



Fast Forward
High School Completion Initiative
Lethbridge School Division

Year End Report
2019-2020

Respectfully submitted by
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The 2019-2020 academic year celebrates the **ELEVENTH** year of operation for the Fast Forward High School Completion Initiative in Lethbridge School Division. As the data and details in this report demonstrate, this has been a rewarding and record-breaking year.

Since its beginning in December 2009, Fast Forward has, and continues to, support Alberta Education's High School Completion Strategic Framework, and is aligned with the principle that "... school completion is a significant predictor of a person's long-term health, economic success and general well-being." (Janosz, M et. Al. 1997)

As the same author states, "... the completion rate is a key marker of the efficiency of the formal K-12 school system." As such, the ultimate goal of Fast Forward is to provide high school students, who did not graduate or who are at-risk of not graduating, the extra support and assistance needed to complete their high school education and receive an Alberta High School Diploma. **During the 2019-2020 academic year MORE students than ever before earned High School diplomas.**

The statistics presented below substantiate and confirm the value of Fast Forward's work in supporting high school completion.

FAST FORWARD DURING THE PANDEMIC

Student support and contact was dramatically increased during the closure of schools. Often times contact was made primarily as a wellness check while also encouraging academic engagement. Contact went from weekly, to nearly daily for some students. An increased effort was made to connect with family members, guardians and support people for Fast Forward students on a regular basis. It was important to confirm that students were safe, had consistent access to food and that mental health was being adequately supported. Every effort was made to fill in the social, emotional, and physical gaps previously fulfilled while at school and to meet student needs holistically while they were homebound. The Student Support Advisor regularly did sidewalk and front lawn visits, delivered personal supplies, gift cards and school materials. Communication with students included uploading encouraging or informative videos on Microsoft Teams as well as using Facetime with some students so that we could imitate our habitual face-to-face connection as closely as possible. Student sleep and wake patterns changed quickly, and oftentimes it became necessary to connect with students in the evening.

Important to note - historically, Fast Forward continues to accept new student intakes throughout the school year even well into summer school. However, **there were NO new registrations into Fast Forward after the provincial government announcement on March 15, 2020 of school closures across the province due to the global pandemic.** In the weeks following lock down, many intake appointments had to be cancelled and all new inquiries were strongly encouraged to rebook appointments in September. It could be assumed that, without the school closure, Fast Forward registrations would have continued to increase into the spring as it has done so in previous years.

Also, there were a number of Fast Forward students registered to challenge diploma exams in June and August which students were unable to write because of the provincial decision to cancel diploma exam writing. (Diploma exams were reinstated for the August sitting, however, in our area it was restricted to only students registered in summer school classes. If a student was challenging a diploma exam, he or she would have had to travel to Calgary.) Both of these situations directly affected the potential of Fast Forward's overall data in the 2019-2020 school year.

SUCCESS AND STRATEGIES THAT INFORM OUTCOMES, MEASURES and PROCESSES

Over the eleven years of operation, several effective strategies are apparent when determining successful patterns and outcomes in students of the Fast Forward High School Completion Initiative. It is a priority of the Fast Forward High School Completion Initiative to provide directed and focused support and assistance to vulnerable groups of students whose completion rates are traditionally lower than the norm. Vulnerable student groups might include students living independently, young parents, students living in poverty, students who have suffered a tragedy such as loss of a parent, students in care, Indigenous students, ESL students, LGBTQ2+ students, or students with mental health or addiction issues. The main role of the Student Support Advisor is to collaboratively establish and support the students' academic direction and goals while being cognizant of individual needs and implementing non-traditional support and involvement that goes beyond the role of a school based advisor.

The best and most important practices for successfully supporting and advising Fast Forward students seem to be:

- 1. Relationship!! Relationship!! Relationship!!** – it is crucial that students feel welcomed, valued, respected and supported. It is essential that the Student Support Advisor develop a non-judgmental, safe and trusting relationship with every student.
- 2. Flexibility** - life circumstances change frequently and often drastically for many vulnerable students. As a result of disruption or change in their personal lives, some students may begin their coursework, then lag or come to a standstill only to resume their studies at a later date. Most students do not quit in a formal sense; but tend to fade away. It is very important to keep the doors open for a positive continuation or re-entry into the school system. There are many students who resume contact after a three or four month absence because they feel safe and welcomed by the Student Support Advisor. It is important to recognize these interruptions to learning as (usually) temporary and respond in a manner that respectfully acknowledges these changes, while being flexible to adapt goals, and maintain realistic accountability on the part of the student.
- 3. Choices** – students create and follow unique learning paths that are often not linear. Many students who have left high school or who have not completed within the traditional three year timeframe, do not want to (or it's not practical to) return to their previous High School. The

majority of students prefer the divergent options offered at Victoria Park High School because of the choices (distributed learning, tutorials, classroom classes, blend of both), flexibility, and independent learning process, especially if they have also entered the work force.

