

Elementary Students in Buchanan County, Virginia Improve Reading Skills and Scores with Fast ForWord



After only one year of implementation, students are engaged and literacy skills are on the rise.

K-5 Literacy Success Story

Buchanan County Public Schools Demographics:

- **Grade Level:** Pre-K-12
- **Enrollment:** 2516
- **Race:** White - 98%, Multiracial - 0.6%, Hispanic/Latino - 0.6%, Black - 0.4%, Asian or Pacific Islander - 0.2%, American Indian or Alaska Native - 0.1%
- **Economically disadvantaged:** 48.3%
- **Students with disabilities:** 16.7%
- **English learners:** 0.2%

Challenges:

- Declining scores on Standards of Learning (Virginia state assessment)
- Pandemic-related learning gaps

Solutions:

- Fast ForWord
- Reading Assistant Plus™

Populations Served:

- K-5

Results:

- 83% pass rate on state assessment—the highest in many years
- Proficient and advanced readers have almost quadrupled
- Increased student motivation and engagement

It's a problem that was all too common coming out of the pandemic.

With so much missed in-person reading instruction, elementary schools in Buchanan County, Virginia saw their scores on yearly state assessments suffering.

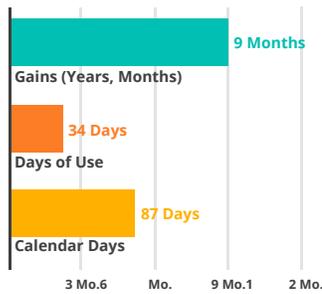
"Our third graders take state standardized tests, and our scores used to be pretty good," explains Connie Hibbitts, Instructional Coach for all four elementary-middle schools in the county and an educator with 34 years of experience. "But over the years, they declined, so we knew we needed to get something in place. So the principals traveled to a different county where Fast ForWord was being used, and when they got back, they were sold."

When Hibbitts saw what Fast ForWord offered, she was also in. "We knew we needed a program to build foundational reading skills," she explains. "That's major. We were looking for something that covered all the underlying components of strong literacy. And this program was it."

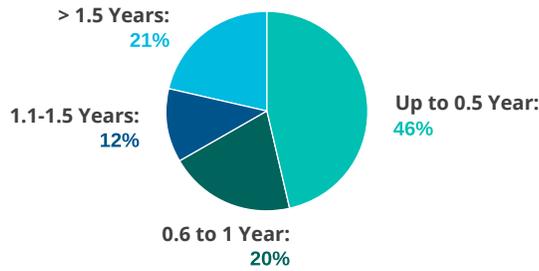
Buchanan County Public Schools began implementing Fast ForWord in the 2021-22 school year. All students in grades K-5 work in the program five days a week for thirty minutes a day. After just a few months in, students' hard work started paying off. "Honestly, we weren't expecting the program to start working so quickly," says Hibbitts. "A lot of our students saw tremendous gains and tremendous success, especially with this being our first year of implementation."



Reading Level Gains



Reading Level Gain Distribution



439 students made an average **9 month** gain in 67 days

Year-to-Date: 8/22/21 - 5/5/22
Usage Period: 4/4/22 - 5/5/22

Reading Gains Backed by Impressive Statistics

Buchanan County students began making gains rapidly. Of the 439 students in the district who used Fast ForWord in the 2021-22 school year, there was a 49% decrease in struggling readers and a 380% increase in proficient or advanced readers. Students made an average of nine months’ reading gain in just 67 days.

Rita Breeding, a Title 1 Teacher at Council Elementary School, notes that one reason students responded so positively to Fast ForWord was because of its just-in-time support, which adapted to each student’s skills and challenges. “The activities in Fast ForWord progress as students progress, and I think it’s wonderful,” says Breeding. “It’s finally something that’s clicking.”

“Teachers can see a big difference in students’ reading abilities,” adds Hibbitts. “And students are proud of themselves and want to read aloud because they no longer feel ashamed of not being able to read as well as their peers.”

Better Reading Scores on State Assessments

Fast ForWord has helped Buchanan County elementary school students improve their scores on the Standards of Learning (SOL), the yearly state assessment taken by all students in Virginia Public Schools. “We just took SOLs, and 83% of our third-graders passed,” Hibbitts says proudly. “While teachers did their part to get the kids where they needed to be, this year’s pass rate was the highest we’ve had in many, many years, and I think that’s at least partially due to Fast ForWord.”

Breeding echoes Hibbitts’ excitement and notes the role Fast ForWord played in test success: “I feel that Fast ForWord was a real benefit for the SOL scores. The texts, the techniques, the learning, the listening—the students got to use the skills they were being tested on.”

Getting More Practice with Reading Assistant Plus

When discussing how students prepared for their SOLs, both Breeding and Hibbitts cite Reading Assistant Plus as being particularly beneficial. Reading Assistant Plus, a component of Fast ForWord, is an innovative guided reading tool that listens as each student reads aloud and delivers immediate support when a learner struggles with or mispronounces a word—reinforcing newly learned reading skills, vocabulary, and fluency.

“Reading Assistant Plus builds their stamina for state tests,” Hibbitts explains. “When they read a passage, they have to comprehend it, figure out vocabulary, and apply what they’ve read, and that’s exactly what they have to do on SOLs, so it’s good practice for them.”

“We weren’t expecting the program to start working so quickly. A lot of our students saw tremendous gains and tremendous success, especially with this being our first year of implementation.”

**Connie Hibbitts, Instructional Coach
 Buchanan County, VA**

Reading Success Across Grade Levels

Buchanan County elementary schools have seen success with Fast ForWord across grade levels.

