

# Underserved Four Year Old Pre-Schoolers Prepare for Kindergarten by Becoming Beginning Readers

In 2008 the Olive Child Parent Center (OCPC) of the Mathew A. Henson Elementary School in Chicago implemented the Sunform™ Alphabet System. The research goal of the implementation was to determine the effectiveness of the Sunform approach in teaching at-risk preschoolers their letter sounds by comparing the results to children who received a traditional approach. Researchers believed that children who live in poverty received less exposure to print and possessed weaker alphabet knowledge (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). Sunform had been promoted as a K-2 supplemental program only, and this was the first time it had been formally studied with preschool age children.

## The Sunform Methodology

Sunform simultaneously teaches children phonemic awareness, letter sounds (versus letter name sounds), and letter shapes to automaticity by integrating emotionally engaging images and alliterations. This uniquely innovative approach to beginning literacy instruction transforms abstract, non-phonetic symbols into meaningful, phonetic letters for young learners.

*"The preschool students learned at a much faster rate with Sunform. They all started in September, and by January the majority of them knew their sounds. They wanted to write stories, and write their names! When I got them the following year in kindergarten, they were very comfortable with their letters and sounds. They were eager to go beyond many of the students who had used the other program."*

Cheryl Arthur,  
Head Teacher

## Fast Facts

- Chicago Public Schools
- Inner city neighborhood
- At-risk preschool center
- Control was Earobics®

Preschool age children from low-SES families typically learn one third of their letter sounds during preschool (Molfese et al, 2006). In this study, students in the control group (Earobics®) learned 36% of their letter sounds, while the Sunform students learned 91.5% of their letter sounds.

## Implementation

All of the participating students were four year old African American children living in economically disadvantaged circumstances. They were assigned to one of two classrooms. The experimental (Sunform) classroom had 22 students in a half-day preschool. The control classroom had 22 students enrolled in a full-day preschool.

Each classroom had one head teacher and one aide. The head teacher in the control classroom taught a traditional ball-and-stick letter recognition/letter-naming method, supported by visual aides such as the letter chart. That teacher used creative games and songs to teach the letters of the alphabet. Earobics® was the commercial supplemental program used.

Susan Bernover, the head teacher in the Sunform classroom, had taught preschool for 25 years. She had always taught students letter names and sounds simultaneously, and she was trained in the Sunform method (which only teaches letter sounds – not letter name sounds) before school started. “I enjoyed doing it. I thought the kids really did well with the program, and they seemed to enjoy it. They correlated visually what they saw with what they heard. It seemed much easier for them to remember the sounds than with other methods such as learning a new letter each week.” Susan Bernover, Preschool Teacher

## Outcomes

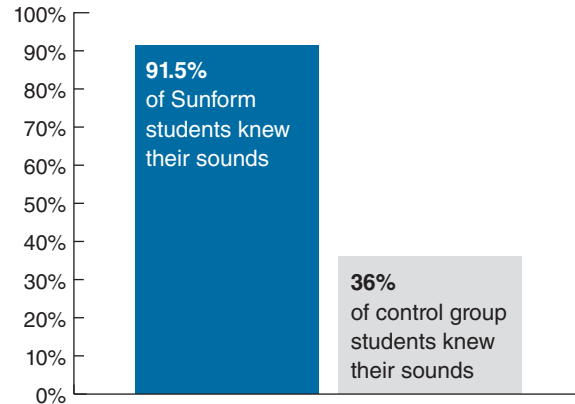
The students were individually tested three times during the year. The procedures for pre-, mid- and post-testing were identical and included assessment of sounds and words. An outside assessor conducted all the assessments for reliability purposes.

Despite the external factors that make learning more challenging for students living in poverty, the preschool students who received Sunform instruction all mastered alphabet knowledge in a relatively short amount of time, and the results were published\* in the Journal of Education Research. The researchers attributed Sunform’s effectiveness to 5 factors:

1. Emotional connection children have with images (Vail, 1996)
2. Approach strengthens phonemic awareness through alliteration
3. Instruction of letter sounds & names is integrated
4. The alphabet is directly taught explicitly and systematically in four stages
5. Phonemic awareness, phonics, writing are intertwined in an accessible way

Bernover attributed the program’s effectiveness to student engagement. “It really held their attention. It’s not like I had to constantly review and reinforce. It was almost like a game to them. They looked forward to doing it every day. It can be very hard to hold these kids’ attention. But even my wiggleworms did very well with this program.”

## At-risk Preschoolers Become Beginning Readers



In a Chicago Public Schools preschool study\*, Sunform students learned 91.5% of their sounds while the control group students (Earobics®) learned 36% of their sounds.

## About Sunform

Sunform’s unique integrated pictograph mnemonic-based approach to alphabet instruction establishes the foundational letter sound proficiency necessary for the subsequent development of automatic word recognition and word memorization. Daily 10–15 minute lessons enable students to master the 26 beginning letter sound-symbol correspondences to automaticity. Most English speakers will begin blending after just 8–10 weeks of instruction. This approach is consistent with the latest evidence (Roberts, 2021) and produces dramatic literacy gains in Pre-K, K-2 and remedial settings.

## About Ventris Learning

Our linguistically responsive instructional and assessment resources help educators better meet the needs of all students including those who become underserved in literacy.

*\*Massengill Shaw, D., & Sundberg, M.L. (2008). At risk preschoolers become beginning readers with neurologically integrated alphabet instruction. Journal of Education Research, 2 (1), 61-73.*

*Roberts, T.A (2021). Learning Letters: Evidence and Questions From a “Science of Reading” Perspective. Read Res Q, 00(00), 1–22.*

