

# Lessons from Trei (and uPAR!)

One small bit of data made a world of difference for this Lander student

**uPAR™**  
**niversal**

## QUOTES

“*The challenge is knowing what works. uPAR takes away that guesswork.*”

Ellen Holzmann,  
Speech Pathologist  
Lander Middle School, WY



### Back Row

Mike Harris, Student Services Director  
Casey Widhalm, AT Coordinator

### Front Row

Ellen Holzmann, SLP  
Trei Federer, Student  
Julie Shanley, Principal  
Jacqueline Sixbey, Resource Room Teacher

Last December, Trei Federer, a 6th grader in Lander, Wyoming, learned something that he will likely never forget. Although he reads two grade levels below most of his peers, Trei, it turns out, can also vastly out-perform them.

The revelation came about when Trei took a new assessment: the Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading (uPAR). The results re-framed his school's approach to his education and their expectations of him. Most importantly, however, they also re-framed his own sense of self.

Educators and administrators in Lander first learned of uPAR from Ellen Holzmann, an SLP working in the District who has a strong interest in assistive technology (AT). The summer before, Holzmann took a course on accommodations for reading and writing. There she learned how uPAR pinpoints effective reading accommodations for individual students, and demonstrates—through clear data—the impact these accommodations can have on a student's reading comprehension.

Holzmann brought uPAR to the attention of the Lander School District's AT Coordinator and Case Manager Casey Widhalm, Special Education Director Mike Harris, and Resource Room Teacher Jacqueline Sixbey. Her colleagues were receptive. The District understands how important it is for students with reading deficits to access their grade-level curricula and how academic gaps can widen as students move through the grades if appropriate supports are not identified. “We know it makes a huge difference when a student can access the curriculum through reading,” explains Holzmann. “The challenge is knowing what works. In other districts I've seen educators throw different apps and text-to-speech readers at kids thinking they might work, but without any data to support whether they would or not. uPAR takes away that guesswork.”

“ I thought it would be just another piece of data. I didn’t think it was something that would make such a huge difference. ”

Jacqueline Sixbey,  
Resource Room Teacher  
Lander Middle School, WY

Jacqueline Sixbey is the Lander Middle School 6th grade resource room teacher. When she heard about uPAR, she thought of Trei Federer right away. Trei spent years receiving specialized reading and writing instruction outside of his general-education classroom.

Despite these interventions, an above average IQ score and impressive class participation, Trei still visibly struggled when he read, and it left a strong impression. “He read slowly, mispronounced words, and missed meanings,” Sixbey explains. “As result, I wasn’t entirely sure how much he was getting out of 6th grade Social Studies and English.”

#### Enter uPAR.

uPAR tests how well students comprehend leveled reading passages with different accommodations: as text on the screen, as text on the screen read by a recorded adult voice, and as text highlighted in sync with a computer voice. Students who score well with a particular passage are tested again at a more advanced level with the same accommodation. The results can be powerful. The measures contrast independent-read scores with scores achieved with the different accommodations. Sixbey admits she wasn’t at all prepared for the impact.

“Honestly, I thought it would be just another piece of data, and there are so many out there. I didn’t think it was something that would make such a huge difference.”



Ellen Holzmann and Trei Federer

Results display to the administrator’s dashboard as students complete test segments. They highlight in red, yellow, and green. Trei’s independent reading level lit green only for 4th grade. However his comprehension of passages read by a recorded adult voice stunned Sixbey. Bright as a traffic light, Trei, a 6th grader, was also green for grade 12.

“It blew me away! I was very, very surprised. And I was excited. This would mean a huge change for this student. Such a huge change.”

All told, the Lander School District assessed 19 middle and high school students with uPAR in its first year. Of these, 14 were recommended for reading accommodations, three were found to not benefit by accommodations, and two were recommended for accommodations as well as additional supports. “It’s pretty cool to be able to look back and see the differences in students’ lives,” reflects Holzmann.

“Before uPAR,” Sixbey admits, “we didn’t really know what Trei was capable of. Now we know he understands everything and so we expect more from him.”

Trei, too, expects more from himself. “I found out that I could accomplish more things reading, and now that I know, I try. Because I can do it.”

Following uPAR, Trei was provided a newly-created elective: a class for assistive technology proficiency. There he was joined by several classmates who were also identified by uPAR, and each was provided a Chromebook for exploring the assistive technologies that work best for them.

By year’s end, Trei and his AT-elective classmates were fully independent in their general education classrooms. Trei had also stopped failing classes, dreading school and spending unproductive hours at home in frustration.

“Trei taught us as much as we taught him this year,” reflects Sixbey. “He taught us you have to do different things with different kids in order to make it work and not every kid is going to be the same. He broke the mold.”



Trei Federer

Or as Trei puts it: “I used to feel different and special in a bad way. Now I feel different and special in a good way.”

“*I could accomplish more things reading, and now that I know, I try. Because I can do it.*”

**Trei Federer,**  
**Student**  
**Lander Middle School, WY**

# Our Vision

## Empower Students with Accessible Technologies that Address Unique Literacy Needs

It's commonplace in schools to see stacks of textbooks, paper notebooks, pencils and pens. These are the "conventional" learning tools in schools, and they are effective for many students. But for students with physical, cognitive or learning differences, these tools pose significant barriers to learning. These students require **specialized accessible technology** and media to maximize their learning. This is where Don Johnston excels. Since 1980 we have been developing and supplying innovative technologies to schools who recognize that each student has unique learning needs and can thrive in the right environment.

**We strive to create the right environment.** This requires the right tools, the right implementation and the right instructional approaches. We are committed to providing you with the most value from product selection to ongoing support and implementation.

Don Johnston empowers educators with specialized accessible technologies and supported reading and writing tools for students with cognitive, physical, and learning differences. Since 1980, the company has partnered with literacy experts, assistive technology specialists, speech language pathologists, psychologists, teachers, researchers, and scientists to develop over a dozen assistive technology products. The company also publishes Start-to-Finish®, a collection of paperback, audio and computer books for students who read below grade level.

