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District launches digital literacy program

■ Footsteps2Brilliance part of 'School Ready' initiative

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NEWMAN - The Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District has launched an initiative aimed at better preparing young children for their school years and strengthening the literacy skills of those already enrolled in the lower elementary grades.

A digital literacy program, Footsteps2Brilliance, has been implemented in grades TK-3 across the district. The program is being offered free of charge to every family in the district, regardless of whether they have students enrolled.

The district will host a Jan. 18 School Ready Initiative meeting for community leaders and residents interested in learning more about the program and/or serving as advocates for literacy in the community by promoting the use of Footsteps2Brilliance.

Superintendent Randy Fillpot and Director of Curriculum and Instruction Kim Bettencourt said the literacy program provides interactive levels of engagement which benefit pre-school students as well as those of school age, reaching them at their skill level.

One goal, they emphasized, is to provide all students the tools they need to be school-ready.

"Some of our students come to us in kindergarten almost two years behind. A lot of that is basically due to the amount of words they are exposed to from birth until the time they enter our school system," Fillpot told the school board in December.

Fillpot said children coming from families with professional parents will have been exposed to about 45 million words by the time they enter kindergarten, while those coming from lower-income families will typically have been exposed to 15 million words.

"That translates into lower-income kids tending to be about two years behind," Fillpot explained. "That is something we spend the next 12 years trying to catch up on. It is a pretty daunting task."

The Footsteps2Brilliance program can help bridge that gap, Fillpot and Bettencourt stated.

The program can be downloaded onto any device and provides a range of features geared for various age levels.

The program, for example, can read to younger children who follow along on the device and can click on words or illustrations to bring them to life. As older students develop their literary skills, the program provides e-books for them to read.

Children can take part in activities such as creating their own book or completing other skill-based exercises.

Footsteps2Brilliance delivers content in English and Spanish, and allows parents (and teachers) to track the number of words their children have been exposed to, books read, comprehension and more.

"The more kids read independently, the more they learn," Bettencourt commented. "Footsteps2Brilliance has kids listen to books, but it also has direct instruction because it has activities which follow each book," she reflected. "It is great if a parent can sit and interact with the children, but if they can't the child is still getting this exposure."

While the classroom is a ready-made conduit for putting the program in the hands of students, the district also hopes to promote access to Footsteps2Brilliance for pre-schoolers as well.

"Our goal is for every kid age zero through the third grade to have access to this," Bettencourt remarked.

Next week's meeting is geared toward that goal.

Any family, regardless of whether they have students enrolled in the district, is invited to use the program, the administrators reiterated.

"The purpose of the meeting is to introduce the community to Footsteps2Brilliance, but also to develop ambassadors to promote the program," Fillpot said. "We want to get the word out there."

Adults can use the program as well to brush up on their reading skills, he noted.

Literacy is not the only key to school readiness and success, Bettencourt said, as physical health and social/emotional issues also come into play.

But, she emphasized, literacy is a key cornerstone in the process.

"A literate community is a thriving community. You only benefit by making sure kids are literate," Bettencourt said. "The more kids who get that exposure, the better off we will be."

The School Ready Initiative meeting will begin at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 18, in the McConnell Adult Education Center adjacent to Von Renner Elementary.

Community members interested in attending are asked to RSVP no later than Monday, Jan. 15, by calling 862-2933 or emailing Nanci Fox as NFox@nclud.k12.ca.us.