

CASE STUDY

Building a City That Reads: Atlanta Public Schools' RACE2Read & Beanstack

For the past five years, Atlanta Public Schools has been building a city that reads. Book by book and minute by minute, their RACE2Read program in Beanstack emphasizes the importance of reading and provides motivation and access for developing strong reading habits. And during the 2021–2022 school year, just as the city was coming to grips with a new post-pandemic reality, RACE2Read soared past 10 million minutes read and logged throughout Atlanta. With a far-reaching coalition of partners, a focus on visibility and book access, and Beanstack's suite of tools for motivating and tracking reading, APS is truly racing toward reading success—and is on track for another record-breaking year.



A Commitment to Independent, Free-Choice Reading



Jennifer Saunders, APS's director of library media services, and a team of media specialists spearhead the school district's literacy efforts. Facing low literacy scores a few years ago, they knew a big part of their solution needed to be promoting independent, free-choice reading. "We know that independent, free-choice reading really builds readers and helps readers grow stronger by increasing their vocabulary and strengthening fluency," Saunders said. "And it helps just build the joy of reading for students."

The school district already used Accelerated Reader, but they wanted a new tool that promoted choice, increased motivation, and gave kids an all-time digital reading log. "We didn't necessarily want to tie anything to taking a test with your reading," Saunders said. "We just wanted

you to be aware of your reading habits and have a digital record." Beanstack, with its easy mobile app, engaging reading challenges, and proven gamification features, fit the bill.

But Saunders and her predecessor, Patrice Laird Walker, knew that creating strong reading habits couldn't just take place at school. And so the citywide RACE2Read campaign—with RACE standing for Read Across the City Everyday—was born.



Cultivating Invested Partners Around the City



The idea for RACE2Read took shape within APS, but it came to life across the city through a coalition of partners that the school district rallied to the project. From nonprofits to educational organizations to big corporations, partners play a big role in promoting the initiative. Even The Home Depot and the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport are on the RACE2Read partner roster!

Partners participate in multiple ways. Their employees sign up and log their reading on a community Beanstack site to contribute their minutes to the city's reading goal. Each partner donates rewards or incentives, like books, experiences, or author visits, and works to promote the initiative through their channels and contacts. And they

help increase access to books across the city, often by stocking book vending machines and filling up little free libraries.

"We couldn't do half of the things we do without our partners," Saunders stressed. "Making sure our kids have access to books and then are rewarded for their reading habits is very important to our sponsors." To stay aligned, the APS library media services team holds bimonthly RACE2Read partner meetings, where participating organizations report on their progress and share ideas.



Motivating With Levels of Rewards



Rewards are an important aspect of RACE2Read—and they're backed up by data. Within Beanstack reading challenges, adding at least one reward increases average school participation by nearly 95%. And students participating in reading challenges that include rewards read an average of 21 minutes a day.

"While there is a school of thought that says, you shouldn't reward kids for doing what they're supposed to do, like reading ... anytime I can get something in addition to what I'm already going to do, I'm all for it," Saunders explained. "The kids don't necessarily know that they're getting an incentive. It's a surprise to them. They're just doing it because they like to read."

In addition to their yearly RACE2Read goals, APS tracks and rewards monthly reading progress too. With fun monthly reading challenges in Beanstack like March

Minutes Madness, readers unlock new badges every month that they read and log. And then teachers, media specialists, and district administrators can check their leaderboards and reports to find their top participants.

There are rewards and incentives at the student, school, and district level. Sometimes, the reward can be an experience arranged by the district's internal partnerships office—this year, for instance, the school that read the most in August won a field trip to Disney on Ice. Other months, the top readers in the district win free books, or a top school could receive an author visit or a book vending machine.



Spreading the Word



Rewards, which are hyped up on all of APS's social media channels, become one prong of RACE2Read's promotion efforts. "Once people have seen that incentives are involved, it does entice other people to read and log their minutes," Saunders said. And it's not just students and families who want to win big—rewards stoke other teachers and schools' competitive drive to win recognition as well.

Creative initiatives like Prize Patrol, which surprised top readers with in-class shoutouts and rewards during the pandemic, and envy-instigating prizes like bikes can go a long way in piquing interest at other schools. "A lot of schools are competitive, and they want to shine," Saunders said.

Throughout the city, APS and RACE2Read partners like the Urban League of Greater Atlanta and the city of Atlanta make sure "it is constantly in the faces of our families and reminding our city of the importance of reading," she said. They secured a commercial at a local NCAA tournament and an ad at the airport, put up

billboards and yard signs, and got Mayor Andre Dickens and local news anchors to record endorsements. APS even covered a city bus in RACE2Read advertisements last year.

"Our library system also uses Beanstack, so it's very helpful, because our students are like, oh, I use that at school, I can log this here too," Saunders said. Beanstack's unique tandem connection service allows students to connect their library and school accounts for double the reading challenges, badges, and motivation. So even during school breaks, students and families hear about the initiative and stick to their reading and logging habits.



Hitting Big Reading Goals



For the past three years, RACE2Read has challenged Atlanta to hit a big reading goal of 10 million minutes—about 1 million minutes of reading a month during the school year. Starting in August, every minute read and logged throughout the city helps move the needle toward success.

Within that lofty goal, each school in the district is given their own goal to work toward. Their individual Beanstack site tracks and advertises progress toward that goal, so that students, staff, and families can watch their minutes tick up every time they log. The community page aggregates those totals from all the schools and community members across the district to track their progress toward 10 million.

“We use social media to promote what we’re doing, how close we are to our goal,” Saunders said. “We send regular updates to our library media specialists so that they know where they are ... That’s very helpful for the schools and the students to see what’s happening.”

These real-time updates, along with Beanstack’s gamification tools like badges and reading streaks, build momentum and provide instant feedback to solidify reading habits. As the 2021–2022 school year was

drawing to a close, APS drew closer and closer to their big goal and rallied readers for one big push before summer. The needle moved up and over 10 million on May 12, 2022.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the program for Saunders has been seeing family reading habits take root throughout the city. “We had a couple families where the child and the parents read and logged their minutes,” she said. “We noticed that, when it’s a family effort, the kids really fare better and they really pay attention to what they’re reading and how often they’re reading. And just sending the message that just 20 minutes a day makes a difference in the lives of our students, with their developing empathy, with relieving stress, with developing vocabulary, I mean, all of the benefits of reading, we promote through RACE2Read.”

Halfway through the 2022–2023 school year, RACE2Read has already garnered 6.8 million minutes of reading. With an average of almost 1.4 million minutes read per month, Atlanta is racing toward another record year of reading.





About Beanstack

Beanstack helps public and school libraries effortlessly facilitate reading challenges and reading fundraisers. The flagship product of Zoobean Inc., Beanstack is licensed by over 10,000 public libraries, school districts, and corporations around the world. Its investors include Mark Cuban from ABC's Shark Tank and its founding members were previously Washington, D.C.'s teacher of the year and Google's first head of K-12 education outreach. To learn more, visit beanstack.com.