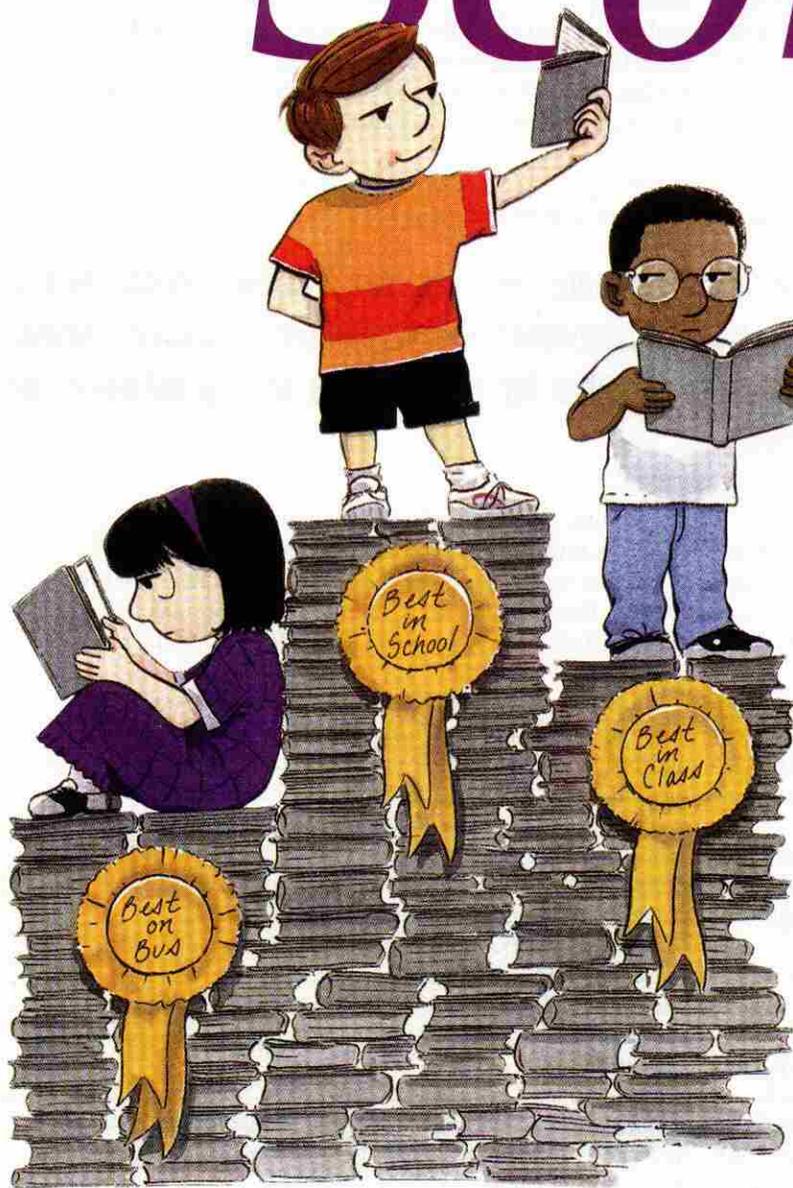


# Keeping Score



Increasingly popular  
“reading management  
programs” give kids  
points for every  
book they read.

**But do they turn  
kids into readers?**

**By Karin Chenoweth**

**D**O READING COUNTS AND ACCELERATED READER IMPROVE children's reading ability and develop a lifelong thirst for a good book? Or do their low-level quizzes and prizes turn reading into an empty contest and actually discourage reading?

These are the kinds of questions that dog Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts, two popular commercial reading management programs that have been adopted in thousands of schools around the country, sparking ongoing controversies.

Some school librarians, such as Ellen Jay, a librarian at Damascus Elementary School in Damascus, MD, and a former president of the American Association of School Librarians, scorn Reading Counts and Accelerated Reader, preferring to develop their own schoolwide reading programs. About Accelerated Reader, Jay says, "I would not personally give it the time of day." She argues that although it may encourage some children to read independently, "for some kids it's as much of a turnoff as a turn-on."

