



...while early learning technology being used by Owensboro Ind. to raise kindergarten readiness; \$185,000 contract provides district with feedback when youth use app

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City schools taking Footsteps to literacy
By Keith Lawrence

Last year, only 40.8 percent of children in Owensboro Public Schools and 54.5 percent in Daviess County Public Schools were considered ready to attend kindergarten when they enrolled.

Owensboro Public Schools has a plan to change that. It's called Footsteps2Brilliance — <http://www.footsteps2brilliance.com/>.

The app can be downloaded and used by anyone in most parts of the city.

"It's available free to anybody within the boundaries of the Owensboro Public Schools district," Superintendent Nick Brake said last week. "But our boundaries are so ragged, I would expect you can get it anywhere inside the bypass."

Footsteps2Brilliance, a private company founded in 2011, is an early learning technology company.

Basically, the program, designed for 3- and 4-year-olds, reads to children, underlining the words to the story as each word is pronounced.

"It provides literacy training," Brake said. "Some of the things Sesame Street did a generation ago, this is doing now."

He said, "This is a really strong attempt to improve literacy before kids ever enter our schools. It's a really good opportunity. But it doesn't replace books or parents reading to their children."

Brake said, "We don't recommend that they spend more than 30 minutes a day looking at a screen. But when parents are driving, waiting in a doctor's office, cooking dinner or whatever, the kids can use the device and improve their reading and comprehension."

He said, "There are so many factors in kids' lives we can't control. Some of the parents aren't having conversations with their kids. This doesn't replace that, but it helps."

While anyone can use the app, the city schools, which spent \$185,502 for the program, gets feedback from the company on how much time each student spends on the app and how many books they read.

"We provide them with a roster of our students so we can get information to track their progress," Brake said. "It's pretty sophisticated. In March, we'll start an outreach to the elementary schools, churches, day care centers and Head Start. Right now, it's being tested at Hager Preschool."

Money for the program came from a iGrant from city schools and grants from the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro and the Marilyn and William Young Foundation.

"We're one of the first districts in Kentucky to adopt it," Brake said. "We only have to pay the initial fee, not an annual fee."

Sherry Baber, Hager Preschool coordinator, said students there read an average of 563 books on Footsteps2Brilliance, had a comprehension rate of 65.14 percent and were exposed to 177,595 words between Aug. 1 and Jan. 13.

The device asks questions at the end of each story and children push a button on the screen to answer.

That's how the comprehension rate is figured.

"We have some parents with limited literacy skills, especially in English as a second language program," Brake said. "The program is also in Spanish, but not in Burmese."

Both local school systems have a growing Burmese population

Brake said city schools plan to use billboards to promote Footsteps2Brilliance and tell how to download it.

"It can replace video games for kids," he said. "It's a slam dunk, an investment in early childhood education."