4. Relevance – the unique circumstance of each student needs to be considered when planning and setting goals. The Student Support Advisor, together with the student needs to be able to have honest and safe conversations about lifestyle, learning needs and academic and career goals. The Student Support Advisor needs to be able to read a transcript and decipher the best route for individual students, making the most efficient use of time to reach goals while considering and appreciating the student's current life situation. Some students will pursue the completion of their High School diploma, others will explore career options that, with specific course pre-requisites completed, can begin a trade or a college program; and still other students will upgrade courses to enter into a University program. The goal with each student is to move forward in a positive way to reach academic and career goals that are realistic and attainable for them specifically.

5. Staying connected – the Student Support Advisor connects weekly (or more frequently) with students. The preference is for face-to-face weekly connection, and when this is not possible, the second most common way to connect with students is through texting. Sometimes, especially for students who are also employed, face-to-face connections might happen in public spaces off-campus and/or after office hours. Face-to-face interaction is imperative to affirm a genuine and caring relationship, to assess and adjust goals, to provide ongoing encouragement and accountability, to celebrate success and oftentimes to exchange materials. Persevering and maintaining these ongoing face-to-face connections is so important because phone and internet usage for students is often sporadic, changes or discontinues. The relationship established early on allows students who fade or disappear during the school year to resurface comfortably knowing that they will be warmly and enthusiastically welcomed without judgement. The Student Support Advisor maintains contact with some students who have left school for extended periods of time, (for example, to have a baby) knowing that maintaining this relationship even when they are not formally a current Fast Forward student is also a strategy to encourage the student to return to school as soon as possible. Contact with students is also maintained over the summer to ensure student's successful completion of summer school courses.

6. Tracking progress – the Student Support Advisor keeps continuous records of student goals (both academic and personal) as well as barriers and achievements. This helps students focus on both smaller and bigger picture goals, helps hold students accountable and it certainly helps students see and celebrate their progress. Tracking student progress is a tool that supports and encourages student growth and often times provides a tangible, visual representation of student successes.

7. Collaborative partnerships – the Student Support Advisor facilitates student connection to relevant community agencies to help meet individual student needs. Common examples of community connection and support that undoubtedly influences and affect academic progress

for students include, resources for mental health and addictions as well as homelessness and financial need. There is a strong collaborative relationship between Alberta Mental Health, Lethbridge Family Services, Alberta Works and Woods Homes that result in many referrals and shared students.

8. Supporting transitions – some students are anxious and unsure of the process required to move onto post-secondary studies. The Student Support Advisor breaks the process into manageable steps and assists students to make connections with advisors at post-secondary institutions. This often involves setting up appointments, sometimes accompanying the student to the appointment and sometimes helping students apply for admission. It also includes promoting opportunities such as career fairs and open houses at post-secondary institutions. The same is true for students entering into a trade, information, support and connection is provided by the Student Support Advisor.

9. Celebrating accomplishments – even small accomplishments (completing a difficult module or quiz, attending classes for a consecutive week) are celebrated. This acknowledgement of achievements is motivation for students to keep on going. Students require and deserve celebration and ongoing encouragement in meeting their academic and career goals.

10. Personal Initial Contact – A personal, positive and warm phone conversation is essential when working through the grade 12 classes of the previous school year from all division high schools of students who have not yet earned their high school diploma. The information provided by the Student Support Advisor needs to be optimistic and encouraging. Many students do not know how many credits they have or how many courses they need to complete, so when they are presented with a tentative plan or other options, it can be surprising and overwhelming. Sometimes students don't have the belief in themselves to commit to the process during the initial contact made by the Student Support Advisor. Many students do not respond to the initial contact immediately and may not respond with any action for a few months, or even a year or more. However, if the initial contact can spark HOPE, the seed has been planted, and as the students begins to realize and believe that it is indeed possible to achieve their academic or career goals, and that they would be well supported during the process, they are much more likely to open themselves up to possibilities.

