Students Achieve 1 Year, 3 Months of Reading Gains in Only 68 Days

Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District
Starkville, MS

District Statistics

Number of schools: 6

Number of students: 5,100

Grades: K - 12

School Structure: Small Town

Website:
http://www.starkvillesd.com

Student Population:
67% African-American
2% Asian
30% Caucasian
1% Hispanic

70% free/reduced lunch
15% special education

Challenge
- Large gap between the lowest- and highest-performing students

Solution
- Fast ForWord®

Populations served:
- Grades K–10 including:
   - Struggling readers
   - Response to Intervention (RtI) Tiers 2–3
   - Special education

Results:
- Average reading level gain of 1 year and 3 months in 68 days of Fast ForWord use
- Increase from the 22nd to 43rd percentile in reading
- 59% decrease in the number of students at the Struggling level; increases of more than 80% at the Emerging, Proficient and Advanced levels
- Improved performance on Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
- Increase in the number of students passing the Mississippi 3rd Grade Reading Summative Assessment
- Increased graduation rate from 66% in 2014 to 87.5% in 2016

Located in the same town as Mississippi State University, Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District (SOCSD) is one of the state's largest districts with more than 5,100 students.

"Because we're a university town, the top 25 percent of our students are on par with the highest achieving students you'll find anywhere. The lowest 25 percent, however, are students who really struggle. Our goal is to close that achievement gap. We also want to ensure that our students can be successful with higher-level content in honors classes, Advanced Placement courses, and other programs," said Jody Woodrum, Ed.D., assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for SOCSD. "The superintendent and I both had experience with Fast ForWord in other districts. We've seen schools make dramatic progress with the program, so we had great confidence it could help us here as well."

Scientific Learning®

More intensity means "success is almost guaranteed"

SOCSD began using the Fast ForWord program district-wide in fall 2012. Fast ForWord is a neuroscience-based intervention solution that uses the principles of brain plasticity — the ability of the brain to rewire and improve — to target the root causes of slow academic progress in students with disabilities, struggling readers, and English language learners. Students who use the program can make fast progress, and they continue to make progress long after they are done with the intervention.

In SOCSD, all first graders participate in the Fast ForWord program. It is also targeted to students in grades 2–10 who score in the lowest quartile on the NWEA MAP or the Mississippi Assessment Program.

"Fast ForWord is a big part of our RtI process for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students, and we have some students with special needs who use the program as well," said Woodrum.

Within each school, students work on Fast ForWord for 30 to 40 minutes each day in computer labs staffed by certified teachers or teaching assistants. The program is also used in afterschool and summer programs to provide additional support for students.

> "Because Fast ForWord works with cognitive skills in addition to reading, it makes students more receptive learners."

"Fast ForWord is much more intensive than other intervention programs. It takes time for teachers and teaching assistants to learn how to use it, but once they do, success is almost guaranteed. Because Fast ForWord works with cognitive skills in addition to reading, it makes students more receptive learners. This means that when they go back to their classrooms, they're better able to learn whatever their teachers are teaching. You just don't see that with other programs," said Woodrum. "We're very pleased with the work our lab managers are doing. They also meet periodically to look at the Fast ForWord data as a group and plan celebrations for students making growth."

Improved fluency, confidence and perseverance

Selected students in grades 3–8 also use Reading Assistant technology, which is part of the Fast ForWord program. They typically work on Reading Assistant for a period of four weeks to build their fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and overall reading proficiency. Reading Assistant is the only tool that uses speech recognition technology to correct and support students as they read fiction and non-fiction selections aloud.

"Students really enjoy Reading Assistant," said Woodrum. "It builds their fluency, as well as their confidence and perseverance. It helps them realize they can read any passage they attempt if they just keep at it."

Doubled reading scores and half as many struggling readers

During the 2015-16 school year, 1,047 students completed at least one Fast ForWord product and took a Reading Progress Indicator (RPI) pre- and post-assessment. "These students showed an average grade-equivalent reading level gain of one year and three months in just 68 school days of use — which is much less than a semester," said Woodrum. "Students doubled their reading scores, increasing from the 22nd to the 43rd national percentile. We also reduced the percentage of struggling readers by almost 60 percent and had huge gains in the percentage of students at the proficient and advanced levels!"