Others, such as Tonya Bennett, a librarian at Seneca Elementary School in Seneca, MO, give Accelerated Reader credit for huge increases in circulation. At Seneca, where most teachers use Accelerated Reader with the school's 760 students, 111,000 books circulated during the last school year. "The kids just absolutely love it," Bennett says. "The teachers really love it. They're seeing real results. I am literally running out of books."

But even Bennett questions the value of Accelerated Reader when she hears students say that they read so much to get competitive points during the school year that they plan on not reading afterward for a very long time. "Do they read because they love to, or because they have to?" she asks, echoing many other librarians in schools that have bought these commercial programs.

Although Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts differ in some details, both start from the same premises and have similar features. Both categorize books by reading levels and provide computer software

allowing teachers or librarians to keep detailed records of what books students read and whether they pass a computer-scored quiz about the book. Each program assigns points to different books based on length and reading difficulty. Some teachers and librarians reward students who amass the most points with trinkets, certificates, and field trips—some even base classroom grades on those points, though both programs discourage that.

The Accelerated Reader program, which was begun in the 1980s by Judith and Terrance Paul, is the bigger of the two programs, reporting that it has sold products to 54,500 schools in the United States and Canada and trained more than 279,000 educators in its one- and two-day seminars, 90,000 of whom were trained in 2000. Although it can be found in schools around the country, it is most concentrated in California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas. But Accelerated Reader, which is owned by the relatively small, Wisconsin-based company Renaissance Learning, is facing stiff competition from Reading Counts.

Reading Counts, formerly Electronic Bookshelf, is a fairly new acquisition of the publishing company Scholastic, Inc. Scholastic has taken direct aim at Accelerated Reader's customers, claiming to be easier to use and a better value. Scholastic General Manager Harry Barfoot declined to say how many schools are using Reading Counts, citing that information as proprietary, but he did say it is in the "thousands."

The costs of the programs are difficult to calculate, because both companies

market starter packages that run only a few hundred dollars. But once training costs, extra quizzes, and all the other bells and whistles are added, schools can spend many thousands of dollars on each. Sometimes the money is provided out of ordinary school budgets, but often it comes from special funds, such as PTA donations, foundation grants, or federal Title I money.

Title I money may dry up in the future, however, because of new rules that require federal money to be spent only on programs that have been proven, with independent research, to be effective. Neither Accelerated Reader nor Reading Counts qualifies. A few years ago, the National Reading Panel, which was convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Department of Education at the request of Congress, reviewed the research on programs that help improve reading. Neither Accelerated Reader nor Reading Counts met the standards. "They didn't come through the screen," says G. Reid Lyon, chief of NICHD's child development and behavior branch. "The absence of well-designed research on these specific programs tells the story."

This points up a difficulty with the programs, both of which say they are "research-based," and include many scholarly citations in their literature. However, the research cited tends to be very general, such as research demonstrating that practice is necessary to become a fluent, proficient reader.

Few disagree that these programs are effective in encouraging students to practice reading, at least temporarily, but whether the programs can be credited with the kinds of long-term gains in reading scores the companies claim in their literature has yet to be fully demonstrated. Because academic researchers often shy away from researching commercial programs, that situation may not become clearer any time soon.

One of the rare pieces of independent research that has been done on either program was presented by Linda Pavonetti and Jim Cipielewski of Michigan's Oakland University at last year's National Reading Conference. They followed more than 1,500 sev-

enth graders in 10 middle schools in Michigan—one a suburban district and one an ex-urban district. Roughly half had used Accelerated Reader in fifth grade while half did not. The study found that, although participating students had read more books with Accelerated Reader, once the program was over they read no more than before. Pavonetti even says, “We found a negative effect in some programs,” meaning students read fewer books after participating in Accelerated Reader than beforehand.

Although this study calls into question Accelerated Reader’s claims that it will help produce lifelong readers, it doesn’t address whether, as the company also claims, it improves reading ability.