STUDENT RECRUITMENT

At the end of June (and ongoing) of each school year, the list of students from grade 12 classes across Lethbridge School Division who were to have graduated are checked on PASI to ensure each has student has earned their High School diploma. The Fast Forward Student Support Advisor is the undertaker of this task for all five high schools in Lethbridge School Division. This task is worked on throughout July and August, and for students writing diploma exams in August, their credential checks occur in September or beyond. This is the main form of student recruitment for Fast Forward, with the primary goal being to support our school division's non-graduated students through to completion.

Non-graduated students are then prioritized based on a combination of current number of credits earned, types of courses left to complete and student age on September 1st. Beginning in September and carried on throughout the school year, the Student Support Advisor makes contact with the non-graduated students from the previous school year in an effort to re-engage them and work towards high school completion.

The unfortunate exception is students of ESL and K&E status who are not contacted because of our inability to provide services for them beyond 3 years. However, if an ESL or K&E student initiates contact with Fast Forward, every effort is made to assist them.

Contact with non-graduated students is established using records from Power School. During the 2019-2020 school year, students were strongly encouraged to re-engage at their designate High School, oftentimes with Fast Forward support. (This is new - previously students would register at Victoria Park High School. The reason for the change is to not inundate Victoria Park with the sole responsibility of all non-graduated students.) Many students are apprehensive to return to their designate schools after their grade 12 year, and are then invited to meet with the Fast Forward Student Support Advisor where together, we uncover student academic needs and wants and sometimes then register at Victoria Park High School. Fast Forward will support students, current or non-graduated, at any of the five high schools.

Over the past couple of years, it has been impossible to contact and meet with all students mentioned in the above process. The reason is twofold. Firstly, this was a task that, between 2010 and 2016 was contracted out. Since 2016 it has been an addition to the responsibilities of the Student Support Advisor. Secondly, local agencies and the larger Lethbridge community are increasingly aware of the Fast Forward initiative and it is challenging to keep up with referrals from community agencies, post-secondary institutions, friends, families and colleagues. Self-referrals resulting from brochures, posters and other media coverage were also increasing and Fast Forward had to reign in some of the community advertising. This is definitely good news! The program is reaching many students and they are finding success. However, one concern is that there are many more students for whom we do not have the time nor the personnel to make that initial contact and continue with ongoing support.

Throughout the school year, referrals from division high schools to Fast Forward may occur for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps a student may be experiencing a physical or mental health situation and need extra support, or the regular school setting does not mesh with the financial situation of an independent student who is also employed part or full-time and the student is looking for an alternative way to complete courses. ESL students often require longer high school careers because of language-related barriers, and Indigenous students are culturally distinct with differing needs. The Fast Forward Student Support Advisor meets regularly with division high school counselors to assess individual student needs and programming. Working together as a division collaborative high school team is a definite strength of the Fast Forward initiative!

There is no active recruitment of students who are 20 years or older; however, there are frequent inquiries about this initiative and request for guidance and help. Most commonly, these are previous Lethbridge School Division students who aged out and return as adults other times they are adults who are referred through friends or significant others. The Student Support Advisor will share many options for pursuing academic or career goals with them that may not necessarily include a High School diploma. For example, upgrading programs at Lethbridge College, challenging diploma exams, High School Equivalency, GED (general education diploma), or information about mature students through Alberta Education.

DIVISION HIGH SCHOOL COLLABORATION and SUPPORT

The Fast Forward initiative has been successful much in part due to the administrative and staff support at Victoria Park High School. Victoria Park High School provides a culture of care and expertise when dealing with youth. Individual student needs and accomplishments are noticed, supported and celebrated. This collaborative partnership has been crucial to the success of students in the Fast Forward Initiative.

CONCLUSION

The eleventh year of the Fast Forward High School Completion Initiative continues to show remarkable growth. The achievement of Fast Forward students remains steady and strong. Fast Forward continues to provide **DIRECTION, HOPE, POSSIBILITY** and **SUPPORT** to vulnerable students by providing a variety of unique supports for either high school completion, requirements for post-secondary or assisting students in career exploration. Fast Forward is continually expanding and evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of students in Lethbridge School Division and will continue to move in this direction with division support.

Fast Forward would gratefully be interested in meeting with any stakeholders reading this report who may have questions, comments or suggestions that could enhance the experience of Fast Forward students or increase success rates or better support student completion.

