

K–10 Struggling Readers Achieve 1 Year, 9 Months Gain in Only 85 Days

Starkville School District
Starkville, MS

District Statistics

Number of schools: 5

Number of students: 4,378

Grades: K - 12

School Structure: Small Town

Website:

<http://www.starkvillesd.com>

Student Population:

65% African-American

3% 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 9 months in 85 days of Fast ForWord use — less than one semester
- Increase from the 21st to 42nd percentile in reading
- 427% increase in the number of students at the Advanced level, 336% increase at the Proficient level, and 78% increase at the Emerging level
- 52% decrease in the number of students at the Struggling level

Located in the same town as Mississippi State University, Mississippi's largest public university, Starkville School District (SSD) is one of the state's largest districts with more than 4,300 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 gap," said Jody Woodrum, Ed.D., assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for SSD. "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."

More intensity means "success is almost guaranteed"

SSD began using the Fast ForWord program district-wide in fall 2012. Fast ForWord uses the principles of neuroplasticity — the ability of the brain to rewire and improve — to target the root

cause of slow academic progress in struggling students. Students can realize achievement gains of up to two years in as little as three months and maintain an accelerated rate of learning even after the program ends.

In SSD, Fast ForWord is targeted primarily to K–10 students who score in the lowest quartile on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). In addition, all second graders participate in the program, except those who are pulled out for a gifted program during that same time period.

“Fast ForWord is a big part of our Rtl 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 a 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,” said Woodrum. “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.”

Doubled reading scores and half as many struggling readers

During the 2014-15 school year, 703 students in grades K–10 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 1 year and 9 months in just 85 days of use — which is less than a semester,” said Woodrum. “Students doubled their reading scores, increasing from the 21st to the 42nd percentile. We also cut the percentage of struggling readers in half and had huge gains in the percentage of students at the proficient and advanced levels.”

**2014-15
Reading Progress Indicator — Proficiency Level Changes**

Level	Pre-Assessment/ # of Students	Post-Assessment/ # of Students	% Increase or Decrease
Struggling, 1st–29th percentile	530	257	-52%
Emerging, 30th–54th percentile	125	223	+78%
Proficient, 55th–79th percentile	33	144	+336%
Advanced, 80th–99th percentile	15	79	+427%

2014-15
Reading Progress Indicator — Reading Percentile Scores

Before Utilizing Fast ForWord	After Completion of 1 Fast ForWord Product	Percentile Gain
21st percentile	42nd percentile	+21 percentile points

Struggling 3rd grade readers pass summative assessment

In Mississippi, 2014-15 was the first school year students were required to take the 3rd Grade Reading Summative Assessment. Students who do not pass the initial test are given the opportunity to retest twice. Those who do not pass must be retained, unless they qualify for one of four possible “good cause exemptions.”

To prepare for this, in fall 2014, SSD used data from the spring MAP test to determine which students would be entering 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 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. “To date, we’ve had the initial 3rd Grade Reading Summative Assessment and one retest, and 85 percent of students who completed a Fast ForWord product have now 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, SSD was named a National Reference Site by Scientific Learning Corp. in May 2015.

“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. These 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.”

Sustaining success

In summer 2015, SSD will join together with the Oktibbeha County School District to form the Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. “We’re working now to determine how to sustain our success as our district grows,” said Woodrum. “We want our new schools and students to have the same opportunities to use the Fast ForWord program because we know it works.”



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