

# FAST TRACKING READING PROFICIENCY



In Bessemer City, a no-frills, focused approach has brought outstanding results to low-performing schools.

## THE CHALLENGE

Bessemer City Schools in Alabama are a fine example of how Success for All's whole-school approach to narrowing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students has consistently produced research-proven results. Working with SFA since 1999, Bessemer City currently runs the program in five elementary schools.

Dr. Pat Garlikov, now reading and professional-development coordinator for federal programs in Bessemer, was a member of the Bessemer staff when the partnership started as part of a Reading First Grant. "The data made it very clear that we were in trouble," she recalls. "If you needed a definition for 'at risk,' you could've pulled our data and there it was."

Of five SFA schools, two – Jonesboro and J. S. Abrams – stand out. In 2003, when they adopted SFA, both had a free- or reduced-lunch student population that hovered around 90%, well above the 50% state average. A year into the SFA partnership, the reading proficiency scores weren't encouraging – 59% at Jonesboro and 33% at J. S. Abrams.

## THE SOLUTION

To meet the challenge at Jonesboro and J. S. Abrams, their staff members and administrators stuck to the SFA game plan, working with its solid fundamentals, cooperative-learning approach and meticulously planned execution.

"It's FastTrack Phonics for kindergarten and first grade. Those grades get stronger, and then the performance moves up the ladder," says Shirley Storey, SFA facilitator at J. S. Abrams.

"Nobody's going to beat FastTrack Phonics," adds Dr. Garlikov. "Our kids can sound out almost every word in the world."

While the curriculum fostered improvement for this at-risk district, it took a collaborative effort between the district and the SFA support system to pull it off. From her years of experience working with SFA, Garlikov has gained a special appreciation of its professional-development system, as well as the schools' SFA point coach, Theresa Blanton, whom she calls "relentless," knowing all the staff members throughout each school.

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DR. PAT GARLIKOV, Reading and Professional-  
Development Coordinator for Federal Programs



For Garlikov, this type of service elevates the SFA program above a typical publishing-based education-reform organization. "They just care about selling books," she said of such publishing-based groups.

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SHIRLEY STOREY,  
SFA Facilitator at J. S. Abrams

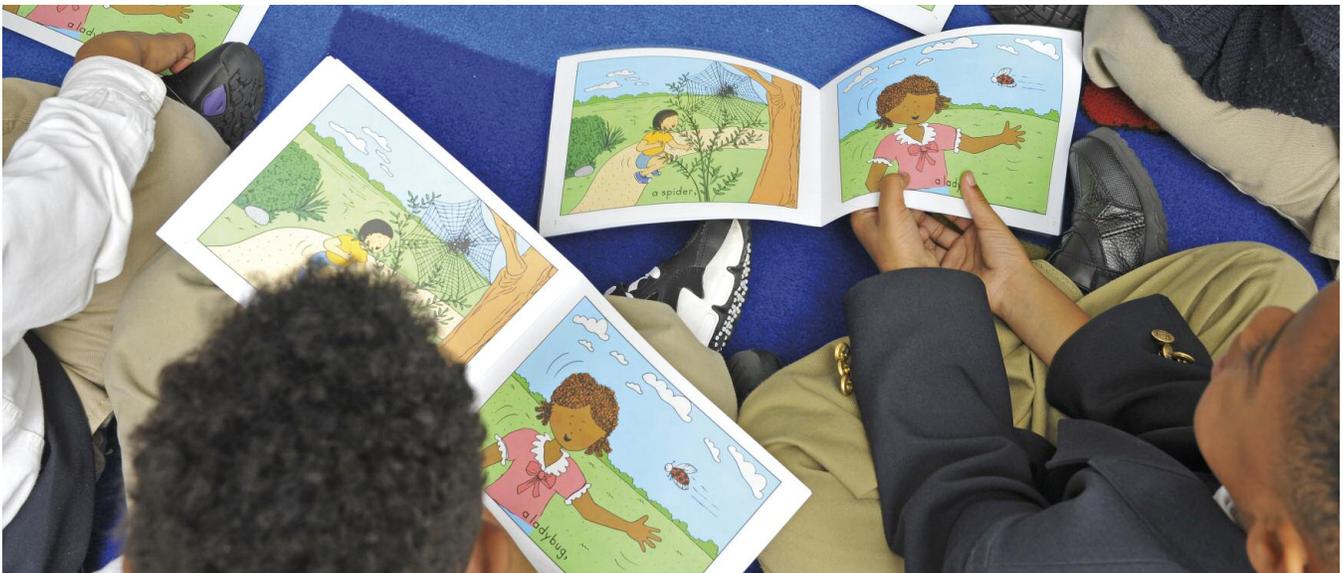
## THE RESULTS

Keeping eyes on the reading prize paid off. By 2010, Jonesboro had raised its reading proficiency scores from 59% to 89.4%, two points higher than the state average. For its part, J. S. Abrams improved a staggering 40% to 73.1%. Once 40% behind the state of Alabama, J. S. Abrams is now nipping at its heels.

Many years of successful professional development are also paying off, especially with school Facilitators such as Shirley Storey. Storey has been teaching reading at Abrams for 32 years, and it is clear that she has taken ownership of the SFA program. "I've had so much training with SFA that I can now train all the new teachers without assistance," she says proudly.

Like other successful facilitators, Storey is always looking for ways to fine-tune the system and effectively problem solve. For example, worrying that J. S. Abrams's reading performance may be stagnating in the early grades, she is working to solve this by ensuring that teachers get to the writing portion of each lesson. Otherwise, the students "understand the sound, but don't know how to use it," she explains. By solving problems early, fewer interventions will be required as students progress to higher grade levels.

Bessemer City is a model of how to close the achievement gap, and it's a simple formula – solid curriculum and solid instruction built on an effective partnership with SFA.



FOUNDED IN 1987, the nonprofit Success for All Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that every child, from pre-kindergarten to grade 8, becomes proficient in reading and learning – opening up new doors for a lifetime of achievement. Not only has SFA been proven time and again to help with student reading ability and math performance, it also addresses non-academic concerns, improving behavior, attendance and parental involvement. Please contact us for more information.

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