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School District launches free mobile pre-K app

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According to the Osceola County School District's statistics, 87 percent of students are not prepared for kindergarten on the first day of school.

It's a situation that, in the past, public school systems couldn't and didn't do anything about, since they didn't have access to students until they became kindergartners.

But, Osceola district's leaders, seeking to buck a trend that those children who aren't ready never catch up, are making something fun available to really-young children in order to do something about it.

Enter the digital world of Osceola Reads and Footsteps2Brilliance.

The School District, Education Foundation Osceola, the cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud and Osceola County have joined forces to bring a new digital application to parents and students-to-be to enforce reading and phonics to young children.

Osceola Reads has formally launched this month and presents Footsteps2Brilliance, a literacy app for pre-kindergarten through third grade students. It can be accessed through a traditional computer or any mobile device.

The School District, local governments, Education Foundation and a federal grant will combine to cover the \$330,000 price tag over five years, at which time district will own it and have an unlimited number of licenses, so it will remain free for all residents in Osceola County. Superintendent Melba Luciano said the goal is to get the app in the hands of families, who pass it on to their children, and to double the number of kindergarten-ready students in Osceola County to 30 percent by September.

"We in the school system can't do this. We need parents, we need community assistance," she said at an unveiling event Wednesday at the district's Early Learning facility.

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten teacher Michelle Brown put F2B through its paces with the help of a few of her 4 and 5-year-old students. It uses visual and audio cues to build vocabulary and teaches new words the students end up using as they talk about the content in the lessons, usually nursery rhymes or other stories.

"These children are five months to kindergarten and they're already learning letters and sounds," Brown said. "They can work at their own speed and pace. Those at a higher level will reach a higher mastery on their own."

F2B is a free app for Osceola families who register at www.Osceolareads.com, and children can use it at home or anywhere else outside the classroom they take their devices, harnessing their portable power and eliminating the "digital divide" between the classroom and living room.

"We need to get to them before they get to school," Luciano said. "What's amazing is what you saw (Wednesday) happens in a classroom, but with this app it can happen at home, in the car, in a restaurant, and they are highly engaged."

School Board member Jay Wheeler said Footsteps2Brilliance is a groundbreaking tool.

"Kids are having fun, but this makes them classroom ready. So many of our students arrive not ready," he said. "We didn't grow up with this, but these kids won't know any different."

District leaders said with the app up and running, the next challenge is getting it onto parents' devices and in their children's hands. So far, only 255 of the county's 15,000 eligible families (1.7 percent) have signed up. The goal is to have 25 percent of them registered with F2B a year from now.

Local leaders attending Wednesday's event discussed ways to get awareness for the app, coming up with ideas like putting the word out to big box stores that sell phones and tablets, community centers and their events, the county's Early Learning Center and local cable television stations.



Teacher Michelle Brown watches her student Anderson Boessel use the footsteps2brilliance app during the kickoff event of Osceola Reads in St. Cloud on Wednesday. News-Gazette Photo/Marc Clery