

MALDEN

Where reading is fun, cool, and early

By **Terri Ogan** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 13, 2013



PAUL HAMMERSLEY/CITY OF MALDEN

Students at Malden’s Beebe School check out a literacy program.

Malden first-grader Sarah Maranda-Duarte says she doesn’t get bored when she reads because the pictures move.

The Beebe School student uses [Footsteps2Brilliance](#) , an interactive, mobile literacy program that features a library of about 44 e-books and 300 educational games intended to build knowledge and improve vocabulary in young students.

“It’s really good,” Sarah said. “I pretty much use it every day at home. My favorite part in the game is when the pictures move and talk.”

In the next few weeks, Footsteps2Brilliance will become available to all Malden students in preschool through second grade as the district aims to accelerate early learning, close the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent counterparts, and get students to read proficiently by third grade.

According to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 33 percent of third-graders in the city read proficiently, well below the state average of 45 percent.

“Our success hinges on our ability to be literate,” said Malden’s superintendent of schools, David DeRuosi Jr. “We put a plan in motion that would expand literacy to every child in Malden. It’s a unique plan.”

Also used in Everett and Revere, Footsteps2Brilliance has specific learning objectives for all of its e-books, even if the topic is whimsically presented. For example, “The Backyard Band” teaches youngsters about different kinds of insects and musical instruments. “Butterflies play the flute. They flutter with every toot,” the e-book tells them.

Students can test their knowledge with a set of exercises and questions that assess reading comprehension. If they are unable to answer a question, they can select the “hint” button or go back for a refresher.

The program can be obtained through various websites, including Amazon.com , and is free to all users in the Malden zip code. It can be used on computers, smartphones, and tablets such as iPads.

Depending on the size of each district, Footsteps2Brilliance can cost between \$250,000 and \$350,000. Many school systems, like Malden, pay for the program over several years.

Harvard University professor of education Catherine Snow, who specializes in language and literacy development in children, said a digital resource like Footsteps2Brilliance is not the answer to closing the achievement gap, but has potential in generally supporting students to achieve literacy.

“The big challenge for kids from low-income homes is not learning to read, it’s acquiring the knowledge they need to understand the text they will encounter,” Snow said.

Footsteps2Brilliance, she said, “is building knowledge in a fun and playful way, providing more opportunities to practice sounds and letters. . . . I see huge potential if it’s integrated with classroom curriculum.”

The Everett and Revere school districts are in their second year using Footsteps2Brilliance.

Last year in Revere, children in preschool through first grade used it for about 7,470 hours, and were exposed to more than 16 million words, according to the school administration.

Superintendent Paul Dakin said the district implemented the program in order to embrace a community-learning method at an early age.

“We only have about 200 early-childhood school seats in the district,” Dakin said. “We only get funding for that much and have space for that much, but we have 650 children vying for those spots. This literacy program is available for the remaining 450 that don’t get into school.”

There are other advantages to the program over giving students books to take home each weekend, Dakin said. “When you give them a book, there’s no guidance in their reading, so you don’t know what the student is doing with it. And parents can share that learning with their child.”

He added: “We see that kids are doing a lot of learning outside of the school day, by tracking their usage. It has definitely stimulated more contact hours in rich reading and quality learning.”

In Everett, students are now more focused and have begun building a strong vocabulary foundation, said Janice Gauthier, the district’s director of curriculum and development.

“We see them coming to preschool classes with more conversational skills in place, more confidence, and it helps with technology as well,” Gauthier said.

She added that Everett students were exposed to 25 million words in their first year using the program.

“We’re stealing time from mindless activities, like TV, in order to do literacy work,” said Ilene Rosenthal, chief executive officer of the company that produces Footsteps2Brilliance . “The kids and parents are really drawn to it.”

In addition to its interactive game features, Footsteps2Brilliance creates a community partnership by fusing relationships between city officials, schools, parents, and students.

Professional developers from the company work with the district to give parents training and support by way of newsletters and pizza nights, among other things.

In Malden, officials have worked with the company in developing Parent University, a multiple-resource tool that teaches the ins and outs of the program. Parent University will entail in-person trainings and video instruction on the city’s local cable network.

“Parents want to be their kids’ first teachers; they just don’t know how,” said Eugene Narciso, chief operating officer of Footsteps2Brilliance. The program provides game-based instruction, he said, so kids feel like they’re playing games and parents are not threatened.

School officials can also track the progress of each user, determine struggles and successes, and collect other useful information with a management feature.

Upon the program’s launch, Malden will challenge its students in preschool through second grade to read a million words using Footsteps2Brilliance by early next year.

“We know the very best public investment in our dollars is in early literacy,” said state Senator Katherine Clark, who attended the program’s unveiling.

“If we can make sure that every single child is reading at grade level by third grade here in Malden, it is going to change the trajectory of their entire lives,” she said.

Footsteps2Brilliance is being used in 25 school districts across the United States.

Rosenthal said Winthrop and Chelsea have expressed interest in using the program.

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