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VA District Turns to Blended Footsteps2Brilliance for Pre-School



This fall, Manassas City in Virginia is planning on augmenting preschool for children from low-income households with access to free literacy software called Footsteps2Brilliance.

Manassas City in Northern Virginia receives state funding for preschool, but faces a problem providing enough classrooms for the district's preschoolers. More than 100 children this past year were put on waiting lists.

Since three quarters of the district's incoming kindergarteners do not speak English proficiently, their English literacy as they entered elementary school was a primary concern. To solve this problem and make preschool more easily available to the city's children, the district decided to provide a blended learning program in which students will get classroom time and free access to the reading software.

The 4-year-olds will attend face-to-face classes two or three days a week, and when they're home they will be able to use Footsteps2Brilliance, which is in both English and Spanish. The software is available as an app for tablets and smartphones in addition to its regular site for computers.

Footsteps2Brilliance is an ebook library that allows students to access interactive and engaging children's books, and has been proven to increase [vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking skills](#), writes eSchool News. Ilene Rosenthal, founder of the program, said that it could "level the playing field" for students affected by the achievement gap. According to its website, the software [promotes the habit of reading daily](#), which is important for future academic success.

Manassas plans on eventually making the software available to all the city's students from preschool through third grade. They also want to give the parents of those in the new preschool program access to a teacher who can teach them how to work with their children using the software and invite them to classes every two weeks.

Arthur P. Bushnell, a school board member who lobbied for the program, said:

I believe this is the most innovative and exciting program we have ever brought to this city. It's a program that impacts the entire city. It's a program to change the lives of children.

Superintendent Catherine Magouyrk noted that it could help parents work on becoming bilingual, creating opportunities for them to help their children with schoolwork as the students move through school. She said:

They can actually sit down and work with their child themselves. That's empowering.

However, [some say that this program will not be as effective as traditional preschools](#), notes Moriah Balingit of the Washington Post. Amanda P. Wilford of the University of Virginia, who studies early learning, argues that since the main purpose of preschool is to develop social skills and the ability to focus throughout a full-length school day. Wilford said:

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.

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