DATA REPORT 2019-2020

Age as of September 1, 2019	Number of Students	Number of Credits Earned to August 31, 2020
19 years old or younger	72	1329
20 years old or older	18	135
TOTAL	Students: 90	Credits: 1464

90 - number of students registered in Fast Forward in 2019-2020

18 – number of overage students (20 years or older on September 1st, 2019)

72 – number of underage students (19 years or younger on September 1st, 2019)

35 - number of males

52 - number of females

3 – identified as other gender

46 - total number of students who made inquiries, but ultimately did NOT register in Fast Forward, and were, instead supported and directed to other places (This number reflects students that met with the Student Support Advisor, it does NOT include appointments cancelled or inquiries made during the school closure because of pandemic.)

1464 – total number of credits earned by Fast Forward students in 2019-2020

135 - number of credits earned by overage students

1329 - number of credits earned by underage students

39 – number of students who earned a High School Diploma

5 – number of students who earned a Certificate of Achievement

1 – number of students who earned a High School Equivalency

3 - number of students who earned pre-requisites for a trade or upgrading for post-secondary

5 – number of students attending University in 2019-20

11 – number of students attending College in 2019-20

2 – number of students training in a trade 2019-20

20 – number of students returning to Fast Forward in 2019-20

0 – number of deceased students

Table 1. Historical Summary of Student Registrations in the FASTFORWARD Program

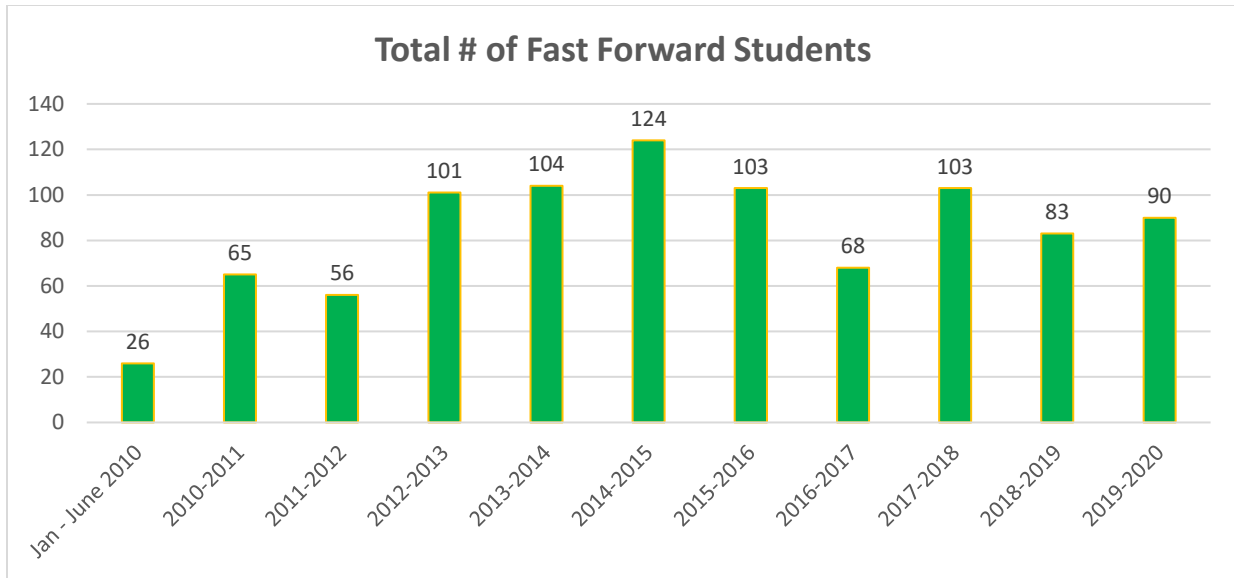


Table 2. Historical Summary of Student Registrations in the FASTFORWARD Program by AGE

