

Education

Manassas City is out of space for preschool. Is software the solution?

By **Moriah Balingit** May 29 at 4:21 PM

Ever since it started receiving state funds for preschool, Manassas City has had a dilemma faced by many other districts across the state: not enough room to put the classes. This school year, more than 100 children from low-income families were on waiting lists because the school system could not offer enough classes.

In the tiny Northern Virginia school district, this was especially wrenching given that more than three-quarters of incoming kindergarteners do not speak English proficiently and are in dire need of the classes to start learning the language.

So next school year, the district plans to roll out a program that will allow it to serve every qualifying 4-year-old. Rather than letting families languish on waiting lists, preschoolers from low-income families will attend classes two to three days a week and have access to free literacy software that can toggle between English and Spanish, the primary language in the households of many Manassas City schoolchildren.

[\[More than a quarter of Virginia-funded preschool seats went unfilled\]](#)

The software, called Footsteps2Brilliance, can be used on tablets, smartphones and desktop computers. It is a virtual library of interactive children's books and eventually will be available to all children in kindergarten through third grade in Manassas City, even those who do not attend public schools. All preschool parents in the city will have access to a preschool teacher who can show them how to work with their children using the software and will be invited to classes once every two weeks.

The school system got special approval from the state to use its preschool dollars — approximately \$900,000 — to fund a portion of the program, using \$482,000 that would have otherwise gone unspent. The district will have to spend close to \$500,000 to match the additional state money and expand it to children who are not covered by the state preschool grant.

Community members have high hopes for the software. In an unveiling of the program on Wednesday, business leaders, school officials and a representative of U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan gathered in an outdoor pavilion in Old Town, where a series of trains blew noisily by. They gushed optimism over the program, speaking of

the potential for it to not only help children learn but transform the community. The presentation included a district-produced video that closed with a classroom of Manassas City students who tried the software yelling, “I love Footsteps!”

“I believe this is the most innovative and exciting program we have ever brought to this city,” said Art Bushnell, a school board member who lobbied for it. “It’s a program that impacts the entire city. It’s a program to change the lives of children.”

Superintendent Catherine Magouryk said that the program also can help parents — English and Spanish speakers — become bilingual. And it could give Spanish-speaking parents, who sometimes feel helpless working with their children on homework, a supportive role in their child’s education. The interactive books allow users to touch words to hear them pronounced.

“They can actually sit down and work with their child themselves,” she said. “That’s empowering.”

The community also is banking on the software to help close the so-called “30 million word gap,” a finding that poor children hear 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers in the first three years of their lives.

Manassas school officials are hoping that it can help lift the performance of the school system, where only two-thirds of the 7,400 students passed English and math state exams last year. About a third of the system’s students are considered English language learners, the highest concentration of any district in Virginia.

The program in Manassas could be a model for how other Virginia schools districts could spend their state preschool dollars, which are divvied up based on the number of qualifying students and the concentration of low-income families. Many districts have declined to take their share of the money because they lack the physical space, and others are unwilling or unable to match the funds.

This school year, the state estimated that more than 7,500 children who qualified for free preschool did not participate because districts did not offer enough slots. Prince William County, which surrounds Manassas, had nearly 1,600 eligible preschoolers but paid for just three dozen slots with state money, according to state data.

Ilene Rosenthal, founder of Footsteps2Brilliance, said that combining lessons on the app with classroom time, a model frequently called “blended learning,” could help districts nationwide expand preschool offerings with less space and expense. Similar programs have been unveiled in school districts in California and Massachusetts. She said her program could help narrow the achievement gap.

“What Footsteps2Brilliance wants to do is level the playing field,” Rosenthal said.

Amanda P. Williford, a University of Virginia education professor who has conducted research on early learning, argued that one of the main purposes of pre-kindergarten is to build social skills, the ability to work in groups and endurance, so children will be able to handle a full school day when they start kindergarten. She worries that with a blended model, children will miss out on the benefits gained from classroom time.

“It would be really hard to have an app that’s a good substitution for real-life, high-quality preschool with a really good teacher,” Williford said.

Magouryk said she recognizes the importance of socialization and that the program will include opportunities for parents and children to get together.

Part of her aim is to stretch her state preschool dollars to serve as many children as possible and begin looking at families to support more early learning.

“If I’m able to get the same results working with them half time, then I can reach more children with that money,” Magouryk said. “We have to work with families. Educators aren’t the ones who work with their children and help their children.”
