

Accelerating Literacy Development



Tom Ihnot - CEO

About Read Naturally

At Read Naturally, we pride ourselves on the quality of our materials, our dedicated service to educators, and the success of students who use our products. We believe that curricula should be interesting and appropriate for each and every student, and that materials should be flexible and adaptable for many situations and environments. We believe that teachers understand best the needs of their students, and that teachers should be supported in their efforts through professional development and coaching.

Developing literacy is one of the most important steps toward a successful future. Reading is not only a necessary skill, but also an enjoyable and rewarding practice that enables a lifetime of exploration and discovery. For these reasons, we are dedicated to producing better tools, better readers, and brighter futures.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Ihnot, what is the concept for Read Naturally?

Mr. Ihnot: Our mission is to improve the reading of struggling and developing readers through a strategy called Read Naturally, which combines teacher modeling, repeated reading and progress monitoring to accelerate reading achievement.

CEOCFO: What is the general strategy for teaching reading today and where does Read Naturally fit in?

Mr. Ihnot: We are primarily used by schools for developing readers in kindergarten, first and second grade, and any struggling readers who are behind. That would be adults down through the first grade. We are used to improve student's fluency, comprehension and vocabulary. We have a CD and print version, which we call Encore. We have a school network version which we call SE, and then we have our online version that we call Read Live.

CEOCFO: What is in the One Minute Reader program? How does it help people who are struggling?

Mr. Ihnot: One Minute Reader was developed for the at home market for parents and schools also use it as a school checkout program where they provide the CDs and books of stories to students to take home to improve their reading achievement. The One Minute Reader is the same strategy, but is a more simplified version for use by parents at home with their sons and daughters. One Minute Reader became available in an app format for iPads in 2013.

CEOCFO: What do you understand about learning to read that is not covered in the normal curriculum or basic program?

Mr. Ihnot: What happens with the students who get behind is they end up with very little practice. When they get behind, the materials in their classroom are beyond them. Therefore, they read very little every day. Our program is a concentrated effort for 30 to 45 minutes every day for students to get the kind of practice at the level they are at so that they can build fluency and automaticity. The result is that they can recognize words automatically and focus their attention on comprehending rather than trying to decode individual words.

CEOCFO: How is the material structured?

Mr. Ihnot: Basically, students are placed at about half a grade above their instructional level where they are able to effectively read a story. We have levels that go from .8 to 8.0 and have half grade increments. Once students are placed, they pick a story and then the student does a one minute cold timing to establish a words correct per minute baseline for the story. Next, the student does the teacher modeling phase of the strategy. They put their headphones on, and as the words are read into their ear, they subvocalize and read along. That is where they build their word recognition and accuracy. These are relatively short non-fiction passages. They start at the low levels at about 70 words a story and they go up to about 300 or 400 words per story at 8.0. The second step after teacher modeling is the repeated reading phase. Now they will just do one-minute timings with the passage, seeing how many words they can read correctly in one minute. They do that as many times as necessary until they think they can reach their goal rate. In the beginning, the teacher would have set a goal rate for them to read a passage. Let us say you had a fourth grader reading a 3.0 passage. She is

likely to have a goal rate of 100 words read correctly, if she had a cold timing of 65 words per minute. Then with the practice, teacher modeling, and repeated reading of one-minute timings, she would have to then get her level up to 100 words read correctly in one minute. That is not necessarily fast, but it is enough so that she is able to read it automatically and improve her fluency. Once she thinks she can pass, then she goes to the final step where she is going to be held accountable. Now she reads the passage for the teacher. She has been taught to be independent on those other steps up until this point, and then once she thinks she can pass, she reads it for the teacher as the teacher conducts a one-minute timing. In order to pass, she has to meet three criteria. One is that she reaches the goal rate, second is that she has three or fewer errors, and third, she answers all the comprehension questions correctly. Once she passes then she can go onto a new story. It usually takes about 30 to 40 minutes to pass a story for a student in the program.

CEOCFO: *How important is it to have interesting content? Do the kids need to be engaged as much as they need to be motivated to do it?*

Mr. Ihnot: That is one of the reasons for the success of our program. We have highly engaging, interesting, non-fiction passages. In addition, the Read Naturally strategy has a video game effect. Students have to reach their goal and read so many words correctly in a minute, you combine those two and the kids really want to do our program. Teachers tell us all the time that some students do not go out to recess until they pass the story.

