

# PRINCE Leadership MONTHLY



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## Accelerated Reader: What it Is and What it Is Not

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The role that the Accelerated Reader program plays in our curriculum is an ongoing topic of discussion among parents. To say that this topic is talked about maybe as often as what the family will do for dinner on any given night might be only a slight exaggeration. By the end of last school year, it was apparent that the program was in need of some focused discussion on our part to ensure that we, ourselves, were clear about AR's role: what it has been, what it could be, and what we want it to be. With those goals in mind, a cross-section of lower school teachers and I met in August to discuss the program in light of these questions.

The Accelerated Reader program, which has been around since at least the 1990's, is used in a variety of ways by schools across the country as a supplement to their reading curriculum. For a school like ours, a program like Accelerated Reader can serve as a motivator to encourage students to pursue reading beyond the curriculum. According to Reference.com, "The program is designed to motivate students to read, while allowing teachers to track student reading progress."



The consensus of our representative group was that the program can appropriately incentivize most students to read books of their choice for enjoyment. The short quizzes that students must take to determine if they have read the book completely are just that: short quizzes. The assessments do not go into the same level of detail, nor are the

performance expectations as weighty as the assessments connected to our reading curriculum. Though there is some debate among researchers, for the most part, the quizzes in the AR program are limited to questions that ask students simply to recall some of the details in the book. These types of questions demonstrate the most basic level of understand-

ing of the book's contents. Students receive points for the books they read based upon the number of quiz questions they answer correctly. If a student reads a book that is truly within his or her comprehension level carefully, he or she typically gets the full number of points on the quiz. Students can answer as few as 60% of the questions correctly and still receive partial credit for the book.

At each grade level, our teams of teachers have created rewards for grade appropriate benchmarks as a means of celebrating their students' dedication to choosing to read beyond class requirements. These "AR parties" have various themes such as "Pajama Day" or "Building Ice-cream Sundae." It is important that you understand and remember that the celebrations are not meant to be the focus. Fostering continual reading is the focus. Our teacher panel agreed that we must clearly communicate this in the classroom. We ask that you do this at home, as well. Additionally, this year, teachers will have the option of recognizing students for reading beyond the curriculum at our periodic awards ceremonies on Wednesday mornings. Rather than emphasizing the point accumulation, these recognitions will be more creative in nature: "Most Improved Reader," "Series Expert," "Best Average," etc. Whether or not these awards are given will be left to each teacher's discretion. At the end of the year, we will recognize students at each grade level for grade-appropriate yearlong point accumulation.

It is never our intention for students to associate stress with reading; however, it is our responsibility, first, to teach our students how to read, and read well. Once we lead them to become readers, we want to induce them to effectively and independently gain knowledge and demonstrate understanding of a variety of topics and subject matter. This is crucial for long-term success in today's fast-paced, increasingly competitive world. Being a strong reader is also closely connected to our ability to fulfill the mandate of scripture to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30) We honor God by developing our minds, which naturally happens when we engage with the written word consistently.

As educators and avid readers ourselves, our desire is that every student who passes under the influence of our lower school reading program will emerge able to read well and will choose to read beyond classroom requirements. Finding a place of balance between the "work" of learning to read and the pleasurable and exploratory aspects of reading can be a delicate balancing act. We hope that programs like Accelerated Reader will serve as just the carrot some of our students need to lead them into the world of books and that it will be a journey from which they never return!