



## Morningside Academy: Building Foundations for Student Success

By Gail Snyder

**W**ould teachers ask their students to build a brick wall without providing the materials and instruction necessary to do so? The logical answer is no, but current trends in education may suggest otherwise. According to Kent Johnson, executive director of Morningside Academy, project-based learning is currently in vogue from late elementary school through college. This type of “learning” requires teachers to assume that students can perform all the component skills that a larger, compound activity requires.

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“Most project-based learning arrangements are an ‘upside down’ approach to curriculum planning: the compound comes first, out of which both compound and elemental skill learning are expected,” he explains. “The assumption is that if the task is sufficiently interesting, learners will employ a battery of skills to figure it out. In the end, some learners do, and some learners don’t.”

One might say students can’t build or continue to build a useful structure without a solid foundation—a foundation that many students, even some of the brightest, have not developed. Morningside Academy is a scientifically-driven organization consisting of a laboratory school and outreach to schools and agencies through its partnership with Morningside Teachers’ Academy (MTA). Though acknowledging that meaningful projects are important educational endeavors, those at Morningside Academy have successfully—now for over 31 years—designed a “right-side-up” sequence of element-to-compound instruction. Morningside Academy’s teachers coach students to perform their best by applying clearly defined rules and expectations for performance and productivity, through explicit modeling of high-performance skills, and providing moment-to-moment monitoring and feedback.

This may sound like even more pressure and work on already beleaguered teachers who manage any number of contingencies in the classroom, but just the opposite is the case.

Morningside Academy uses proven learning and teaching methods that gradually shift the classroom from that of teacher-directed to student-directed learning. For example, using the method of Think-Aloud Problem Solving

(TAPS) students master learning skills that wean them from teacher dependency and put them on the path to independent learning.

At Morningside, students carry a daily report card, earning points for meeting specific, academic learning skills that the teacher specifies before each class period. In the Academy’s middle school, students learn advanced foundation skills in reading, writing, and math. They learn how to study and perform successfully in classes such as the social and natural sciences. Subjects include world history, civics, general science, geography and culture, and human relations and communications. The program teaches everything from textbook reading and studying and lecture note taking, to participation in class discussions, test taking, and essay and report

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writing. As students study, they use a Fluent Thinking Skills method. This teaches them a specific question-generating and answer-predicting technique that greatly reduces their study time while making their study more effective.

These are but a few of the learning and teaching processes that Morningside has brought to schools and agencies throughout the United States and Canada, helping students with learning challenges as well as those who want to improve their already high academic acumen. In fact, part of every school day at one Chicago school for the gifted is devoted to Morningside's math and fluency programs. Morningside Academy also offers a four-week summer school program that provides morning and afternoon programs in reading, language, writing, and mathematics.

Of the more than 20,000 students who have attended the academy, median achievement test performance gains remain above two grade levels per year in reading, language arts, and math. Some students attend year-round, focusing on their skill of greatest deficit. Many other students who do not have learning or attention problems and who are not behind in school attend Morningside

to sharpen their basic skills and develop the necessary foundations for becoming and/or remaining high performers in school. Morningside's summer school students typically gain a grade level in their area of study.

## COACHING THE TEACHER

Specifically, an 11-year study of students' mean standardized test gains in reading, language arts, and mathematics determined that reading averaged 2.5 years of growth per school year, growth in language arts approached an average of four grade levels, and mathematics scores rose to more than three grade levels of improvement per school year. This data not only highlights the efficacy of the Morningside methods but also inspires its proponents to take these methods to even more classrooms. Johnson and the other professionals at Morningside believe that teachers hold the key to an educational program's success or failure. While good curriculum materials are a necessary condition to any teacher's effectiveness, materials alone are not sufficient. Teachers must be masterful in implementing curricular, instructional, and management practices, but more than that, they must understand the rationale behind them in order to apply the most appropriate practice to situations that emerge, to assess their effectiveness, and to make changes that the data recommend. Johnson asserts that employing these skills to the actual conditions of the classroom requires coaching and instruction, yet this is usually not the case. "We would never expect even the most gifted athlete to perform without a coach and yet we





see very little coaching of teachers,” he says. “Further, for teachers, the classroom is the ultimate game day situation and no amount of non-classroom training sessions can prepare them for its complexities.”

For this reason, MTA provides training in three areas that are critical for teachers to develop the level of fluency required to be successful in the classroom. After learning the underlying philosophies of the Morningside model, teachers master procedures that underpin the model, such as the routines used in Direct Instruction and the charting and decision-making practices associated with Precision Teaching. Working with trainer/coaches (TCs), teachers learn to apply this approach in role plays, followed by real-world practice, during which the TC provides positive but non-interrupting feedback. During such sessions, teachers learn the optimal

skills for interacting with students and advancing their abilities. In one large study, after such in-class coaching, teachers’ scores in knowledge acquisition, skill acquisition, and skill application rose from a low of 2 to 5 percent to 80 percent. Mutual interaction also plays a pivotal role in the classroom setting. Johnson explains, “In schools and agencies where our programs are implemented, we realized early on that students can be a powerful source of support for a novice teacher. When students and teacher have a positive and encouraging relationship, students can be enormously helpful to the teacher as he/she proceeds from halting to fluent performance.”

#### MOVING AHEAD

Morningside doesn’t stay in each partner school forever. Efforts begin early on to train an in-house coach—a principal, instructional leaders, and/or master teachers. Once skills are firm, the in-house coach can contact the Morningside coach via email or telephone. Since 1991, MTA has successfully implemented programs in over 125 schools and organizations with over 40,000 students, including contracts with First Nation and





American Indian schools, adult literacy centers, and in urban schools with students from impoverished backgrounds. All show consistent, sustainable, and impressive gains such as the following:

- Fort Fraser Elementary School, British Columbia: At year’s beginning only 39 percent of students met grade-level writing standards. After nine months, 80 percent of the students met grade-level performance. The school subsequently rose from 13th in a district ranking of 25 schools to second in math and fifth in reading.
- Seattle School District: Of the schools with 75 percent of its students qualifying for the free-lunch program, the average Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) reading gain was 7 percent. In the three schools that implemented MTA reading programs, the WASL reading gain was 22 percent.

- During a five-week summer program for students at risk for advancing to middle school, students studied in several areas: reading, writing, and/or mathematics. During that period 80 percent of the students gained at least eight months in grade equivalent scores in at least one skill area; 62 percent gained at least eight months in their skill of greatest deficit.
- Eighth-grade students at a Chicago public school gained an average of 2.3 grade levels on the Metropolitan Achievement Test, after seven months of MTA reading programs.

Such ongoing achievements exemplify the effectiveness of Morningside Academy’s combination of curriculum materials, instructional practices, and assessment protocols that have changed the lives of students. “We believe it is a major tribute to the power of the methods we use that we are even able to begin mid-year, coach teachers to use programs and routines (many of which are completely unfamiliar to them), integrate new students into programs, and still see gains that surpass historic gains for children in the programs we serve,” says Johnson. “Even so, we believe greater gains are possible. We are always eager to further streamline curriculum and instructional practices to achieve greater efficiency, because our goal is to help students catch up and move ahead.”

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## [About the Author]

### **GAIL SNYER**

Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

## [About The Institute]

The Aubrey Daniels Institute is dedicated to increasing the understanding of and advancing the use of the science of behavior. It is a depository of information, research, examples, and resources gathered together to support the powerful application of applied behavior analysis and is intended to be a place for exploring topics that are critical to Dr. Aubrey C. Daniels' vision of changing the way the world works.

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