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Education Matters

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**SUPERINTENDENT MELBA LUCIANO
SPREADING LITERACY COUNTYWIDE**

Accelerating Early Literacy in Osceola: Using Mobile Technology to Create a “Model Innovation County”

Melba Luciano, Superintendent of the School District of Osceola County, may be retiring but she is leaving an indelible mark in the lives of children in Osceola through her pioneering efforts in early literacy.

Supt. Luciano, a South Bronx, N.Y. native of Puerto Rican descent and the first Hispanic superintendent appointed to the position in Osceola, climbed the ranks from teacher to superintendent over a successful and rewarding 30-year career, and she does not intend to leave without putting the final touches on her legacy.

“Literacy is the key to learning,” Supt. Luciano said. However, Osceola County faces a problem that many other Florida districts face. According to the STAR Early Literacy Assessment, more than 87% of children entering Osceola county schools are not prepared for kindergarten. These children start out with a disadvantage from day one, and play catch up throughout their academic careers.

According to researchers Hart and Risley, children from poverty hear 30 million fewer words than their more affluent counterparts by age 3. Marilyn Jager Adams estimates that children in poverty experience only 200 hours of pre-literacy learning before kindergarten compared to 5,000 hours by children not in poverty. And poverty is a real challenge in Osceola County. 74% of Osceola students qualify for Free & Reduced Lunch.

Supt. Luciano set out to solve this complex issue: how does a school district change the learning trajectory for children who are not yet on their school roster?

First, Supt. Luciano looked for a partner who could help her accelerate literacy for every child in her county—even those not yet enrolled in school. Supt. Luciano’s

search led her to Footsteps2Brilliance. She chose Footsteps2Brilliance because of its transformative model that allows her to scale quality early learning experiences to all families within her county, even those not on her school roster. Footsteps2Brilliance invented a device agnostic mobile technology platform that sends pre-K through 3rd grade game-based curriculum to the mobile devices and tablets that parents already own.

After establishing the technology partnership with Footstep2Brilliance, Supt. Luciano faced the bigger hurdle of uniting the community to support a single vision for early learning. Supt. Luciano systematically educated the mayors, legislators, business community, foundations, and other community stakeholders about the challenges facing her schools. She masterfully garnered community support to level the playing field for all early learners by providing families with the right literacy tools during the critical phase in brain development - - birth to age 5.

After months of careful planning, Supt. Luciano launched the countywide literacy initiative “Osceola Reads” with the support of Osceola County, the City of Kissimmee, the City of St. Cloud, and the Education Foundation of Osceola, and powered by a unique partnership with Footsteps2Brilliance. In doing so, Osceola became a Model Innovation County, and Supt. Luciano was invited to the White House to celebrate her innovative approach to bilingual early learning.

Before a countywide launch, the partnership had one objective: validate that the Footsteps2Brilliance early learning solution would be actively embraced by teachers, students, and especially by families. In the summer of 2015, the comprehensive literacy app was introduced in eighteen VPK classrooms. The results demonstrated



By Jorge Hernandez
 Writer/Publisher
 Florida Education Matters

that Osceola Reads would deliver on its promise. In just 39 days, the children had read 3,769 books, interacting with more than 1.1 million words. Best of all, 50% of the total time children spent on the program was outside of school hours. Families were doubling their children's pre-literacy learning by downloading the app onto their mobile phones and logging in with their children anywhere/anytime. **"After seeing those results, we knew we were in business,"** said Supt. Luciano.

"I'm passionate about Osceola Reads because I know it will make a difference in the lives of all children, regardless if they attend public, charter, or private schools. It's about getting children to read."

As the cornerstone of the Osceola Reads initiative, Footsteps2Brilliance offers true learning without limits. All parents throughout the county can download the free Footsteps2Brilliance literacy app from the Osceola Reads website to any mobile device - Apple or Android, tablet, computer or smartphone. With more than 80% of parents owning a smartphone (according to the Pew Research Center), Osceola Reads is able to leverage technology that already exists in parents and students' homes. Footsteps2Brilliance can also be used offline, so families do not have to pay for or use a data plan. And finally, families can easily switch the app between English and Spanish with the click of a button - an important feature since 57% of Osceola students are Hispanic.



While kindergarten readiness is the primary objective of Osceola Reads, the initiative goes beyond to ensure that all students are reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Schools and teachers throughout the county are also integrating the Footsteps2Brilliance app into their literacy instruction - and into their strategy for engaging parents in students' learning. The app includes over a thousand interactive eBooks, songs, and literacy games designed to help children develop literacy skills all the way up through third grade.

Osceola Reads has been able to achieve early literacy expansion for an entire county in both English and Spanish through a unique technology partnership that allows the district to leverage the devices that most parents already own. By removing the barriers of language, cost, and economic disposition, a new frontier in learning has been opened for the children of Osceola.

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For more information visit www.osceolareads.com