

# Wild About Reading Academy: Results

By Michael Sadler

One of the challenges in getting special needs school kids between second and fourth grade to enjoy reading is overcoming the historical tendency for them to forget, over the summer months, much of what they learned the previous school year. It's called "summer loss." Frustrating for both student and teacher at having to start over, almost from scratch, the need to continually play catch-up takes its toll.

For the kids, summer loss can also result in a loss of self-esteem, as peer pressure makes them feel less and less like the "normal" kids. And as time goes by, their growing reading frustration results in the kids losing faith in themselves. They sometimes act out in school, at home, and in public. "A student who cannot read on grade by the fourth grade," says the literature on the subject, "is four times more likely to drop out of high school than his or her proficiently-reading peer. Add poverty to the mix, and a student is thirteen times more likely to drop out."

After that, the prospects for success are dim. If not remedied early, ideally by third or fourth grade, the combination of summer loss, reading below grade level, inability to keep pace with other students, and even a growing dislike for reading, the opportunity for turning things around is lost.

The BASIC Reading Academy at the UCI Steel-Burnand research center, an intensive one-month summer program for special needs kids, was designed to address the above issues by improving reading skills, and especially improving reading attitudes, in the critical years of a child's development. Joanne Stang, founder of BASIC (Basic Assistance to Students in Community), a local non-profit 501c3 organization, writes of the program, "It is a nine-year old, proven reading program in Indiana that continues to get results. We are following this model."

Our article in the Aug. 11 issue covered the overall objectives of the program, and now we get to the results.

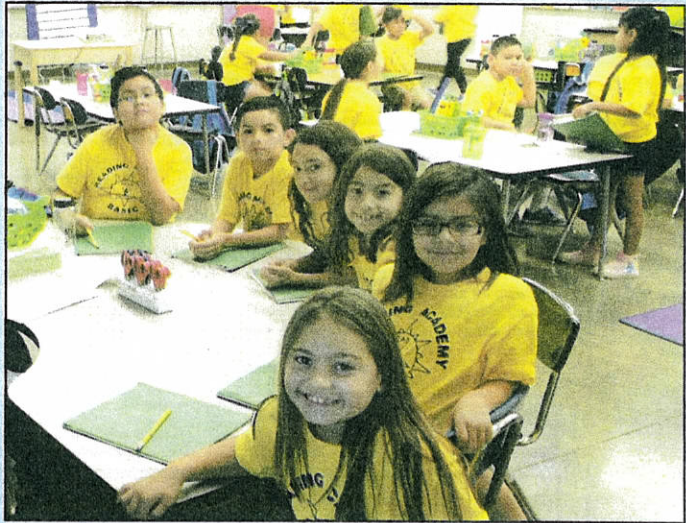
There were twenty students in the classroom, three teachers (Monica Graham, Graciella Muro, and Jennifer Helm), and two available assistants. With a high teacher-to-student ratio, the kids received individual focus on their needs. Every student learns differently

ing specific sounds or syllables, and others by writing out the words - and that focus paid off by students' use of their own individual learning strategies. They not only built their vocabularies but also

learned the mental attitude steps needed before actually opening a book to read: Look at the title, think about what it means, and ask yourself why am I reading this book? Getting the brain ready to read, and making connections, according to teacher Monica Graham, is critically important for these kids.

One student I interviewed (without teachers present), a ten-year old boy I will call "Andrew" to preserve his true identity, is a shining example of program success. Entering the Academy at least two reading grades below his peers, Andrew gained almost an entire year in reading ability. In one month! Remember that most kids suffer from summer loss, so Andrew not only bucked the trend but also did exceptionally well. More importantly, however, Andrew showed a very positive attitude about reading, revealing with bright eyes and beaming self-confidence that, in my words of summary, he can not only read his comic book-type fantasy stories better now, but more importantly, he also understood what he was reading enough to share it with his friends and articulate the finer details, a learned skill that was important to him. Andrew's experience at the Reading Academy seems to have covered all the bases as far as program objectives go.

The other nineteen students had varying degrees of success, averaging at least no summer reading loss, and Monica Graham counts that as a definite plus. English is a difficult language to learn because of all the exceptions to the rules. Throw in the need for most students in the Academy to speak two languages, and translate between them, and the task can be daunting.



according to Graham, "is for the kids to recognize patterns, the arrangement of vowels and consonants that make up the words, and decoding them. They must be able to see the vowels and consonants and word parts and also know what they mean." She and the other teachers get down to individual letters, and combinations thereof, in helping the kids decode the patterns. "And now," says Graham, some of these kids really want to read. Things are starting to click. They won't get these skills in later grades."

The teachers also worked out a rewards system, Class Dojo, an entertaining app for their iPhones. Yes, kids that age have them now. Positive reinforcement was also a major strategic element in the program: "You can do this. You have the ability. Don't give up. You are worthy." The teachers celebrated individual successes with the students in the classroom, even when those successes were small. "The high teacher-student ratio helped a lot," says Graham.

Graham also notes the transferability of the BASIC program, now sponsored by private donors, into mainstream primary education. But teacher-student ratios would have to be much higher.

So, the Basic Reading Academy seemed, at least from this outsider's perspective, a real success story. Let's hope it will continue providing the children of Borrego the opportunity not only to merely keep up with peers, but also motivate them to read on their own, and eventually find the path towards a successful school experience.

The website to learn about BASIC and how you can help finance future learning academies is <http://>