

# Seven Ways to Help Struggling Readers

In almost every middle school, there are students who struggle despite repeated intervention. In 2012-2013, 328 of the 736 students at Salk Middle School in Spokane, Washington, scored at Level 1 (below basic) or Level 2 (basic) on the state reading test. That means that 44 percent of our student body was not proficient in reading.

So in summer 2013, we set out to transform our reading program to help get every student reading at or above grade level before they leave our school. Here are seven strategies we've used to help students achieve significant reading gains.

**1. Seek out research-based interventions.** Starting out, I knew that to get district approval, any intervention we considered would have to be research-based. So I conducted extensive research, including reviewing studies on the What Works Clearinghouse website. After careful analysis, I chose two programs to implement with our students who scored at Level 1 or 2 on our state reading test: a language and literacy intervention called Fast ForWord and an online reading tool called Reading Assistant.

**2. Empower students with a dedicated teacher and a blended learning approach.** Next, I hired an enthusiastic teacher, Shannon Gilfeather, to head up our program for struggling readers. Together, we decided to create a blended learning classroom because combining face-to-face and online instruction gives students more power and control over their learning. In addition, by providing opportunities for individualized, self-paced instruction, we can assist students in filling in the skills they're missing and make sure those skills endure.

**3. Target the root cause of students' reading difficulties.** In Gilfeather's classroom, students work on the software 30 minutes a day, five days a week. Fast ForWord uses the principles of neuroplasticity to remediate the underlying difficulties that keep

**The program uses speech recognition technology to correct and support students as they read aloud. It provides an unbiased listener that allows students to practice—without judgment—at their own pace.**

struggling readers and English-language learners from making progress. It works from the bottom up, developing cognitive skills like memory, attention, and processing speed, while concurrently addressing reading skills. By exercising students' processing skills through intensive, adaptive activity, physical changes occur in the brain. This improves students' skills in reading and helps them to get more from their instruction in other classes.

**4. Provide one-on-one support to build fluency and comprehension.** Research shows that guided oral reading instruction is an effective practice for building fluency. However, it's difficult to do with only one teacher and a class full of students. So for individualized reading coaching, students also work on Reading Assistant 20 minutes a day, three days a week.

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tion technology to correct and support students as they read aloud. It provides an unbiased listener that allows students to practice—without judgment—at their own pace.

We've found this approach to be particularly helpful with students with auditory processing disorders because it allows them to practice reading aloud and then listen to recordings of themselves. This helps them understand where they're making mistakes and helps them pay more attention the next time they read aloud.

**5. Give students opportunities to write every day.** While closely connected, writing is sometimes overlooked as a way to improve students' reading skills. During the 2014-2015 school year, we implemented a buildingwide writing approach, and Gilfeather added a writing component to her blended learning classroom. Now, the class targets a specific writing skill each week and students write to a prompt daily.

**6. Accelerate student progress with real-time data.** One feature we like about the online programs is that they give us real-time data so we can see what's happening with each student. This also helps parents understand exactly which skills their students are missing and how we can target those skills.

Gilfeather also works with students to set weekly goals and do daily check-ins to see how they're doing and where they need to improve. Her classroom also has data walls so students can document and track their progress, which makes their learning more tangible.

**7. Evaluate students' progress using multiple measures.** In 2013-2014, the framework for K-12 Washington State assessments changed and, as such, we were unable to examine and complete a year-to-year state assessment data analysis. However, multiple measures, including pre- and post-assessment data, were examined.

## Results

On the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), we compared the results of students who qualified for

treatment and used the Fast ForWord program with the results of students who qualified for treatment but were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Those who used Fast ForWord achieved average gains of two to four points on the MAP—more than twice as much growth as their peers who did not use the program.

Also examined were data from Reading Progress Indicator, a computerized assessment designed to measure the impact of the Fast ForWord products, as well as the STAR Reading assessment. While these students were all Level 1 and Level 2 readers, they achieved more than a year of growth in only one semester. Three separate semesters of growth data revealed average reading gains ranging from 1.4 to 1.7 grade levels in the Fast ForWord program, and 1.1 to 2.1 grade levels on the STAR Reading assessment.

Of course, we also wanted to see if these gains were transferring to the

classroom. So we looked at students' pass rates across all six of their classes and saw that they were passing more than 90 percent of their classes. While we didn't expect the pass rates to be that high after such a short period of time, the shift was definitely a positive byproduct of the program.

Overall, our reading intervention program has helped students shift their mindsets toward becoming better readers, and more than 50 students in the program read more than 1 million words during the year. Our target students now take more accountability for their learning because they can see the real-time progress they are making. Anecdotally, students say they can think faster, complete difficult tasks with more ease, and they have more confidence and are experiencing more success in each of their classes. **P**

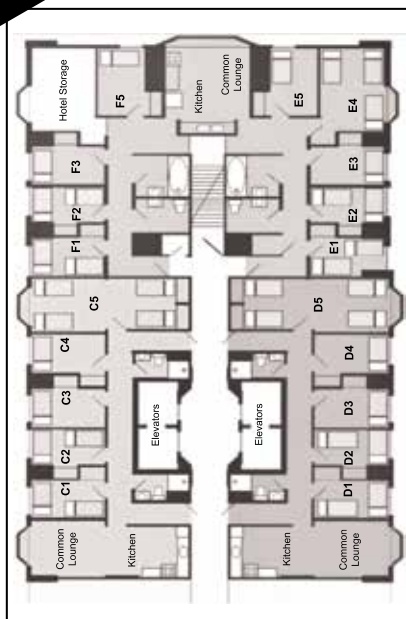
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