St. Mary Parish Public School System Dramatically Improves Student Performance, Moving from the Bottom Half to the Top Quartile in Louisiana

St. Mary Parish Public School System
Centerville, LA

District Statistics

Number of schools: 23

Number of students: 9,218

Grades: K–12

Website:
http://www.stmary.k12.la.us

Student Population:
41% African-American
2% Asian-American
46% Caucasian
10% Hispanic-American
1% Native American
6% Other

79% economically disadvantaged
12% special education

Challenge
- High-poverty schools
- Low state test scores
- "Academically Unacceptable" rated schools

Solution
- Fast ForWord®

Populations served:
- Grade K–5

Summary
Once a low-performing district, the St. Mary Parish Public School System has achieved significant gains to become a role model for schools looking to make dramatic changes in their performance. Since implementing the Fast ForWord® program, students have increased their reading proficiency and improved their achievement on state tests. As a result, the high-poverty district has raised its District Performance Score (DPS) by almost 40 points, moving from the bottom half in state performance to the top quartile. The district also improved its letter grade from a "D" to a "B," missing an "A" by less than one point in 2016.

Results:
- Increased District Performance Score from 60 points in 2006 to 99.2 points in 2016
- Raised district letter grade from a "D" to a "B"
- Moved from bottom half to top quartile in state rankings
- Increased the number of schools recognized as "A" schools and "Top Gains Schools" by the Louisiana Department of Education

"Our test scores are proof positive that Fast ForWord works."
— Leonard J. Armato, Superintendent

In the mid-2000s, after years of struggling, St. Mary Parish Public School System knew powerful change was needed. The rural district's high stakes test scores lagged behind the state average. The state of Louisiana had placed several of the district's schools in Academic Assistance, a designation for schools that fail to grow sufficiently — and some had remained there for nearly 10 years.

"When we were first investigating the need for reading intervention programs, we acknowledged that as a district we were woefully behind the proficiency curve required by high stakes testing," said Dr. Donald W. Aguillard, who served as superintendent from 2004 to 2015. "We were looking for an intervention package that would jumpstart early education literacy proficiency."

Leveraging neuroscience and technology to strengthen students' learning capacity
During the 2006-07 school year, St. Mary Parish started school-wide use of Fast ForWord at eight elementary schools that were in Academic Assistance. Fast ForWord is a neuroscience-based intervention program that aims to remediate the underlying difficulties that keep struggling readers, students with disabilities, and English language learners from making progress. It starts with cognitive skills such as memory, attention and processing speed and works from the bottom up, using the principles of neuroplasticity. Students who use Fast ForWord can make fast progress, increasing their reading skill level up to two years in as little as three months. They continue to make progress long after they are done with the intervention.

"One of the things we like about the Fast ForWord program is that it's based on the science of how the brain learns," said Leonard J. Armato, who served as the special education supervisor and then became superintendent of St. Mary Parish in 2015. "Our challenge wasn't necessarily that our programs were ineffective. It was that they weren't meeting students' individual needs. To make the most of our programs, we needed to develop and strengthen the cognitive skills essential for learning and reading success. Another challenge was that many of our interventions were time-intensive and our paraprofessionals could only serve a small number of students at one time. With Fast ForWord, we could serve more students and improve their skills more rapidly."

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After seeing a marked increase in student performance in the eight schools using Fast ForWord, the program was extended to the rest of the district in 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Creating fast and lasting gains with early intervention
"Initially, we used Fast ForWord in grades 1–12," said Armato. "Now our philosophy is to get all of our students on the program early."

As such, all students in kindergarten through grade 2 now work on the Fast ForWord program 30 to 40 minutes a day. Students in grades 3–5 also participate in the program if they need extra practice.

"Students who use Fast ForWord make lasting gains, which benefit them all through school. As a result, we discontinued Fast ForWord in our junior high and senior high schools because there was no longer a need for it there," said Armato.