One study that does support such claims was conducted in 1999 by William Sanders of the University of Tennessee and K. J. Topping of the University of Dundee in Scotland, with a grant from Accelerated Reader. The study, which examined the data on 80,000 students from third through sixth grade, found that students in classrooms with Accelerated Reader improved their reading scores significantly on Tennessee’s standardized test, particularly in those classrooms where teachers had received training from the Renaissance Learning company.

Sanders, a highly regarded researcher who is best known for his work on what he calls “value added” teacher effectiveness, says of Accelerated Reader, “Basically what the company offers is a good tool. If teachers use the tool as feedback on the progress of kids, that is very useful. It is not a stand-alone reading program.”

The most surprising thing Sanders said he found is that when children read significantly above their reading level, such reading practice did not result in increased reading comprehension as measured on standardized scores. It’s what Sanders calls “nudging up” students’ reading levels that creates reading comprehension growth.

**S**anders’s study certainly lends credibility to Accelerated Reader’s claims that carefully monitored independent reading will lead to increased reading comprehension rather

“ If teachers use Accelerated Reader as feedback on the progress of kids, that is very useful. It is not a stand-alone reading program. ”

than simply encouraging undirected reading.

Still, the lack of conclusive findings about these products suggests the need to be cautious before thinking that Accelerated Reader or Reading Counts is a school’s solution to poor reading skills among its students.

“The main problem is that people still want a quick and dirty solution to the reading problem and they think they can do it with computer technology, instead of making sure their teachers are well trained,” is the way Louisa C. Moats, a reading researcher with NICHD, put it.

And then there are all the other questions that need to be resolved—for example, reading levels. Scholastic uses the Lexile Framework to determine that a book is, for example, 3.4, or grade three, fourth month. Accelerated Reader uses its own proprietary system called Advantage Tossa Open Standard. The idea is for students to know what reading level they are on and then choose a book that matches that level. After reading the book, the child takes a quiz to see if he or she understood it. If so, the student can move up a level.

The idea behind this is to provide students with books where they can understand the vast majority of the vocabulary,

which allows them to read without discouragement and frustration.

Accelerated Reader’s coordinator of library services, Marian Staton, says, “If the student fails the quiz after the reading has been carefully monitored, that information should tell the teacher something—that that book length or level is too hard. I have to back off the level or the length on the next book.”

The teacher, she says, might suggest to the child, “Stay in this range, but get one that’s a little bit shorter. [The quiz failure] is giving me information that something’s wrong.”

Nonsense, argue others who question both the “leveling” systems and the use of the quizzes to determine if a child understood the book.

“A kid has no business knowing what reading level he is reading on,” says Dr. Joan Kaywell, professor of English education at the University of South Florida, who argues that such information might not only be discouraging to a child but also misleading. “What does ‘fourth grade, second month’ mean? It’s not an exact science.”

And the quizzes, she says, are even more questionable as a measure of whether a student is reading on the correct level. “A person’s ability to answer these picayune questions is not an ability to think critically,” she said, citing her own son as an example. He loved reading *Bunnicula* and, she said, demonstrated to her that he thoroughly understood it. Yet because he could not remember such details as what was written on the bunny’s collar when the rabbit was left in front of the library, he failed the Accelerated Reader quiz on the book. He became discouraged by the quizzes and began thinking of himself as a bad reader, Kaywell said, undermining the entire point of the program.

But Kaywell is far from an implacable critic of commercial reading programs. “It’s a tool,” she says of Accelerated Reader. “And it works for some kids and not others.” Although her son had a bad experience, “By contrast, I have a friend whose son is really motivated” by the Accelerated Reader point systems and has read a great deal in trying to amass prizes. Some educators criticize those kinds of extrinsic rewards for reading. Kaywell

doesn't. "I don't care why a person reads, if it makes him a reader," she says.

Her words are echoed by the Reading Counts general manager, Barfoot. "If in fact these extrinsic rewards help kids read the end of *Charlotte's Web* instead of watching television or playing video games, then that's positive."

