

537 views | Nov 15, 2018, 03:01pm

# A Competitive 21st-Century America Begins With Reading



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*I write about the intersection of business and public affairs.*

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**“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses ...until third grade.”**

Much has been made of how America will compete in a disrupted age. How will we adapt? How will we remain competitive as a country and as individuals when so much is changing so quickly



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As unglamorous as it may seem, reading at level by third grade is one of the most important indicators of future success. Reading, perhaps more than any other childhood skill, provides the path to the next [Steve Jobs](#) or [Oprah Winfrey](#). A case in point: Christine Fuentes is a 30-year-old civil engineer and project manager at [Turner Construction Company](#) in San Antonio, Texas, a thriving nationwide firm whose 120-person San Antonio operation has been a big part of the city's renaissance.

Every day, Christine directs a team of four Turner employees and a host of subcontractors in meeting tight budgets and tough deadlines for a variety of commercial and residential projects.

Moreover, she's a qualified "green builder." She's accredited in the [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design \(LEED\)](#) program, a popular green building rating system that doubles as an integral part of Turner's business offering, which prides itself on its environmental stewardship.

For the past few years, Christine has been a part-time graduate student in the business school at the [University of Texas-San Antonio](#). Soon, she'll have her Master's in Business Administration, with a concentration in project management – a degree that Turner helped finance. Her MBA will nicely complement the undergraduate degree in civil engineering that she earned eight years ago at [UT-Austin](#). Hook 'em, Horns!

By any measure, Christine Fuentes is a highly accomplished millennial, the kind of focused and energetic professional that any business organization would be privileged to have.

It didn't happen by accident. She's quick to point out the things and people that enabled her to overcome a challenging childhood in a home without much money: her resilient single mother; an almost-all-Latino elementary school in southwestern San Antonio whose motto was, "You Must Believe to Achieve"; and a special program known as [Success for All \(SFA\)](#), which allowed Christine, a math whiz, to develop similar confidence in reading and writing English, essentially her second language, while still in elementary school.

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SFA came into Christine's life when she was in second grade and probably reading at below-grade level. Almost all the students were from poorer families where English was rarely spoken.

She recalls taking home the brightly-colored SFA materials to practice reading them at night to her mom, who in turn would sign her reading log. One of SFA's core principles is to group students across grade levels so that every student is taught at the appropriate level to help accelerate their individual skills development.

Christine remembers working with the younger kids to sound out words phonetically and, if need be, use Spanish to translate certain words or concepts. This commitment to cooperative learning helps the entire class advance.

The more she worked with the SFA program, the more confidence she gained. The more confidence she gained, the more her language skills began to blossom.

She distinctly remembers that moment in fifth grade when her teacher, Mr. Hammer, volunteered that engineers would chart the future of America – and make good money while doing it. Christine vowed at that instant to become an engineer, a goal that led her to write an essay in eighth grade seeking admission to a special STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) high school. Without her SFA training, Christine says, she would never have had the skills to craft that essay – or to take sophisticated science and engineering classes at the STEM school and, later, UT-Austin.

Christine's example is illustrative of the success that SFA can have when parents and teachers work together at formative moments in a student's life. SFA founder [Dr. Robert E. Slavin](#) observes that, "A child from a low-income household may

have enormous potential and the capability to do great things. But if they struggle with reading early in life there's a good chance they'll never reach that potential.

“Sadly, more than half of all U.S. students reach fourth grade lacking in effective reading skills. SFA breaks this cycle of failure with hands-on literacy programs that have been proven to work,” Dr. Slavin says.

By partnering with pre-kindergarten-to-eighth-grade schools and programs across the country, SFA has over the past three decades helped millions of children – like Christine – gain new skills. Those attributes have been put to work by thousands of businesses across the country, Dr. Slavin points out.

“Success for All equals success for business,” says Stedman Graham, CEO of [S. Graham & Associates](#), a Chicago-based corporate and educational marketing firm that has worked closely with SFA over the years.

“Investment in early literacy pays off in having an understanding of who you are. The ability to read and process information is pivotal in defining your identity and realizing self-worth, esteem, and the knowledge that you can contribute to any endeavor you choose,” Graham argues.

There are hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of young people like Christine Fuentes out there, ready to contribute to society – and a business' bottom line. We have to find them early and get them into programs like Success for All. After all, some opportunities are too important to miss.

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