

Evaluation of the FASTalk Program in OUSD

Findings Brief

Introduction

This brief outlines the key findings from the evaluation of the Family Engagement Lab's 2017-18 pilot of the FASTalk program in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). The FASTalk program in OUSD uses text messages to help families learn strategies to support Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten literacy development. At the beginning of the 2017-18 school year, Family Engagement Lab trained 41 OUSD Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers. Each of these teachers personally signed up families to participate in the program. FASTalk then developed three text messages per week that teachers sent to enrolled parents and guardians. These messages involved developmentally-appropriate literacy information and activities for parent(s)/guardian(s) to participate in with their child. Importantly, these messages were translated into each parent/guardian's language.¹

Family Engagement Lab invited 14 OUSD schools to participate in FASTalk during the 2017-18 school year and ultimately launched the program at 11 schools in late September 2017.² A total of 389 OUSD students were enrolled in the program as of December 6, 2017. Of those students, 330 participated in the program throughout the entire school year.³ 255 students were in Kindergarten, which made up 41% of the total Kindergarten enrollment at the 11 schools with FASTalk. The remaining 75 students were in Transition Kindergarten, which also made up 41% of the total Transitional Kindergarten enrollment at the FASTalk schools.

This evaluation uses a quasi-experimental research design called propensity score matching to estimate the effect of the FASTalk program on OUSD Kindergarten student early literacy development during the 2017-18 school year. The evaluation focuses specifically on the effect of the program on Kindergarten student performance on an index of early literacy related standards-based report card scores. The evaluation analyzes student growth on this index over the period of seven months from November 2017 to June 2018 (please see the technical appendix for a more detailed description of the methodology). Broadly, the evaluation explores three questions:

- Did FASTalk increase achievement among all participating students compared to a matched comparison group of non-participating students?

¹ Mam speaking parent(s)/guardian(s) received messages in Spanish because FASTalk did not support Mam during the 2017-18 school year.

² Bridges Elementary started the program in October 2017.

³ Students with a parent/guardian who received a message on October 23rd, 2017; January 29th, 2018; and May 21st, 2018.

- Did FASTalk increase achievement among participating students whose home language differed from their teacher's language compared to a matched comparison group of non-participating students whose home language differed from their teacher's language?
- Did FASTalk increase achievement among participating students whose parent(s) and/or guardian(s) sent at least five text messages to the FASTalk program compared to a matched comparison group of other participating students whose parent(s) and/or guardian(s) sent fewer than five text messages to the FASTalk program?

Key findings

Finding 1: Although the evidence is not conclusive, FASTalk likely contributed to a slight increase in report card performance among all participating Kindergarteners. There was between a 51% and 89% likelihood that FASTalk led to at least half of a month of additional growth on the report card index relative to a matched comparison group of students who did not participate in the FASTalk program. These models showed that FASTalk was associated with an estimated effect of between 0.5 and 1.1 months of additional growth. Because all models showed a greater than 50% likelihood of a 0.5 month acceleration, FASTalk likely led to positive results. However, this result should be interpreted with caution because three out of four models showed less than a 75% likelihood of acceleration.

Finding 2: There is a strong likelihood that FASTalk was highly effective for students whose home language differed from their teacher's language. The four models in this evaluation that explored this question showed that there was between a 70% and 89% likelihood that FASTalk students whose home language differed from their teacher's language grew by at least 0.5 months more than a matched comparison group of non-FASTalk students whose home language differed from their teacher's language. These models showed that these students grew by an estimated 1.64 to 2.78 more months on the literacy report card index. For comparison, the overall average growth among students whose home language matched their teacher's language was 1.4 months greater than those whose home language differed from their teacher's language.⁴ Counterintuitively, the two models that included FASTalk students with Mam as their home language both showed a higher likelihood of acceleration than the models that excluded these students. This result may suggest that FASTalk was effective for Mam speakers even though FASTalk messages were not sent to these families in their home language.⁵

Finding 3: When comparing FASTalk participants to other FASTalk participants, FASTalk was substantially more effective for students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) sent at least five messages throughout the year. The two models in this evaluation that explored this question both showed that there was a greater than 99% likelihood that FASTalk students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) sent at least five messages to the FASTalk program grew by at least 0.5 months more than a matched comparison group of FASTalk students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) sent fewer than five message. These models showed that these students grew by an estimated 1.94 to 2.14 more months on the literacy report card index.