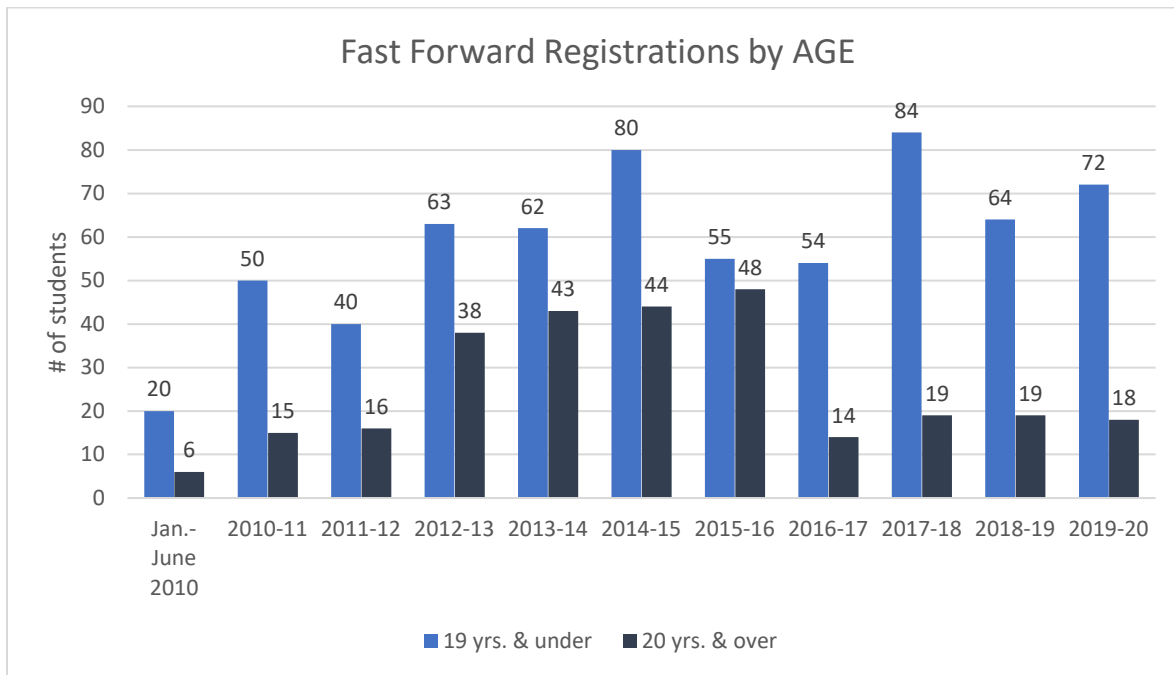


Table 3. Historical Summary of Credits Earned in the FASTFORWARD Program

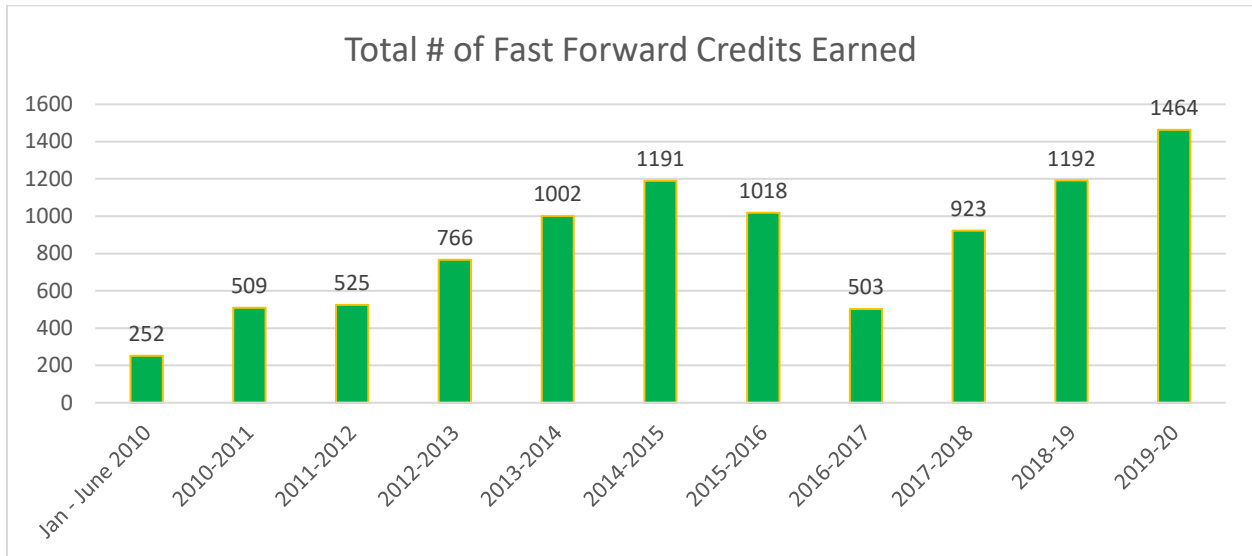


Table 4. Historical Summary of Program Statistics for both Registrations and Credit Earned

