

High Tech Orlando Reading Program Helps Those Struggling Most



A screenshot of Letters Alive in action.

Reading teacher Audra Cervi says kids pay attention to their reading lesson when the letter ‘J’ turns into a jumping, blue 3-D jaguar.

Cervi places a flash card with the letter J under a special camera. Across the room a jaguar springs to life on an electronic screen.

A small group of kindergarteners at Audubon Park Elementary School near Orlando squeal at the sight. Some reach out to grab the critter.

“How does it do that?” one student asks in awe.

Cervi changes the card and an elephant trumpets its appearance. The kids shriek in response.

The students are learning to read with Letters Alive.

The letters spring into moving, screeching animals when held under a special camera that attaches to a computer. The program costs \$1,000 for a year-long curriculum. Mary Elizabeth Langston teaches students with autism.

“It’s so interactive,” she says. “It’s so meeting them where they are providing them the kind of lessons they really need to learn.”

The technology is called augmented reality.

Audubon Park teachers say the animal actions, colors and sounds are riveting. They’ve seen the best response from their toughest students.

That’s significant because many states are raising the stakes for students based on their ability to read.

Florida pioneered the trend by requiring that third-grade students be held back unless standardized test

scores show they are reading at grade level. Indiana is among a handful of states that have since adopted the policy.

Florida's Board of Education also raised minimum passing scores on state reading tests this year. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is encouraging other states to raise their minimum requirements.

Langston says Letters Alive make a connection with students that other reading curriculum does not.

"The picture changed colors," Langston says. "The animal jumped. The animal ate. They got to see what the words meant. And that's the point of teaching reading and writing. It's meaningful. It's purposeful and it came alive for them."

Letters Alive was created by a mother struggling to teach her children how to read.

Cynthia Kaye says they tried everything. But one of her two sons adopted from Latvia could not read English.

"So we had them in public school, we had them in private schools, I had 'em tutored and nothing was working. My oldest one not, not too bad. But my youngest one – it was, it was a struggle.

Kaye is now Chief Zoo Keeper of Alive Studios, an Atlanta-based edutainment provider for early education. An employee that once worked for a video game company showed her augmented reality and Letters Alive was born.

Kaye and Audubon Park Elementary School teachers say Letters Alive works best with students having a tougher time reading.

That means students with autism, those learning English, or boys trailing their female classmates, says Cervi, the reading teacher.

"This really is exciting to the boys that really, maybe don't want to read yet that are five years old."

The program is too new to know how well it works yet.

A national research panel says blending memorization, phonics and students reading aloud is the best way to teach reading.

Letters Alive does all three.

And Cervi sees a difference.

"It just grabs their attention," she says. "I've been using it with my kindergarten students and I used the same letters for like two days in a row and then when I test them they're starting to recognize those letters faster."

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-AUDUBON PARK ELEMENTARY TEACHER MARY ELIZABETH LANGSTON