- 45 Special Ed students



Mission Avenue's Reading Achievement Goals

- Improve skills needed to read, spell & write more successfully
- Strengthen instruction in reading by providing opportunities for children to read and write
- Better prepare at-risk readers by providing a systematic reading method

F.A.S.T. has equipped our students with the tools that allow them to read and understand. While there is no such thing as a 'silver bullet', I believe F.A.S.T. is the closest thing to it that we have found. We will continue to incorporate it into our daily lesson plans and challenge our students to the best of their abilities.

— Stephen Pino
Principal
Mission Avenue
Elementary

classes focused on literature studies.

"The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* has provided our students with the essential tools for reading," says Principal Pino. "The immediate involvement of the students reading stories that have meaningful text is a strength of the program. It allows students an opportunity to read more difficult material more quickly."

Giving All Learners Access

Because the majority of Mission Avenue's students come from homes where English is spoken infrequently and often incorrectly, the children generally enter school with half the vocabulary of their peers across town. According to Steffens, that's where the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* has helped them catch up quickly.

"We realize their limitations, but what the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* does so beautifully is it helps them decode the language so that they have a chance to at least read fluently," she says. "Our little Spanish speakers begin reading *The Bad Cat* before they understand what a bad cat is...the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* gives them an edge because it addresses their earliest abilities right away.

"Kids don't have to know the alphabet, they don't even have to know the language to make a sound," explains Steffens. "When they say 'buh' you can hold up the letter 'b' and say, 'You just said this.' With the *F.A.S.T. Reading System*, there is nothing artificial. It's very natural. It moves right along with the way little children learn — any new learner for that matter.

"F.A.S.T. works because it's consistent for the kids, it's predictable, and it's sequential. It's also research-based," says Steffens. (The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* meets NCLB guidelines and is aligned with National Reading Panel criteria.) "The *F.A.S.T. Reading System* pulls together all of the best techniques from all of the research and puts it within that one F.A.S.T. hour — it's just amazing."

Steffens also says that the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* has proven extremely effective with her students who have emotional and behavioral disorders, again because it is developmentally appropriate. "The interesting thing is that those kids are behaving so

much better because the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* gives them immediate access and success," she notes. "That's what I love about it!. Why shouldn't we do that for everyone? Every kid should have that."

F.A.S.T.'s Multi-Sensory Approach

Unlike other reading recovery programs where educators work exclusively with children one-on-one, Steffens says that the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* works especially well in large groups and produces results. "If you just follow the system, you get amazing growth quickly, almost in spite of yourself. I know a lot of teachers aren't used to looking at data, but once they see the growth on paper, they're transformed."

Both Steffens and Pino believe that the *F.A.S.T. Reading System*'s multi-sensory approach is a major component in the students' rapid progress. "The students don't just sit and do one thing," says Steffens. "About every 10 minutes we change the activity, so it gives them quick access to the codes. They're hearing, then writing, then reading, then taking their fingers and manipulating those tiles. They're busy in a different way about every 10-15 minutes, and it keeps them totally engaged."

Final Thoughts on Testing and The Future

Like all district schools, Mission Avenue Elementary will be taking its state-mandated standards-based assessment tests this spring, which are primarily constructed response. "Without the *F.A.S.T. Reading System*, I don't think our kids would be prepared for this battery of tests because they're mostly written, even the math," says Steffens. "The tests ask questions like, 'Why did you come to this decision? Why did you choose this multiple choice answer?' In order to answer these questions, the students must first have access to the language — without the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* they wouldn't begin to be able to touch this new format. I have high hopes for our students' performance this year."

"F.A.S.T. has equipped our students with the tools that allow them to read and understand," reiterates Pino. "While there is no such thing as a 'silver bullet', I believe the *F.A.S.T. Reading System* is the closest thing to it that we have found. We will continue to incorporate it into our daily lesson plans and challenge our students to the best of their abilities."