I was drawn to Fast ForWord because it’s evidence-based. I was able to tell teachers, ‘there’s a lot of research behind it and a lot of data that says it works. It’s got the Department of Education’s seal of approval.’

-Sharon Betz
Director of English Learner (EL) Programs
Community Academies, New Orleans, Louisiana

When Sharon Betz, Director of English Learner (EL) Programs for Community Academies in New Orleans, started looking for a language program, she knew her schools needed a solution to address English language learning and foundational literacy skills. Her district’s EL students—many of whom are new to the U.S. from Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and other Central American countries—needed more than the textbooks, flashcards, and worksheets the district had been using.

Betz found Fast ForWord on the What Works Clearinghouse site, where Fast ForWord has the highest rating for English language development programs. Fast ForWord uniquely targets reading skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension, while also building cognitive skills that are core to reading and language, such as memory, processing, and sequencing.

“I was drawn to Fast ForWord because it’s evidence-based,” says Betz. “I was able to tell teachers, ‘There’s a lot of research behind it and a lot of data that says it works. It’s got the Department of Education’s seal of approval.’”
Even with her initial confidence in Fast ForWord, Betz was quick to tell her teachers that if it didn’t perform as expected, they would find another program.

ELs at the four schools throughout the district began using Fast ForWord in September 2021. Betz reports, “Teacher feedback has confirmed that Fast ForWord works. They like it, and the kids enjoy it.”

Students have begun making significant gains in their fluency and comprehension, and Betz won’t be looking for another program anytime soon.

**Reading Gains You Can Measure**

Students at Community Academies made an average of eight months’ reading gains in just 30 days of using Fast ForWord. In fact, almost one-third of students made 1.5 years’ gains in that same time!

**From Mardi Gras Prizes to Intrinsic Motivation**

Although the benefits of using Fast ForWord are starting to show, some students were initially unsure about whether their hard work would pay off. Community Academies’ EL teachers got creative to motivate students to work diligently and consistently with Fast ForWord. Students competed against other grades to see who could complete the most work sessions. Teachers rewarded achievements with throws from local Mardi Gras parades.

Although students loved the beads, toys, and tiaras, teachers realized that students were motivated to work hard in Fast ForWord without the extra incentives because they enjoyed it and were excited by their progress.

“Now they like being on the program. We tell them, ‘It’s time to do Fast ForWord,’ and they open their computers and happily begin working.”

Mabel Haffer
EL paraprofessional
Lafayette Middle School

Sally Easley, EL Coordinator at Esperanza Charter Academy, tells a similar story about the motivation and enthusiasm of a seventh-grade girl who recently immigrated to the U.S. Shy and self-conscious, this student would wait for her classmates to start recording their voices before she began so that no one could distinguish her voice from others. Several months later, this student now asks to spend more time in the program because she loves the stories in Reading Assistant Plus, a component of Fast ForWord.

“She’s gained so much confidence in her speaking ability,” says Easley. “And she’s motivated to keep learning. It’s wonderful to see.”
1-on-1 Reading Tutor with Reading Assistant Plus

Vanessa Clincy, EL Coordinator and EL teacher at Lafayette Lower School, shares that her students also enjoy Reading Assistant Plus. “They like that the program reads to them, listens to them, and is personalized to them,” says Clincy.

Reading Assistant Plus is an online guided reading tool that uses patented voice recognition technology to listen to students as they read aloud.

Acting as a 1-on-1 reading tutor, Reading Assistant Plus provides personalized, immediate corrective feedback to help students improve their fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension.

“The students love the color-coded words in Reading Assistant Plus,” reports Easley. “They can see the words they know, the words they need a little work on, and the words they need a lot of work on. And when they reread that same story a second or third time and hear the progress they’ve made, it’s amazing.”

Finding Comfort and Confidence

For students who are building speaking skills, the opportunity to hear English words read aloud by a native speaker has been a game-changer.

“When they hear words spoken by the program and then repeat them, they know they are speaking English correctly, so they feel more confident,” says Laura Contreras, EL teacher at Lafayette Middle School.

Clincy shares the story of a third-grade student new to the U.S. who came to her classroom knowing virtually no English and lacking the confidence to speak in front of his classmates. After using Reading Assistant Plus for a few weeks, he read a poem about the colors of the rainbow in English to his peers, several teachers, and administrators. Many were moved and excited to see his progress.

Data Teachers Can Use

Fast ForWord collects data with every click, meaning teachers have the information to guide necessary interventions with their students. The data also helps them plan long-range learning goals and develop a curriculum that will challenge students without overwhelming them.

“I love the reports,” Easley says. “I like that there is a variety of them. You can break it down by school, grade level, and skill. Every time you think you can’t find another report, you click on an arrow, and there is another one. It’s so much good data, especially when it comes to honing in on exactly where a child needs support.”
Success with State Assessments

Along with Fast ForWord’s primary goal of building lasting literacy, the program also reinforces the reading and listening skills that most state assessments seek to measure.

The English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA 21) is the annual state assessment that students in Louisiana take, and Easley is quick to note that “the reading, listening, and speaking skills in Fast ForWord align perfectly with our state standards.”

While ELPA 21 results are not in yet, Easley shares the story of an eighth-grade boy who is enthusiastic about his reading progress through Fast ForWord. He asks almost daily if his ELPA 21 results are in yet because he thinks he aced it!

Community Academies’ Future Is Bright with Fast ForWord

Given the success that Community Academies’ EL students are seeing with Fast ForWord, Betz can see the benefits this program would have for all struggling readers in the district. Community Academies is a tight-knit community committed to helping all its students gain the academic advantages that come with being strong readers. In just a short time, Fast ForWord has proven to be an essential component of their success.

Fast ForWord has been consistently helping students improve their language and reading skills for over 25 years. Learn more at the link below.

www.scilearn.com/program