CEOCFO: *Business-wise, are you typically working with individual teachers, individual schools, school systems or districts? How and with whom do you work?*

Mr. Ihnot: In terms of marketing, we do not have reps that go out and call on school districts. We go to reading conferences, and we have presenters who train teachers, whether it is one hour, half a day or a full day training. They train teachers in our strategy. We work with teachers and teacher development. Read Naturally presenters get involved at the school district level and school building level. Also we do webinars to educate school leaders and teachers about our program.

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CEOCFO: *Are there particular ages or grades that tend to better with the program or seem to be a better fit, or is it pretty much equal across the board?*

Mr. Ihnot: It is across the board as far as the success of the program, but you do have some key areas where schools tend to devote quite a bit of resources. That is in the second, third, fourth and fifth grade, and they use their resources there to have programs like Read Naturally because they do not want students to get behind. As soon as they see them getting behind, then they want to have this special intervention that will get them back on track.

CEOCFO: *Why not start first and second grade so they do not have to get behind?*

Mr. Ihnot: They do sometimes, and sometimes it happens in kindergarten, first and second grade too. It is just that sometimes struggling students are not identified as quickly when in second grade. As the vocabulary gets more difficult they are identified starting in the third and fourth grade.

CEOCFO: *Is it harder for kids today to learn how to read given reading is not as popular and there are video games and other competition?*

Mr. Ihnot: I think that the distractions and the video games are an issue. However, I think No Child Left Behind was very helpful in that it focused resources in developing the skills of teachers. Teachers use assessments and evaluations to identify students who need an intervention. We are much better off than we were before 2000.

CEOCFO: *Has your approach changed at all over the years as you have developed the product and interest has grown? What have you learned along the way?*

Mr. Ihnot: We have really become a technology company. Schools are moving toward providing more and more of the curriculum and instruction through computers and iPads. We actually started out with cassettes and printed stories, then CDs and stories, then the software edition that is on school networks – and now the leading program of implementation is the online, web-based Read Live version.

CEOCFO: *How is business?*

Mr. Ihnot: It is good. We had a little bit of a decline in 2011 and 2012, and that was partly because we switched over from emphasizing our software edition program where they paid us a one-time payment for it and owned it, versus the Read Live version and a subscription. As we built our Read Live subscription basis, we have seen the revenue pop back up.

CEO CFO: *Put it all together for our readers. There are many companies in your industry and many people attacking the problem. Why does Read Naturally stand out?*

Mr. Ihnot: I think that we have specialized in the developing and struggling reader, and we have kept it very focused on the student and tried to meet the needs of the teacher by continually upgrading our materials and our formats to make it easier for them to deliver instruction. As you mentioned in your question, I think we have the key components that ensures success, and the Read Naturally strategy holds students accountable. They are able to achieve success every day in that 30 to 40 minute period of time because they are held accountable and have to pass. Students feel good about the process because at the end of it they can read the story like you and I can. Many programs have certain parts of our program, but they do not have all the aspects that result in success for the student at the end of the process.

CEO CFO: *When you are speaking with teachers, do they understand the difference? Is there an aha moment where they see the difference quickly between some of the other things available as to the comprehensive nature of what you provide?*

Mr. Ihnot: Yes, I think that is one of the reasons why our approach has succeeded. We do not have a rep coming in to talk to a school leader. We want to train teachers so that they do have a chance to see the power of our program. That is why our focus on marketing has been more on training than just showing the products.

BIO: In 1989, Candyce Ihnot was a teacher, graduate student, wife, and mother of four active children (ages 18, 14, 12, and 6). That year, as part of her master's program in special education, Candyce developed a unique and highly effective strategy to help struggling readers achieve fluency. She combined three research-proven methods (teacher modeling, repeated reading, and progress monitoring) into a simple set of steps that would later become known as the Read Naturally Strategy. Eventually, this strategy would help millions of struggling students read more fluently. Along with her husband, Tom, a high school economics teacher and basketball coach, Candyce founded Read Naturally, Inc., in 1991.

Early on, the husband-and-wife team ran the business from their kitchen table. As Read Naturally's sales increased, they cleared space in a spare bedroom to expand operations. The kitchen table continued to host "board meetings," and the basement doubled as the assembly and warehouse space. Candyce developed curriculum materials and trained teachers around the country to implement the strategy. Tom handled the business side of Read Naturally, servicing customers, shipping orders, and keeping the books. All four of their children were employed to stuff envelopes, assemble materials, and carry out countless other tasks. It was truly a family affair—and it still is, after more than 20 years in business. The Read Naturally family has now grown to nearly 30 dedicated and hardworking people, most of whom work in an office less than one mile from the kitchen table where it all started.



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