

Florida Center for Reading Research

Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds

What is Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds?

Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds (Focus on Sounds) is a supplemental program designed to teach students to fluently decode and spell words using a multisensory approach by developing the underlying phonemic awareness skills of segmenting, blending, and manipulating sounds. The program is intended for students in grades K-3 and struggling readers in grades 1-5 who could benefit from additional sound/symbol correspondence instruction. Lessons occur four days a week for 15-30 minutes. The program may be taught by the classroom teacher, a reading specialist, or a special education teacher and used in a variety of formats including whole group, small group, and one-on-one. *Focus on Sounds* was developed by a teacher/reading specialist who received Reading First training in Florida.

Focus on Sounds provides a few specific lesson formats for word building that are used systematically throughout the program. This structure is intended to offer teachers and students consistency in the daily routine and allow them to focus their attention on the content of the lesson. Starting with simple VC and CVC word types and progressing to more complex word types, students practice phonemic awareness skills as they build words with large magnetized letters. In a typical lesson, the teacher models the word building procedure at the board by saying a word slowly and distinctly (e.g., cat; clean; boat) while sweeping her hand underneath the lines which have been drawn to represent each sound in the word; to emphasize the sound structure of the word, the teacher repeats the sweeping process and says the word again. The student segments the word by imitating what the teacher has modeled. Next, the student is asked to say each sound, find the corresponding magnetic letters, move them onto the correct lines, and read the word. The final step is for the student to map the word, by writing each letter as s/he is saying the sounds in the word. After word building, students develop fluency by reading and rereading these words from an ongoing list and from word cards. Students read these same words in decodable books. Additionally, fluency is addressed through word reading speed drills and games. As students learn advanced phonics skills, they read chants, practice sorting, classifying, sound highlighting, word analysis activities, and chunking techniques to help them read multisyllabic words.

The *Focus on Sounds* Reading Kit consists of 4 teacher's manuals with assessments, lesson plans, black line masters, five decodable books, and all of the necessary materials to make large, magnetized letters for 48 sound bags. Individual sound bags which include the large magnetized letters of the target vowel and several consonants are available for each lesson's word building activities. Blackline masters are provided so that students have their own individual set of smaller letters. Student workbooks are sold separately. The teacher's manual includes suggestions for program implementation at each grade level. More specific information on where to begin instruction and which skills students need extra practice with is provided with an informal class assessment and individual tests of phonemic awareness and the alphabetic code. Although the student materials are carefully aligned with the content of each lesson, it can be time consuming and sometimes confusing to find each lesson's matching activity sheets and a certain amount of preparation is necessary in initially assembling the sound bags. The program developer continues to improve the

program and is currently enhancing the organizational structure with additional lesson plans and an in-depth scope and sequence chart.

How is Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds aligned with Current Research?

Research indicates that knowledge of the alphabetic system and the ability to apply spelling patterns when reading is an essential part of the beginning reading process (National Reading Panel, 2000). *Focus on Sounds* aligns with current research by providing students with explicit and systematic phonics instruction, multiple opportunities for practice, and examples of specific corrective feedback. While the program focuses on fluent decoding and spelling, phonemic awareness with the use of letters is woven into instruction with activities in segmenting, blending, and phoneme manipulation.

In *Focus on Sounds*, students learn the alphabetic code with its variations in a logical progression that increases gradually in complexity and ends with multisyllabic words. The main concepts are very similar to the *Phono-Graphix* program and to the idea that sounds are represented by letters rather than letters making sounds. (See the individual FCRR Report on *Phono-Graphix*). Four ideas are consistent throughout each level of the program: letters are pictures for sounds; more than one letter can be a picture for a sound, called the advanced code sound pictures (digraphs); there is variation in the code (play, rain, cake); and there is overlap in the code (pot, mold). The *Focus on Sounds* program emphasizes the need to be flexible with the different vowel sounds and spelling patterns when reading; an important skill as students progress in their reading skills and encounter more difficult text.

A specific sequence to the vowels and vowel patterns is taught in *Focus on Sounds*. One vowel sound at a time is the focus of each lesson with several consonants being taught simultaneously. Sounds and letters are never taught in isolation but rather, in the context of a word and often the word is placed in a sentence before word building begins. Each of the sound bags includes the target vowel or vowel pattern and all of the necessary letters, in a large size format, to facilitate word building with the whole class. The long a sound bag for example, would include all of the variant spellings of long a: ai, ay, a_e, ea, eigh. If students require extra practice with a particular vowel or vowel pattern, the teacher incorporates that particular sound bag for word building instruction. Students have their own individual set of smaller letters for building and mapping words in centers or during small group instruction.

Multisyllabic word instruction assists students in breaking words into chunks, segmenting and blending each chunk, then blending each chunk together before reading the entire word. The same word building procedure used for simpler words is applied with these larger words. Students learn to navigate the chunks through the analysis of open and closed syllables and the use of prefixes, suffixes, and common endings.

It is important for teachers to note that some students may require phonemic awareness activities without the use of letters before being able to grasp the sound/symbol associations in *Focus on Sounds*. Additionally, the phoneme manipulation activities, which are considered the most difficult level of phonemic awareness, may be too difficult initially for some struggling readers.

The developer of *Focus on Sounds* offers a two day professional development workshop onsite to help ensure a high level of implementation for the program. This training is included with the purchase of the program. The first teacher's manual is available for Kindergarten teachers for a reduced price.

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Research Support for Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds

Focus on Sounds published in 2003, is a relatively new program. A two-year action research study (2003-2004 and 2004-2005) was conducted with six kindergarten classes in one Florida school using the first teacher's manual. Based on running records and dictation scores, the results showed significant growth for students using *Focus on Sounds*. Due to the lack of experimental control however, conclusions about the efficacy of the program cannot be specifically attributed to *Focus on Sounds*.

In sum, the instructional content and design of the program reflect current research. A future well-designed study with randomized control groups and statistical information may provide more information about the efficacy of *Focus on Sounds*.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds*:

- The program is explicit and systematic with consistent teaching formats.
- Teaching flexibility with sounds and spelling patterns is a feature of the program.
- The order of instruction can be modified to accompany a school's core reading program.
- The sound bags provide teachers with an effective tool for word building.
- The variety of engaging activities including chants may offer extra motivation for struggling readers.
- Assessments included with the program are quick and easy to administer.
- Professional development is included with the purchase of the program.

Weaknesses of *Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds*:

- Some organizational features and the alignment of materials in the teacher's manual can be confusing. This is addressed in the professional development workshop and is currently being revised.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Phonetics First-Focus on Sounds?

Lake 352-253-6510

Pinellas 727-588-6011

For More Information

<http://phoneticsfirst.com>

References

National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Washington, D.C.



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