Closing achievement gaps for students in poverty

Fast ForWord is also helping the district close achievement gaps with students from poverty, who comprise nearly 80 percent of the student population.
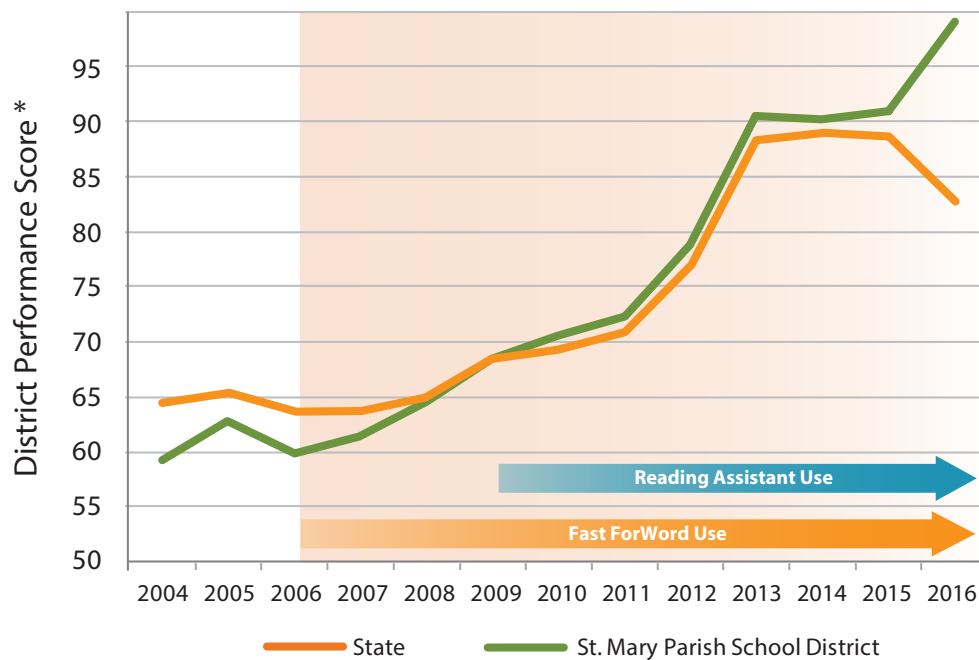
"Most of our students are economically disadvantaged, and many arrive at school below grade level. Fast ForWord targets the foundational skills that students can't get working with a teacher or paraprofessional," said Bridget Guillot, a Title I liaison for St. Mary Parish. "Even after 10 years with Fast ForWord, teachers still tell me how thankful they are because it covers skills they can't cover in an English language arts classroom. They also appreciate that it's fixing problems early, so by the time students take our state tests in the third grade, they've closed those gaps."

Building reading fluency and comprehension with one-on-one support

In some elementary schools, selected students use Reading Assistant technology, which is part of the Fast ForWord program. 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 typically work on Reading Assistant for 10 to 15 minutes a day to build their fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and overall reading proficiency.

Improving the District Performance Score from 60 to 99.2 points

Since introducing Fast ForWord, St. Mary Parish has achieved remarkable gains. It raised its District Performance Score (DPS) from 60 points in 2006 to 99.2 points in 2016*. In addition, it continued to outpace the state performance score, which decreased from 88.8 points in 2015 to 83 points in 2016.

*Scores standardized relative to 150 point scale

Raising the district letter grade from a "D" to a "B"
St. Mary Parish raised its district letter grade from a "D" in 2006 to a "C" in 2009 to a "B" in 2012. In 2016, St. Mary Parish came within .8 points of receiving the distinction of an "A" district.

Moving to the top quartile in state performance
Among the 72 school districts receiving performance score ratings in 2016, St. Mary Parish rose to 17th in the state, up five spots from 2015.

In addition, the Louisiana Department of Education also recognized eight St. Mary Parish schools as "Top Gains Schools." Top Gains Schools are identified as "A" schools that improved by 5 or more points in their School Performance Score (SPS), or schools graded "B" or below that improved by 10 or more SPS points.

Giving students what they need to succeed
"As superintendent, it's my responsibility to place students at the forefront of all decision-making while supporting teachers with the necessary resources for effective instruction. In our district, we have proven that Fast ForWord works with all types of learners, from struggling learners to high performers," said Armato.

"When you look at our state test scores, you can also see that we've closed the achievement gap between Title I and non-Title I schools and across different student subgroups," added Guillot. "Over the years, we've changed many programs in our district. Fast ForWord has been the one constant for prevention and intervention because it works."

"That's critical because when we invest in a program in St. Mary Parish, we want to make sure we're getting our money's worth," said Armato. "The Fast ForWord program gives our students what they need to succeed. If you implement Fast ForWord with fidelity, you'll get results. Our test scores are proof positive that Fast ForWord works."

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