⁴ This difference is among all students who attended a FASTalk school in 2017-18 because teacher language data was only available for schools with the FASTalk program.

⁵ FASTalk did not support Mam language text messages during the 2017-18 school year.

Key limitations

This methodological approach has some important limitations that should inform the interpretation of the results. Please see the technical appendix for a complete discussion of the limitations.

- First, this methodology cannot fully account for the possibility that unobservable student characteristics, such as parent involvement, may have had an impact on student report card performance. This limitation presents particular challenges in this evaluation because parents opted in to participate in the FASTalk program. Therefore, FASTalk students may already have had more engaged parents than non FASTalk students. If this were the case, this evaluation could be overstating the effect of FASTalk.
- Second, many of the models in this evaluation had fewer than 100 students in the treatment group. Because of these relatively small sample sizes, there is a possibility that the results of this evaluation could have occurred by chance.
- Third, there is substantial variation by school in the degree to which literacy related report card standard scores are correlated with student performance on the F&P Foundations assessment. This variation suggests that different schools use different methods to assign report card grades, which could bias the results of this evaluation.

Recommended next steps

In order to build on and validate the findings from this evaluation, the FASTalk program should design a randomized controlled trial (RCT). This RCT should include the following components:

- **Analyze the effect of FASTalk on multiple components of literacy development.** This evaluation did not uncover any conclusive evidence that FASTalk was more effective at accelerating particular literacy components over others. Specifically, this evaluation did not find a substantial difference in outcomes between models that assessed the impact of FASTalk on a report card index weighted to reflect the report card standards most aligned with FASTalk message content and a model that assessed the impact on an un-weighted index. A future RCT should analyze the effect of FASTalk on various components of literacy development to determine whether the program is more effective at improving certain components, such as speaking and listening, than others, such as reading.
- **Analyze the effect of FASTalk on non-academic outcomes.** This evaluation focused on the effect of FASTalk on academic outcomes. However, FASTalk may also positively affect non-academic outcomes, such as student attendance. A future RCT should analyze the effect of FASTalk on these non-academic outcomes.
- **Analyze the effect of FASTalk on parent engagement.** This evaluation did not specifically analyze the effect of the FASTalk program on parent involvement in their child's education. To assess the degree to which FASTalk improves parent engagement, a future RCT should compare the engagement of parents in the treatment and control groups. Parent engagement should be measured through a post intervention survey of parents asking about their involvement in helping to develop their child's literacy skills.
- **Analyze the extent to which FASTalk is more effective for students whose parent(s)/guardian(s) are highly engaged with the program.** A future RCT should compare academic and non-academic outcomes of FASTalk students with highly engaged parents to the outcomes of students in the control group. This type of analysis

would overcome the challenge faced by this evaluation that parents opted-in to the FASTalk program, which therefore introduced the possibility that the parents of students in the FASTalk program may have been more engaged even if they had never participated in the FASTalk program.

- **Analyze the extent to which FASTalk is more effective for students whose home language differs from their teacher’s language.** A future RCT should compare the academic and non-academic outcomes of FASTalk students whose home language differs from their teacher’s language to the outcomes of a control group of students whose home language differs from their teacher’s language. This type of analysis would help to validate the findings from this evaluation by increasing the sample size of students in the treatment and control groups.
- **Analyze the extent to which FASTalk is more effective for students with low baseline academic performance.** This evaluation did not analyze students with relatively low baseline academic performance separately from those with relatively strong baseline performance. However, the FASTalk program may be more effective for students with low baseline performance because these students have more room to grow academically. Alternatively, the FASTalk program may be more effective for students with better baseline performance because they may have parents who are more likely to engage with the FASTalk texts. A future RCT should compare the academic outcomes of FASTalk students with low baseline performance to the outcomes of control students who also had low baseline performance.