2015-16
Reading Progress Indicator — Proficiency Level Changes

Level	Pre-Assessment/ # of Students	Post-Assessment/ # of Students	% Increase or Decrease
Struggling, 1st–29th percentile	782	324	-59%
Emerging, 30th–54th percentile	206	373	+81%
Proficient, 55th–79th percentile	41	248	+505%
Advanced, 80th–99th percentile	18	102	+466%

2015-16
Reading Progress Indicator — Reading Percentile Scores

Before Utilizing Fast ForWord	After Completion of 1 or more Fast ForWord Products	Percentile Gain
22nd percentile	43rd percentile	+21 percentile points

Middle school students make 1 year and 6 months of reading gains from fall to winter

"At our middle school, we initially didn't see the level of growth we wanted to see, so we made one key change to motivate students to work harder. We allowed them to exit Fast ForWord when they met specific criteria," said Woodrum.

As part of this change, when students reach Fast ForWord Reading Level 5 and score at grade level or higher on their RPI assessment, they can exit the program and return to their regular class schedule. Students know that they also have to stay at grade level or above on the NWEA MAP assessments and the state assessment, or they will be returned to the intervention program.

"The results have been phenomenal. We now have about 20 students a year who exit the Fast ForWord program, and our middle school students are performing above everyone else on the RPI assessments. From fall 2016 to winter 2017 they achieved a gain of one year and six months in reading," said Woodrum. "Fast ForWord and strong motivation have been key to their success."

"Huge" gains on NWEA MAP interim assessments in grades 6–8

Students have also achieved gains on the NWEA MAP interim assessments in reading. "Making even small improvements in the RIT score from fall to winter is huge for middle school students. More than half of students participating in the Fast ForWord program achieved their expected growth target for the entire year by the winter. And nearly one-third of students made two or more years of growth in that time," said Woodrum.

Armstrong Middle School
NWEA MAP Winter Assessment – December 2016

Percentage of Fast ForWord students making RIT score improvement from fall to winter

Grade 6	56%
Grade 7	83%
Grade 8	71%

Percentage of Fast ForWord students who met their expected growth target for the whole school year by December 2016

Grade 6	46%
Grade 7	73%
Grade 8	54%

Percentage of Fast ForWord students making gains of 10+ and 20+ RIT points by December 2016

	10+ points growth (equivalent to 2+ school years)	20+ points growth
Grade 6	21%	10%
Grade 7	47%	23%
Grade 8	28%	4%

Increased graduation rate, lower dropout rate

"Our high school students who struggled to pass the state test were placed in Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant, and our graduation rate improved. Our dropout rate decreased as well. It's now at 3.4 percent, which places us in the top 10 of districts in the state with the lowest dropout rates," said Woodrum.

District Graduation Rate

2013-14	66%
2014-15	74%
2015-16	87.5%

Struggling 3rd grade readers pass summative assessment

In Mississippi, 2014-15 was the first school year students were required to pass the Third-Grade Reading Summative Assessment in order to be promoted to fourth grade. To prepare for the assessment, in fall 2014, SOCSD used data from the spring NWEA MAP test to determine which students had entered third grade as Beginning Readers. "We identified 55 students as Beginning Readers, and we were very worried about them passing the state assessment," said Woodrum.

By the end of the 2014-15 school year, of all the third graders who completed at least one Fast ForWord product, only one was still a Beginning Reader, according to Woodrum. "That's pretty astounding," she said. "Eighty-five percent of students who completed a Fast ForWord product passed that test. Considering that these were our struggling readers, those results are very, very good."

Achieving national recognition

In recognition of their exemplary implementation and strong student gains, SOCSD was named a National Reference Site by Scientific Learning Corp.

"We're very pleased with our results. We're also proud of our teachers and teaching assistants who do such a great job with the Fast ForWord program and our students who work hard every day to improve their skills," said Woodrum. "When we look at students' growth and achievement we can definitely see that our investment in the program is paying off. We see students who are making gains of a year-and-a-half or more. Many are students who have never made that kind of progress before. They now have more confidence as learners because they know they can achieve success."

"In a world focused on reducing budgets and trimming the costs of education, Fast ForWord is one area we are not going to cut back because of its importance and value to our children as learners. It is the best program out there for closing the achievement gap," said SOCSD Superintendent Lewis Holloway.

Fast ForWord®

reading assistant™

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