

How Fresh Start supports struggling readers in secondary schools

“School leaders understood the need to identify specific reading gaps and weaknesses, and made sure that the staff working with struggling readers were trained to teach reading.” Ofsted, October 2022

In October 2022, Ofsted published a report on supporting struggling readers in secondary schools after visiting six schools where a higher-than-expected proportion of struggling readers got a grade 4 or above in GCSE English language. Ofsted notes that struggling readers need to master decoding in order to “recognise words automatically” as “this frees up their working memory so they can concentrate on comprehension.” It also states that: “As pupils’ reading improved, they gained confidence and became more motivated to engage with reading in class.”

Read Write Inc. Fresh Start is a catch-up reading programme for 9 to 13-year-olds. Developed by Ruth Miskin, it offers a simple yet powerful solution to accelerate reading progress. Below, we talk to several secondary schools about the impact Fresh Start has had on students who are struggling readers.

Screening and assessment from the start

Kathryn Newby teaches Fresh Start to students in Year 7 and above at Astrea Academy Woodfields in Doncaster. The school assesses every Year 7 student on arrival. “I can tell quickly which students need Fresh Start teaching and no student slips through the net. One in four of our students start Year 7 reading below their chronological age and Fresh Start helps them catch up quickly and enthusiastically.”

Fresh Start supports EAL students and those with SEND

West Derby School is a Single Academy Trust boys’ secondary school, where 89 students in Years 7, 8 and 9 were identified for Fresh Start teaching last September. Staff at the school are very enthusiastic about the impact it has made in such a short time. “The Fresh Start resources help our students learning English as an additional language hugely,” says the school’s inclusion manager. “The visual prompts for phonics and engaging texts keep them motivated.”



As an example, a Year 7 student, arrived in the UK last year and received no individual reading or phonics support in primary school. “The Fresh Start programme has helped him significantly with his pronunciation and his spoken English has improved hugely.” After five months of Fresh Start teaching, his reading age increased by three years and one month.

Essential training for secondary school staff

Ongoing professional development is key to supporting and retaining staff. Teachers trained in Fresh Start praise the knowledge and practical solution the programme provides for their neediest readers. A teacher from West Derby School explains: “[Fresh Start] has helped me as an English teacher to gain knowledge of phonics teaching and understand that effortless decoding is essential to access both GCSE English and the wider curriculum.”

At Ormiston Meridian Academy, in Stoke-on-Trent, staff from six secondary schools received training and support from Ruth Miskin Training to teach Fresh Start to students reading below their chronological age. “For many staff, this was their first training on phonics and reading,” says Rachel Johnson, KS3 English lead and lead of the Stoke project. Through training and the accompanying online support, they have “gained extra knowledge and opportunities to practise the programme.”

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Cherry Tripp, reading leader at Olsen House School in Liverpool confirms the benefits of staff training: “Staff enjoy teaching the programme, develop positive relationships with their one-to-one students and are always eager to learn and improve.”

Fresh Start supports teaching across the wider curriculum

Secondary schools find that Fresh Start training is beneficial for *all* staff. Rachel Johnson notes: “We are keen to train all teaching staff, no matter the subject they teach, on the complex code of the English language so they can help students transfer their Fresh Start knowledge to other subjects. We know there are students in our school who don’t need Fresh Start teaching for reading but would benefit from a refresher of the alphabetic code for spelling.”

A Year 8 student at Astrea Academy Woodfields confirms the cross-curricular benefits of Fresh Start: “I can read more fluently without stopping for every word. I feel more confident reading out loud. It has helped in science and history too as we read out loud a lot in these subjects.”

Fresh Start builds self-esteem and confidence

A noticeable change to Fresh Start students is their increased levels of confidence. Olsen House School in Liverpool teaches children and young people with social, emotional and mental health, with associated needs including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, and with moderate and specific learning difficulties. According to Cherry Tripp: “Students who were previously unable to read are now reading enthusiastically and developing their fluency. Their self-esteem has increased; it’s a pleasure to see. They now choose to read, are happy reading to others and, importantly, can access the curriculum more easily. Confidence and self-esteem have increased in all lessons.”

Over two and a half terms, 13 students from Ormiston Meridian Academy and Ormiston Sir Stanley Matthews made an average increase of two years and one month in their standardised reading age. This is despite not having a full year of Fresh Start teaching. Rachel Johnson observes: “The impact of Fresh Start is clear, not just on students’ reading ages but on their confidence.”

Success through challenging times

In summary, “Our students now have the skills needed to reach age-related expectations in reading; their confidence and enjoyment in reading increase every day,” says Kathryn Newby.

Rachel Johnson affirms this point “Despite the challenge of the pandemic and its significant impact on both staff and student absence, Fresh Start students at Ormiston Meridian Academy can now read accurately. They have cracked the alphabetic code. In terms of helping to teach students who can’t read effortlessly, I don’t think there’s anything better than Fresh Start.”

Reference

[“Now the whole school is reading: supporting struggling readers in secondary schools.”](#)
Ofsted, 31/10/2022

Further information

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[Find out more about Read Write Inc. Fresh Start from Ruth Miskin Training](#)

[Find out more about Read Write Inc. Fresh Start resources from Oxford University Press](#)