

SIPPS Plus for High School Students: The Critical Elements for Growth and Success

By Jennifer McMahon | Categories: Reading Intervention and Acceleration

I sidled up next to a high school student and casually asked my trademark question, "What are you reading and loving?"

He barely glanced up from the paper he was doodling on and said, "Oh. I don't read."

I was sure I must have misheard him or maybe misunderstood him. I tried again and smiled, "Well, maybe you haven't found the right book. What do you like to read about?"

This seemed to catch his attention. He actually glanced up when he replied, "I don't have to read. It's on my IEP."

Well, after I researched this a bit, I discovered that his statement was pretty accurate. He had so many accommodations and modifications that he effectively did not have to read during his school day. Further, I could find no plan for how he might actually close his phonics gaps. As I looked into this more, I discovered this student was not alone. So, our district needed a plan. That plan was *SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words)*.

We began implementing *SIPPS* as an intervention for our most at-risk students in high school. Through this implementation, we have seen growth! Oh, and I do mean growth! Students who had given up on ever learning to read are passing mastery test after mastery test, and their decoding and encoding skills are evident in their reading and writing.

Along the way, we learned and identified some special considerations for older readers and the aspects of *SIPPS* we believe are critical for the growth of these students.

Routines and Systematic Instruction Lead to Success

If a student has reached high school and still has significant phonics gaps, the first priority is to ensure this student experiences success. The *SIPPS* routines are predictable and are designed to lead students to success. Because they are modeled and guided, and students respond chorally, fear of failure is mitigated. This is so incredibly important because students who reach high school with phonics gaps are often convinced they can't learn or grow as a reader. Don't be tempted to modify the routines or add pizzazz. It was so difficult for me to just stick to the routine, but the predictable nature of the routine and the minimal teacher talk is critical for student growth.

What a teacher may see as too repetitive is exactly what allows older readers to begin to let down their guard and trust the process. The students know exactly what to expect, and this allows them to focus only on the new learning.

Mastery Tests Build Confidence

Frequent mastery tests allow for immediate feedback for students after only a few lessons. This allows them to see their own growth, and for many, seeing how much they learned in a short period of time provides a much-needed confidence boost. I cannot emphasize

this enough! Because of the structure of *SIPPS* lessons, as long as routines are consistent and corrective feedback is provided, students will likely show mastery on these assessments. I had one student tell me it was the first time in his life he had gotten a perfect score on a test.

These mastery tests become the evidence needed to reassure some of the most vulnerable students that they are readers. When they say, "I can't do it," then one only needs to point to these mastery tests and say, "But, look! You already *are* doing it." It is hard to argue with data.

Create a Schedule that Honors this Work

High school students have to be concerned with "credits," so carving out an intervention time is not easy. Students with disabilities often need time during the day to complete work for other classes, so even if they have resource room, they are often reluctant to use it for "that phonics stuff." (This is an actual quote.)

Our high school principal created a credit-bearing class for students receiving *SIPPS*. This allowed students to have a class in their schedule where their needs were being met, but that also moved them closer to graduation. The class includes the *SIPPS* lesson and independent reading time, so students can apply their learning and teachers can confer with students.

Honor Students' Dignity

We also learned the importance of honoring students' dignity. The *Dreams on Wheels* book looks like a real chapter book, so students were not embarrassed to carry it around with them. As students moved through *SIPPS* Plus and toward *SIPPS* Challenge, we made sure to invest in high-interest, lower-reading-level books to continue to support their reading growth.

We also pointed students toward ebooks, and several students expressed how this helped them feel more comfortable because nobody could see the cover and make judgments.

Foster Agency Through Choice

Probably the biggest difference between using *SIPPS* with elementary students and using it with high school students is the even greater need to be flexible and ready to respond to the suggestions of high school students. If a student is in high school and has phonics gaps, then they very likely also have a negative self-concept. Experiencing success is one way to help students rebuild their confidence, but older students also need to develop agency—the idea that they can make choices and have control over their lives. We saw over and over (usually at the point where students were almost ready to test out completely) that as they gained confidence, they also offered suggestions to modify the lessons.

This requires sophisticated decision-making and the person providing the intervention has to be absolutely clear about the purpose of the lesson or the particular part the student wants to change. Sometimes it is easy: "Can we use green markers instead of blue?" And sometimes it requires more thought.

Regardless, showing respect for students' ideas and accommodating them when possible is more important than it may first appear. It is a sign that students are ready to take ownership of their own learning, and as they teeter on the edge of adulthood, this sense of control over their own development is exactly what they need to have in order to continue to grow beyond high school.

In Conclusion

I am writing these thoughts after having a nice chat with a rising Sophomore at the high school. He is coming in every day this summer for *SIPPS* and independent reading because he wants to have room in his schedule for an elective next year.

I watched him decode every word that was put in front of him and then he read aloud to me too. He is on target to complete the

Challenge level in *SIPPS* in just a few weeks.

Oh, and did I mention? This is the student who only a year ago said, "I don't read." Excuse me as I blink back these tears.

Have you used *SIPPS* with older readers? What did you learn? What might you share with others?

If you enjoyed this blog by Dr. Jennifer McMahon, check out her blog 'Fostering Book Love in Older Readers.'