Challenges:
• Need to improve literacy skills, including phonological awareness, decoding, and comprehension
• Low STAR assessment scores
• Special education students needing support

Solutions:
• Fast ForWord
• Reading Assistant Plus™

Populations Served:
• K-4 students, including:
  ° Special Education, Including Dyslexia
  ° Students reading below grade level
  ° Gifted Students

Results:
• Increased STAR assessment scores
• 50% decrease in struggling readers

It's a story that teachers and administrators are all too familiar with: weak reading skills, low test scores, and uncertainty about what to do next.

When Regina Santolla, Principal of Joseph T. Donahue Elementary School (3-4) in Barnegat, New Jersey, found herself facing these challenges, she started by asking, “Where do students need help? What tools do teachers need to help them?”

“They didn't know how to decode,” Santolla explains. “They couldn't comprehend. There were problems across the board, and of course, that trickles down to all academics. So we needed to establish a strong baseline.”

Santolla and her colleagues found the help they needed in Fast ForWord, an adaptive reading and language program based on science of reading principles. Using the latest advances in neuroscience, Fast ForWord teaches cognitive skills, such as memory and attention, alongside literacy skills like phonological awareness, leading to accelerated reading gains that last.

After two years of using the Fast ForWord program, Santolla and her colleagues are happy to report that their students are comprehending consistently, reading more fluently, and scoring higher on assessments.

“"We saw a lot of success, not just with reading progress, but also with our STAR reading scores."”

-Nora Green, District Supervisor of Special Education
Bringing Reading Success to All K-4 Students

Barnegat Township Elementary Schools started implementing Fast ForWord in 2019 at an after-school boot camp. “We identified students who weren't quite at proficiency but just needed a little bit to get there,” explains Nora Green, District Supervisor of Special Education. “And we saw a lot of success, not just with reading progress, but also with our STAR reading scores.”

“We saw organizational skills improving too, and student focus was improving, so we saw good things across the board. It made us so excited!”

Regina Santolla, Principal
Joseph T. Donahue
Elementary School

“One of our main goals is really looking at the most recent research in reading,” explains Green. “And in our lower grades, we found that phonological awareness was what was missing in a lot of our instruction pieces. So Fast ForWord helped us establish that for our young readers so that they could eventually learn how to decode.”

Santolla echoes Green’s observation that knowing where and how to start benefitted both students and teachers. “Because teaching reading is so broad and there are so many things to learn,” Santolla explains, “teachers would feel like, ‘Oh, the kids can't do any of this!’ But Fast ForWord let us really break it down for them. They could see that students had to have decoding and language skills before they’re going to have comprehension, and teachers understanding the process and knowing what to focus on really just did wonders.”

“They are just so happy and proud of themselves, and I love seeing that.”

Fast forward to 2020 and a global pandemic. Suddenly, teachers needed a way to teach literacy skills virtually, and Fast ForWord was easy to implement, effective, and engaging. “When Covid happened, we decided to make Fast ForWord a mandatory part of the K-4 school day,” Santolla explains.

Although not expecting the transition to online learning, Santolla and Green felt lucky to have a proven online reading program at their fingertips when they needed it.

Using The Science of Reading To Build Foundational Skills

One aspect of Fast ForWord that both Green and Santolla like is how it aligns with the research on reading science.

Both Struggling and Advanced Students Excel With Reading Assistant Plus

Barnegat Township students enjoy using the Reading Assistant Plus component of Fast ForWord and are already seeing its benefits. “They tell me, ‘I just love Reading Assistant Plus so much because I get to choose what I read,’” says Sue Mayo, Master Teacher of District Elementary Schools.

Reading Assistant Plus is an innovative online guided reading tool where learners read texts both silently and aloud. Using patented technology, Reading Assistant Plus listens to each word read aloud and delivers immediate support when a learner struggles with or mispronounces a word—reinforcing newly learned reading skills, vocabulary, and fluency.

“What I love about Reading Assistant Plus,” Mayo adds, “is that if a student doesn't get a word right, it's going to read it to him, so he's not getting frustrated. What the program is intended to do is help you until you get where you can do it on your own.”
Mayo shares the story of a fourth-grader who came to her reading at a kindergarten level. “We found that he had the foundation, he had the phonics skills, but he wasn’t applying them,” she explains. “Reading Assistant Plus was really helpful for him because he could hear the correct pronunciation when it read to him. So I think it’s giving him some confidence, and his reading is improving. When I gave him a fluency assessment, he went from making 21 errors to six errors in just two weeks.”