And he defends his quizzes, saying, "We're trying to get at whether the student read the book and understood what he read." Accelerated Reader's Staton agrees. "A lot of people want [the quizzes] to be more literary-based," she says. "They are not. It is purely: Did they read it, did they understand it?"

Betty Carter, a professor at the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University who has been an outspoken critic of Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts, counters that argument by saying, "We have no empirical evidence that those tests measure understanding." She argues that the quizzes don't even do what they say they do, which is to make sure students have read the book. "I've taken quite a few of the [Accelerated Reader quizzes], and whether I read the book or not seemed irrelevant. Some books I have read and didn't get the questions right and some books I haven't read and I got all the questions right."

The National Institute of Child Health and Development's Lyon says that he is willing to entertain the hypothesis that such concrete, detailed questions can be "used as a diagnostic" for the fuller range of literary comprehension that librarians and teachers want students to acquire. "That's a research question," he says. "But I doubt very much that [the companies] have that data."

If the companies' reading levels and quizzes have sparked controversy, the competitions and prizes have inspired fireworks. "I just don't like to treat children like little dogs. It's very Pavlovian," says Sharon Coatney, a librarian at Oak Hill Elementary School in Kansas and another past president of the American Association of School Librarians. She argues that the points, rewards, and competitions work only for as long as they are in place, rather than developing a real love of reading. And

rather than expanding children's reading selections, she argues the programs tend to limit them to those books that the school has quizzes for. Because the students are so focused on the competition, she says, they will often refuse to read books unless they can get program points. "One thing that happens is that children only read what's on [the Accelerated Reader list]," Coatney says.

To address that argument, both Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts have vastly expanded the number of quizzes that are available and made it easier for librarians to match their collections with the quizzes. And, Scholastic's Barfoot says, teachers can write their own quizzes for any books their school doesn't own the quizzes for. That flexibility has won over some skeptics.

But Accelerated Reader's Staton has another answer, which is that if schools are only relying on the point system and prizes to motivate children to read, they are "playing 'Chopsticks' on a grand piano," meaning they are using a sophisticated program in the crudest possible

tool," she says, allowing teachers to keep track of students' independent reading and providing important data that teachers can use to help pinpoint which students need additional help.

This is one way Accelerated Reader says it differs from Reading Counts, which openly bills itself as a "motivational" program, recommending that schools make partnerships with local businesses to provide prizes, such as free meals, entrance to amusement parks, or free books. The distinction Accelerated Reader makes between itself and Reading Counts is, justifiably, a little confusing when Accelerated Reader's promotional literature includes testimonials such as, "In my 27 years of teaching experience, Accelerated Reader is the best thing I've seen to motivate students to read!"

Renaissance Learning's general manager, Mike Baum, argues that the very act of reading helps motivate children to read. "The software doesn't do it, it's reading that does it. The software just helps teachers keep track," he says.

## **Accelerated Reader's Marion Staton says she actually discourages schools from having point competitions.**

way. Staton, who was a librarian for many years in Canyon, TX, says she actually discourages schools from having point competitions, preferring to have children set individual goals and then be recognized for having met all or part of their goal. For example, one student could set a goal of reading four books, another a goal of 20 books, and if both reach their goal they can both be recognized with a public announcement, rather than setting up elaborate competitions between the two. "There are many, many schools that don't give their kids a thing and they're very successful," Staton says.

Besides, she says, Accelerated Reader should not be used as a motivational program. "It is a teacher management

However, for librarians, teachers, principals, and superintendents who are evaluating whether to buy these programs for their schools, more important than the relatively small differences between Reading Counts and Accelerated Reader is whether the overall approach of both programs is effective in improving reading fluency and comprehension and developing a positive attitude toward reading.

Certainly this is a fertile field for more research. But until such research is done, Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts seem to fall into the category of experimental, not proven, programs.

*Karin Chenoweth is an education columnist for the Washington Post.*