Goochland Helps Middle and High School Students Quickly Close Reading Gaps with the Fast ForWord® Program

Goochland County Public Schools

Goochland, VA

District Statistics

Number of schools: 5

Number of students: 2,594

Grades: PreK–12

Website:

http://goochlandschools.org

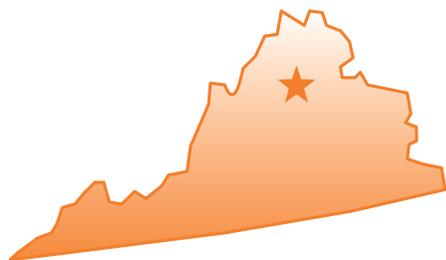**Student Population:**
70% Caucasian
17% African-American
7% Hispanic
5% Two or More Races
1% Asian/Pacific Islander

30% Economically disadvantaged
13% Special education
3% English language learners (ELLs)

Challenges

- Students entering middle and high school with reading gaps
- Growing population of English language learners (ELLs)

Solution

- Fast ForWord®

Populations served

- Grades 6–10 including:
    - All students in standard English classes
    - ELLs
    - Special education

Results

- Improvements in students' reading, language, and listening skills

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— Emily Holloway-Costa, English Teacher

In almost every middle school or high school, there are students who struggle in reading, despite years of interventions. To close these gaps, Emily Holloway-Costa, an English teacher at Goochland High School in central Virginia, wanted to try something different — but what?

"When students are in a standard English class but aren't reading at grade level, it can be frustrating. How can we teach 10th grade material if students aren't reading at a 10th grade level? When we look for ways to help them, many publishers are quick to say,

'Here's the magic key,' but it's usually just a repackaged solution that won't have measurable effect on our students," said Holloway-Costa. "We began to think that if we wanted to see different results, we would have to do something really different from what we'd done in the past."

Leveraging neuroscience and technology to address individual needs
The Fast ForWord program is a neuroscience-based, online intervention program that uses a unique three-step approach to deliver fast gains to struggling students. It provides them with the foundational language and cognitive skills, intensive practice, and guided reading help that they need to catch up, once and for all.

"Fast ForWord is so different from other interventions. We thought this approach could be very helpful for our students," said Holloway-Costa.

The district implemented the Fast ForWord program at Goochland Middle School and Goochland High School in January 2017. Students in standard English classes in grades 6-10 work on the program a minimum of 30 minutes a day, three days a week, while ELLs and students with disabilities in literacy development work on the program at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

In the first five months of use:
• 55% of students made up to half a year's growth
• 11% made .6 to 1 year of growth
• 13% made 1.1 to 1.5 years of growth
• 21% made more than 1.5 years of growth

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Opening minds and changing brains
To help students see how valuable this tool can be, Holloway-Costa has come up with several strategies for student success.

"In high school, struggling learners sometimes fear what they don't know. Ego can get in the way, too. But underneath it all, what they're really wondering is, 'Am I stupid?'. To change students' brains, we need to first open their minds," she said. "In our school, we've implemented several strategies to quickly get students on board so they can get the help they need."

Strategies for Student Success

- Set goals.
- Create a culture that embraces the Fast ForWord program.
- Have teachers try it themselves.
- Be consistent in the implementation.
- Have students keep their own progress charts with points for each exercise.
- Create a Wall of Fame for students who level up; they notice it!
- Put students into teams, track points on a scoreboard, and award a prize — or at least recognition or bragging rights — for the best average score.
- Create a chart for each class and hold competitions.
- Talk to students' parents to enlist their support.
- Assign a grade based on each student's participation and attendance in the program.

Closing gaps for ELLs

Students in Goochland's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program work on the Fast ForWord program five days a week, both in their standard English class and their ESOL class.

"When students are working on the program, their classmates can't tell which level they're on. That confidentiality breeds confidence because they can fill in gaps in their educational background or address pre-existing challenges without being singled out," said Holloway-Costa.

As a result, ELLs are quickly closing language and reading gaps. "One student had a MAP® reading score of 185 at beginning of year and by the end of March it was 199; that's two to three times the expected growth for that period of time," said Holloway-Costa. "Another student arrived at school speaking no English. After using Fast ForWord, she said it's now much easier to understand what people are saying."

Strategies for ELLs

- Be aware of differences in students' educational backgrounds.
- Be aware of gaps in their technology knowledge.
- Make sure students don't feel alone in using the program. Seeing others using it goes a long way!
- Keep other teachers in the loop and demonstrate connections between their classes and the Fast ForWord program.
- Create groups and conduct rotating activities to allow for more one-on-one interaction and spoken English between students.
- Educate parents about the program's importance to support buy-in.

Working toward district goals

"We have several end goals for the Fast ForWord program. We want to increase literacy levels for all students. We want to decrease remediation needs for our state Standards of Learning (SOL) testing, particularly in the humanities. We want to bridge gaps between student groups, reduce the dropout rate, and raise SAT and ACT scores," said Holloway-Costa. "Our ultimate dream goal is to explore the possibility of making Fast ForWord more widely available in the elementary schools to level the playing field early on."

As the district works toward these goals, teachers are seeing positive results in their classrooms.

"The Fast ForWord program reduces the cognitive load and the strain that students used to feel when reading," said Holloway-Costa. "They no longer feel that reading is hard. Instead, they think, 'I can do this.' It's improving their reading skills, their listening skills, and their comprehension — and they notice these changes as they're happening. It is an amazing program for our students."

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FAST FORWORD®

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