According to Mayo, another strength of Reading Assistant Plus is that it challenges all readers to improve, not just those who are underperforming. “I knew Reading Assistant Plus would be great for our struggling readers,” she shares. “But our gifted students love it too. One of my top students was so excited because her goal was to read 144 words per minute, and she got to 142. She said, ‘I just need two more! I’m going to do it!’ That was motivating for her.”

**Advanced Readers More Than Double in One Year**

Students at Cecil S. Collins Elementary (K-2) and Joseph T. Donahue Elementary (3-4) schools, where Fast ForWord is most widely used, are making significant reading gains. “From September to May, we had 270 students gain a whole year of reading skills, which is huge,” shares Mayo. “That’s more than half our school. And the fact that we were able to move the needle in a third and fourth-grade school, where reading is much more challenging than it is in K-2, is really nice.”

Mayo is right that the numbers are impressive. Out of 655 students who used Fast ForWord in the 2021-22 school year, Barnegat Township has seen a 50% decrease in struggling readers, a 129% increase in proficient readers, and a 119% increase in advanced readers.

The stories behind these fabulous statistics are wonderful to hear. “I had a fourth-grader,” Mayo shares, “who was at zero percent completion. He just wouldn’t do his work. So I offered him an incentive if he reached an agreed-upon completion goal. Just some simple little drumsticks because he’s a drummer. By the end of two weeks, he got to a 75% completion rate. And he was so excited about his success that now he doesn’t need that outside motivation because he saw the difference in his work. It showed in his STAR scores. He went from the 28th percentile to the 75th percentile.”

**Special Education Students Are Thriving**

Barnegat Township students who receive special education services are also improving with Fast ForWord. “We’re using Fast ForWord to target some of our students diagnosed with dyslexia, for them to really focus on phonological awareness,” shares Green. “For students reading well below grade level, we needed to go back to the basics, and Fast ForWord has helped us do that.”

Green shares that the individualized data Fast ForWord provides has helped her district get more parents of special education students on board. “One thing we are able to do with our special education students is send weekly progress reports home,” she explains. “Parents want to see if their child is making progress. Even if that progress is slow, we can show that it is still happening.”

**Out of 655 students who used Fast ForWord in the 2021-22 school year, Barnegat Township has seen a 50% decrease in struggling readers, a 129% increase in proficient readers, and a 119% increase in advanced readers.**
Robust and Actionable Data
Santolla, Mayo, and Green appreciate how detailed and usable Fast ForWord's progress reports are and how this helps them work with students and guide teachers on their next steps. “It’s easy to see when I open up the data what programs, components, or activities students are struggling with,” says Mayo. “And I can help teachers see this too.”

Green echoes Mayo’s thoughts, adding that the data helps her anticipate student needs and program parameters. “Using the Reading Progress Indicator, I was able to see which students needed support with phonological awareness, phonics, or comprehension,” Green explains, “and the reports have been really helpful for making decisions about programming, retention, special education services, and IEPs.”

Lastly, Santolla talks about using student progress reports to motivate her teachers, plan professional learning, and keep district leaders aware of student progress. “I use the Fast ForWord results at faculty meetings to show the teachers where our students are struggling and where we need to focus, and this helps drive our professional development,” Santolla explains. “I also use the reports to show the superintendent that our students are growing as readers.

Differentiation for an Even Brighter Future
When asked where they will go next, all three educators agree that one of Fast ForWord’s strengths is how customizable it is for users. They plan to consider different program usage strategies next year and beyond, so they can give every student precisely what they need to learn optimally.

“I’m thrilled that we implemented this program, and I’m glad that we mandated it for all of our students,” shares Santolla. “It’s going to tweak over time, depending on what each grade level needs. So, next year we can differentiate more for students. Rather than making usage the same for everyone, which is how we started, we can make it more specific. We’re going to have better student success because we’ll just be targeting everyone’s specific needs.”

“We are just so happy and proud of themselves,” Santolla adds. “And I love seeing that.”

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

#NextTenYears
#NextTenYears is Barnegat Township’s initiative to encourage all students to become self-regulated learners who can advocate for themselves within the next decade. Although #NextTenYears predates Barnegat’s Fast ForWord use, Santolla notes that the program “fits in really nicely with the initiative because it helps students track their growth and set goals.”