Murray County Students Achieve Gains on State Tests and Improve Graduation Rate

Murray County Schools
Chatsworth, GA

District Statistics
Number of students: 7,621

Number of schools: 12

Grades: PreK-12

District Structure: Rural

Website:
www.murray.k12.ga.us

Student Population:
1% African-American
1% Asian/Pacific Islander
78% Caucasian
20% Hispanic
1% Multiracial

76% free/reduced lunch
9% special education
10% English language learners

A high-poverty district, Murray County Schools (MCS) began using the Fast ForWord® program with a group of struggling high school students in 2010. After helping 81 percent of these students pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) in English Language Arts (ELA), the district expanded the Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant™ programs to diverse learners in grades K-12. From 2010 to 2013, the percentage of students in grades 3-8 achieving proficiency in reading on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) rose from 93 to 96 percent. In 2013, the cohort graduation rate for the district's two high schools was 90 percent, compared to 72 percent for the state of Georgia.

Challenges
In 2007, when Dr. Vickie Reed became superintendent of MCS, the rural district had a graduation rate of 57 percent, one of the lowest in Georgia. By 2009, it had risen to 71 percent, but many students still struggled.

Solutions
Fast ForWord – At-risk students in high school
In 2010, MCS began using the Fast ForWord online reading intervention to help a group of high school students who, based on previous high stakes test scores, would likely fail the ELA component of the state graduation test. "These students were very much at risk of dropping out. We tried every possible intervention to help them but nothing was working," said Allison Oxford, director of instructional support services. "We learned about Fast ForWord and its research-based approach to improving literacy skills, and wanted to try it for our students."

The Fast ForWord program uses the principles of neuroplasticity — the ability of the brain to rewire and improve — to treat the underlying cause of language and reading difficulties. It was developed by neuroscientists to address reading skills while concurrently developing foundational skills including memory, attention, processing and sequencing.

The at-risk students began using the Fast ForWord program and after working on it an average of 60 days, 73 percent passed the English Language Arts portion of the state test. A few months later, the pass rate among this group was up to 81 percent.

Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant – Expansion to grades K-12
Based on this success, the district expanded the use of the Fast ForWord program and added the Reading Assistant online reading tool to all 11 of its schools. "Overall our reading scores were good and we've made great progress toward closing the achievement gap, but we still had some students who struggled, no matter what best practices we used. Based on the success we saw in our high schools, we knew Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant could help all of our students, no matter what grade or subcategory," said Reed.

"We use a variety of data points to determine which students will use the programs," said Oxford. "Our goal is to start with struggling learners and then add everyone else we possibly can. Our schools use Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant with general education, special education, ELL and even gifted and talented students. They really benefit all students."

Across MCS, the Fast ForWord program is used with diverse learners in grades K-12. Students work on the program 30 to 50 minutes a day, five days a week.

In addition, Reading Assistant is used in grades 3-12. Reading Assistant is the only online reading tool that uses speech recognition to correct and support students as they read aloud, building fluency and comprehension with the help of a supportive listener. No other program or e-book provides comparable real-time guidance and feedback.

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"Students use the Fast ForWord products to build foundational reading and language skills, and then we move them to Reading Assistant to develop their fluency, comprehension and vocabulary," said Oxford. "When you have a ratio of 30 students to one teacher, the opportunities to read individually to the teacher are few and far between. Reading Assistant allows students to receive instantaneous feedback on their reading, so they can progress more quickly."

"Reading Assistant is also an important part of our efforts to help students develop the skills they need to read and understand the more complex texts required by the Common Core State Standards," she added. "While we have several students who are meeting the standards for reading on the CRCT, their Lexile levels show they are not on target to meet the Common Core standards. Reading Assistant will help accelerate our struggling students' reading skills to move them to the proficient level on the new standards, and push our gifted students even further."

Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant – English language learners (ELL)
In addition, MCS finds that the combination of the Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant programs is helpful with ELL students.

"One area ELL students struggle with is differentiating similar-sounding English phonemes. The Fast ForWord exercises help students hear the small, but important differences between sounds," said Oxford. "Then, once students have worked with a few Fast ForWord products and understand the phonemes, we place them on Reading Assistant. That's where we really see progress! Reading Assistant helps students build their vocabulary and their understanding of the English language. It also allows students to hear themselves read aloud and it assists them if they get stuck on a word so they don't get frustrated. It gives students the one-on-one support they need, no matter what their level, so they get just the right amount of assistance to move forward."
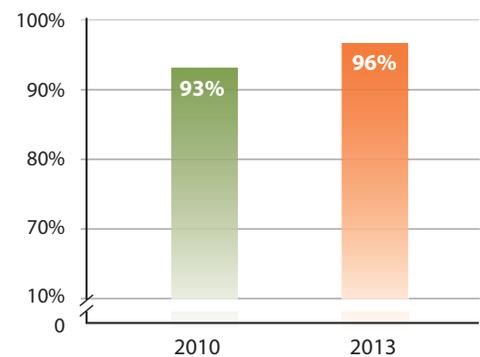
Results

"We believe that all children can learn and that high expectations result in high achievement," said Reed. "In our own research, we see a strong correlation between students' use of the Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant programs and improved performance on state tests."

"From 2010 to 2013, the percentage of our students in grades 3-8 meeting or exceeding state standards on the CRCT in reading rose from 93 percent to 96 percent," said Oxford. "In 2013, the cohort graduation rate for our two high schools was 90 percent, compared to 72 percent for the state of Georgia."

CRCT Reading – Grades 3-8 Percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards

	2010	2013
	93%	96%

"Maintaining a high level of achievement is difficult," Oxford continued. "We use Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant not only to address the needs of struggling readers, but to support all students to help them meet and exceed the standards in reading. We believe that with these programs, we can sustain the high levels of achievement we've experienced the past several years."

In 2014, Scientific Learning named Murray County Schools a National Leadership Center due to strong student achievement gains after the use of the Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant programs. "This success validates everyone's commitment to our vision: 'Committed to student success...no exceptions, no excuses!'" said Reed. "We love sharing our successes with the Fast ForWord and Reading Assistant programs with other districts, so they can improve learning for their students as well."

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