



## Southwest ISD looks to prepare learners at home

In a part of the county with sprawling farms dotted by aging tractors and bales of hay, Southwest Independent School District is hoping to propel its students into the future with a “virtual pre-kindergarten.”

The program allows parents to borrow iPads loaded with interactive stories and games and to use them to build reading comprehension and critical thinking skills — at home.

“This comes from the adage that parents are a child’s first teacher,” Southwest ISD Superintendent Lloyd Verstuyft said Tuesday as he watched 4-year-olds skip past him in a soon-to-be-renovated early childhood center.

Based on a learning platform called “Footsteps2Brilliance,” the initiative aims to serve kids who didn’t qualify for pre-K the district offers that is funded by the state or federal governments. The program will cost the district \$64,000 this year.



With momentum building locally and nationally around early childhood education, Verstuyft said district trustees asked him to find a creative way to reach all the district's students. They're not alone — Southside ISD announced plans this summer to offer full-day pre-K to an estimated 100 students who didn't qualify for existing state and federal programs.

After an orientation, Southwest ISD parents are expected to read through the iPad activities with their children at home and visit with program coaches twice a month for the next year to go over progress and teaching tips while their child interacts with others in a classroomlike setting.

“We're trying to give them the same kind of strategy that teachers use in the classroom,” Southwest ISD community outreach director Brenda Patrick said.

Ilene Rosenthal, the founder and CEO of Footsteps2Brilliance, said the software helps build children's vocabulary and higher-level thinking skills with e-books and interactive games.

“Forty-six percent of children enter school at risk of failure because they don't have the vocabulary they need to do well, and the really frightening thing is that the gap widens as they go through school,” Rosenthal said, adding that the deficit is most prevalent among English language learners and low-income children.

She said the e-books, which can be read in English or Spanish and highlight each word as it's being read, also help conquer the “digital divide” between parents who can afford Internet service and those who can't because parents can download the program into any device and use it offline.

“You can really steal time, and what I mean by that is that you can be at a doctor's office or a dentist's office and you can be working on literacy,” Rosenthal said.

The program is being used in 25 other school districts across the country, Rosenthal said, including Harlandale ISD, which adopted it last year. District spokeswoman Leslie Garza said educators there are “incorporating it into more classrooms this year.”

A study by the San Francisco-area Touro University on the program's use in conjunction with daily classroom instruction in a Napa County kindergarten class found it had a “significantly positive effect on students' receptive language skills.”

But the Southwest ISD model is unique in its intended use by parents outside a traditional classroom setting, and in how it provides additional support services and monitoring, Rosenthal said. Students will be given pre- and post-tests to track progress, said Southwest's early childhood coordinator, Marcia D. Mitchell-Padrón.

So far, 14 families have enrolled and 19 more are expected to sign up at a ribbon-cutting for the program set for Saturday, said Patrick, the outreach director. She said the district hopes to serve 400 students over two years and has reached out to families that signed up for pre-K but failed to meet state or federal income requirements.

Southwest ISD, like others in San Antonio, is already using its own funds to offer full-day preschool to many of its students. And the 25 slots it received through the city's Pre-K 4 SA program have already been filled, school officials said.

Sylvia Hernandez said she's happy she enrolled her granddaughter Jazzlyn in the program after finding that she didn't qualify for the state pre-K program.

"So far, she loves it," Hernandez said, as Jazzlyn selected farm animals from the screen for a story she was creating about a "mean farmer."

Hernandez said the program seems intuitive enough and that she's happy that her granddaughter also gets to interact with other kids during their bimonthly meetings.

"We all want our children to be better than we are," Hernandez said. "We try to put in her head that she's going to go to college so she already has a plan."

*mcesar@express-news.net*