Kindergarten

One student who flourished in his first year using Fast ForWord is Brayden Yates, who recently finished kindergarten at Riverview Elementary School. Brayden’s pre-assessment score on the Reading Progress Indicator (RPI), Fast ForWord’s built-in assessment that measures skills such as decoding and phonological awareness, was in the 35th percentile. But after working diligently with Fast ForWord, his post-assessment score placed him as an advanced reader in the 99th percentile!

“What I like about school is using Fast ForWord,” says Brayden, “especially the weeps and woops in Sky Gym and reading stories like ‘Let’s Make a Cake.’” “Weeps and woops” refers to the type of brain training included in some Fast ForWord exercises like Sky Gym that build auditory processing—a prerequisite to skills like phonemic awareness. “Let’s Make a Cake” is one of the hundreds of stories available in Reading Assistant Plus.

Brayden’s grandmother, Tina Fuller, a teacher herself, shares what she observed after Brayden used the Fast ForWord program for a few months: “All of a sudden, he started to pick up books to read without me asking him. And I thought that’s a great milestone when kids read to themselves for enjoyment. It was wonderful to see that he was so confident in what he was doing.”

“It’s not that Brayden wasn’t capable,” Hibbitts reflects, “but like many children, he struggled at first. But then it was like ‘BAM!’ After working with Fast ForWord, the lightbulb came on. He progressed and, like many of our students, saw tremendous success.”

“The activities in Fast ForWord progress as students progress, and I think it’s wonderful. It’s finally something that’s clicking.

**Rita Breeding,
A Title 1 Teacher**

First Grade

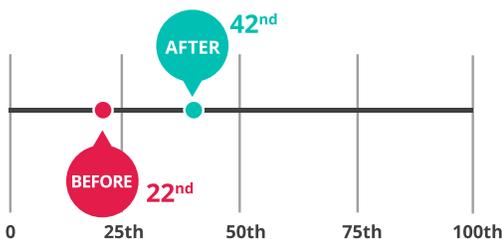
Students haven’t just strengthened reading skills with Fast ForWord—they’ve developed as confident and joyful learners even in the face of adversity.

“I remember one first-grader,” shares Breeding. “Really quiet. His father passed away in the middle of the school year, and he was really struggling academically and overall. He started throwing himself into Fast ForWord. He loved the recognition that the program gave him and would work so hard to get more of it. Teachers would bring him to my room and say, ‘Guess what score he got?’ and he would get a huge smile on his face. Fast ForWord came into his life at a really hard time and helped him succeed.”

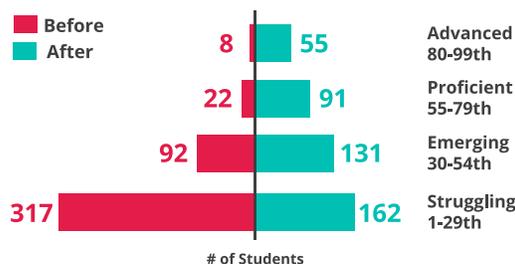
One reason this student enjoyed Fast ForWord was that the many reading activities allowed him to build literacy in a fun way that felt less like work and more like play. In fact, Breeding wasn’t expecting Fast ForWord to be as engaging—and effective—as it is.

“When we first saw the reading activities,” Breeding recalls, “we wondered ‘how are these going to help?’ But then they did. Students became better listeners, they started responding better, and some kids who couldn’t sit still were all of a sudden focusing on their work. This program kept them engaged. And that surprised me.”

Reading Percentile Scores



Proficiency Level Changes



For the current school year, **439** students have completed a follow up RPI

49% Decrease at “struggling” or above
380% Increase at “proficient” or above

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Second Grade

One aspect of the Fast ForWord program that delighted both Hibbitts and Breeding was that it was as effective for gifted readers as it was for struggling ones.

Hibbitts shares how Fast ForWord allowed a second-grader to work at an advanced level when they were ready to do so before their peers. They came across a lesson on prepositions, something they hadn't yet learned about in class.

"The teacher and I were able to supplement with a mini-lesson for the student," Hibbitts explains. "We printed out information about prepositions and a list of the most common ones. Then success! The student was able to work through that lesson on Fast ForWord and learn above-grade-level content. In a normal second-grade classroom, prepositions would never come up. But this student was ready to learn about them, so why not?"

Fifth Grade

Hibbitts and Breeding note that with stronger reading ability comes greater confidence- regardless of where a student began the Fast ForWord program.

Hibbitts tells the story of the incredible growth in performance and confidence that she saw in a fifth-grade student through Reading Assistant Plus. The student was reticent and never wanted to read aloud, but that changed.

"You can tell how shy and lacking in confidence she was in her first recordings in Reading Assistant Plus," Hibbitts shares. "And then in a recording from a few months later, it was like, 'Is this the same student?' There was such a dramatic change in her confidence level, her tone, her expression, fluency, and flow-all of it. It was like two different students. And that was just from September to February. What more could you ask for?"

Excited About Future Reading Success

"One great thing about Fast ForWord," Hibbitts concludes, "is that the program is suitable for all ages and grade levels, as well as special education students. If they're a third-grader working at a first-grade level or a third-grader reading at a seventh-grade level, there will still be benefits because Fast ForWord helps them succeed at the level they're at."

When asked what the future holds for Buchanan County elementary schools, Hibbitts says, "I'm looking forward to year two. And I'm hoping we'll see the same gains."

"I'm also looking forward to seeing where we go from here," concurs Breeding. "There will be more progress. This program is working."



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

www.carnegielearning.com/fastforward ►