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Fast ForWord's in a class of its own for special students

By GARETH FINIGHAN

A CUTTING-edge learning tool is helping some of the island's struggling students go straight to the top of the class.

And the scheme has been so successful helping about a dozen schoolchildren with their studies Government is now looking at getting the system installed in public schools.

The Fast ForWord programme, which was developed in California following neurological research into how the brain functions, was introduced into Bermuda by educational consultant Bercon last year. The system sets interactive exercises integrating proprietary CD-ROM and Internet technology that adapts to the level of each student.

A number of students have been using the computer software to improve their language skills, but so far the system has only been available privately, with classes being held after school either at Bercon's Fast ForWord computer lab in Devonshire or in the students' own homes.

Richard Bassett, the Fast ForWord programme manager for Bercon, said: "Simply put, the programme works.

"The developers have recommended that students use Fast ForWord five days per week with each training session lasting between 48 minutes and 100 minutes. Neuroscience research has proven that this frequency and intensity of use maximises the benefits.

"Based on this pattern of use, each Fast ForWord programme should last between eight and 12 weeks. It's a serious time commitment for both students and parents – however, the benefits usually become evident within the first four to eight weeks of use. In this time period, a number of students who have used the programme have improved their reading proficiency to the point where they are reading at grade level.



Picture: Glenn Tucker
Michelle Hutton

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It is also important to note that Fast ForWord does not replace other reading and language intervention programmes presently being used in homes and schools. Given that Fast ForWord works at a more fundamental level than other programmes in developing the areas of the brain associated with language and reading, use of Fast ForWord has been found to improve the results derived from the use of other programmes."

Students and their parents have testified to the dramatic improvement in performance as a result of the programme.

Kitori Smith-Tacklyn, ten, who attends the Star Academy home school, said he believed the tool had boosted his concentration levels and got him motivated about school work.

"Before I took the programme it was pretty tough going – the lessons were hard but now I love everything," Kitori said.

Mother Lakeisha Smith agreed. "I went to a demonstration and I thought it was ideal, basically because it's a computer-based programme," she said.

"Kitori was like 'this is my thing'. He really enjoyed doing it. It was outside regular school and he started doing about 90 minutes a day so it was quite a commitment but the times have got shorter.

"He's now more confident and his self-esteem is definitely boosted. He was a child with very low self-esteem and low motivation and since he's been doing the programme his motivation is up – he actually enjoys doing work and is enjoying school which he once hated.

"He's not as quick to give up now – before, he wouldn't even try.

"This wasn't the first thing that I tried but for my son it really works. It's been tremendous for him and I would encourage parents who are feeling frustrated and that there's no hope to give it a try. It's definitely worth the sacrifice.

Rea Holloway, whose daughter Michelle Hutton was also once struggling with her text books, was equally full of praise for the programme.

"Michelle's been to a lot of schools but they always told her that there wasn't a problem with her, she was just lazy.

"But at the reading clinic it was determined that she had ADD and she wasn't learning the way she should have been learning. That's when we went to Bercon and Richard Bassett put her on to the Fast ForWord programme which she started in June."

Now settled at Dellwood Middle School, Michelle, 13, is already seeing a vast improvement in her performance. So much so that she now wants to become a teacher.

"Michelle's gone up five grade levels in that time – I'm so proud of her, she's just done wonderfully," Mrs. Holloway said.

"She's doing extremely well, but she can still do better – she rushes through her work and always wants to be the first one finished.

"It takes a lot of work because, although she doesn't find it dull or boring she can't sit still for too long. She wants to do it and she knows that it's benefiting her but sometimes she wants to be doing other things.

"But it's definitely focused her. Now she just puts her head down and gets on with her

work. She was just awarded a prize for most improved girl. It's wonderful, a great programme, expensive but worth it. Before she didn't want to go to school. Now she doesn't want to miss it. She's come such a long way. She's gone from a D, E and F student to Bs and Cs."

Michelle explained: "The work used to be very hard for me but my teachers would always help.

"Now I have subjects that I like, although there are still some that I don't like, but Fast ForWord has really helped. It's made me feel better about school and now I want to go to school."

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