

# Reading gets better by the click

By: Julie Drake

PALMDALE - The colorful characters, words and images on the computer screens in Cottonwood Elementary School's computer lab weren't the typical child's play.

Each of the students seated at a computer wore headphones so he or she could listen for instructions and then click in the appropriate area on the screen using the computer's mouse. What looked like a simple game to the passing observer was actually a more complex neuroscience-based brain-training exercise program called Fast ForWord that uses the principles of neuroplasticity to help students improve their reading skills.

"You have to really pay attention because you have to click the mouse when you get a sound. If you don't get it on time, or if you click it at the wrong time, you have to start over again," Cottonwood Principal James Norris said.

Andria Blua-Contreras, a resource specialist at Anaverde Hills School, discovered the program about two years ago when she, and Norris, were at Sundown Elementary School.

Blua-Contreras wanted to find a more efficient and effective way to help her students. She started using it toward the end of the 2012-13. Students' reading skills improved dramatically.

"It's like a dream come true," Blua-Contreras said in a telephone interview.

Fast ForWord is the only program Blua-Contreras has seen that produces such dramatic results in such a short amount of time.

Westside Union School District expanded the Fast ForWord pilot program to Cottonwood, Anaverde and Del Sur schools last year.

After students at the test schools improved their reading skills by an average of eight months, the district expanded use of the program to all 12 schools in the district.

The district uses it to help English-language learners,

special education students, and other children who are struggling.

Janell Cornwall, a computer aide at Cottonwood, said after three months using the program last year students' reading levels improved by an average of nine months.

"It just doesn't help with their reading level. Because it's doing neuropathway strengthening and practice, that's making it so it transfers to other things that they do throughout the school day," Cornwall said.

Students are able to focus more and have improved memorization and vocabulary.



"You have to really pay attention because you have to click the mouse when you get a sound. If you don't get it on time, or if you click it at the wrong time, you have to start over again," Cottonwood Principal James Norris said.

At Cottonwood Elementary students in second through sixth grade used the program for about 30 minutes each morning. The school also has an afternoon slot for special education students.

There are different, repetitive activities with names such as Sky Gym, Moon Ranch, Robo-Dog and Space Commander.

"It does things that we can't do as a teacher," said Kristin Belcher, a resource specialist at Cottonwood.

Cottonwood fifth-grader Isabelle Pruitt, 9, likes Fast ForWord.

"I like it because it helps me focus on my stuff that I'm supposed to do in class," Isabelle said.

Student Michael Gutierrez, 12, said the program includes a game that will give the user sounds that require you to press the right button. Another program will read the user a story and then ask the user to click on the text from the story.



The sixth-grader said that he is able to chart his progress each week, adding that he understands language arts more now.

"It's a great learning activity," Michael said.

Sixth-grader Daniel Burgos, 11, agreed.

"I think it's going really well for me," Daniel said. "I think this really helps me and it's going really good. It was a great activity and they have a lot of games."

Dr. Marty Burns, a speech and language pathologist, who is also a professor at Northwestern University, teaches courses that revolve around neuroscience including stroke, traumatic brain injury and cognitive rehabilitation for children and adults.

"We started to identify that a lot of children who struggled with reading had a lot of trouble with that task, phonemic awareness, breaking words down into

sounds," Burns, who consults with Scientific Learning Corp., said in a telephone interview.

Fast ForWord helps to build up the maps of underlying sounds of a native language and the ability for a child to remember the sounds, called phonological memory.

"It builds up basic language skills so that the child has the vocabulary, so if they can decode the word they can figure out what the sentence means."

Marguerite Johnson, Westside's assistant superintendent of Educational Services, said the district decided to expand the program district wide to help English-language learners and special needs students as they moved into the Common Core State Standards.

They piloted the program for the second part of the 2013-14 school year and had phenomenal results.

"It was very important to us to make this available district wide so that everybody would have access to it," Johnson said.

The district purchased the program for about \$750,000 using one-time Common Core funds. Students will continue to have access to the program if they transfer from school to school and can also use it at home.

The only future expenses will be access to ongoing data and support services.

"It's not a reading intervention program," said Christine Fitzgerald, director of curriculum and instruction.

"It just happens to be that their reading fluency and comprehension skyrocket," she said.

"We're seeing some really great improvements with our kids," Westside Superintendent Regina Rossall said.

[jdake@avpress.com](mailto:jdake@avpress.com)