

HOME / COVINGTON



★ Premium Content

Northern Kentucky School Districts Turn to This Program to Boost Early Learning

WED, 07/29/2015 - 10:55 RCN NEWSDESK

[+ Increase Text Size](#)

For a long time educators have been attempting to start the process of learning for children earlier and earlier. Years ago it was discovered that children in the preschool classes when they are 1 - 5-years old of can absorb learning more effortlessly than when they are older.

This prompted an ongoing determination to connect very young children with some sort of learning program that was both effective and inexpensive for parents. Without paying for a preschool, or qualifying for free preschool, some parents chose to keep their children home from birth to kindergarten, and others opted for some sort of child care that doesn't stress learning enough to make the child ready to enter kindergarten.

According to the Brigance K scale, a required test which measures a child's readiness to enter kindergarten in the United States, Kentucky rates just under 50 percent, meaning less than 50 percent of the children in Kentucky have the skills that are necessary for them to enter kindergarten. So teachers then have to bring all those children up to par before proceeding with the kindergarten agenda.

"From day one these students may be at a disadvantage, they are behind, and some may lack the foundational skills on which to build," said Governor Steve Beshear in a press release in January of last year. "Too often, they don't catch up with their peers. As a result, these students may face years of poor grades and negative school experiences that usually only end when they drop out or graduate from high school unprepared for college or career."



This spring, educators in Northern Kentucky came together to find out about a new program called Footsteps 2 Brilliance. This is an Early Learning Mobile Technology Platform that can be accessed from any smart phone, tablet or traditional computer. What developers hope is that this program can allow school districts to spread an early learning solution quickly throughout its schools, homes and community. Footsteps 2 Brilliance banks on the ability to build content once and deliver it on any smart device. The program is designed for preschoolers through third grade.

"The goal is to have students read on a third grade level in third grade," said Lisa Swanson, Preschool Director and Director of Special Education Services at Newport Schools. "Also with a click of a button, it translates everything into Spanish. In Newport, 39 percent of our children are ready to enter kindergarten. Our superintendent, Kelly Middleton, wants better results."

Footsteps 2 Brilliance puts over 1,000 ebooks, songs, and learning activities into the hands of every parent of children from preschool to third grade who lives within the districts' zip codes. With any smart device, children can log into the program by themselves, even as young as two, because the log in can be a series of four pictures that the child can recognize and press to complete the log in sequence. Once in, that child will be exposed to ebooks, songs and things that challenge them on their age level. In addition, all of the child's work will be uploaded to the district, so that educators can know how many times the child logs on, what activities the child likes to do when he or she logs on, and how much progress the child is making. When that child does come into the system, the teachers have knowledge of what he or she can do as well as the work they have been doing, so they can pick up and start teaching on that level.

This program takes advantage of the explosive adoption of mobile technology, in the form of smartphones and tablets. Parents have known for a few years that their children are fascinated by their smart phones, and very early on those children want to grab the phone and make it work. Parents download apps that their children can do and sometimes when they need the child to be quiet, they allow him or her to play on the phone. Even in households that don't have a computer or internet in their homes, as many as 80 percent of parents have a smart phone. With this knowledge, developers of the Footsteps 2 Brilliance realized that they could reach more

households than ever simply by having the parent download the program and then continuing to give the phone to the child.

"The problem we have is that 50 percent of our preschool age children are not anywhere," said Dr. Kathlyn Burkhardt, Superintendent of Erlanger-Elsmere schools. "Our students in high school are 100 percent college and career ready. We are tied with 12 other districts being first in the state for that. We have several quality programs in place for preschool students, but if the children stay at home, they can't take advantage of the programs, and they tend to be lacking a few skills necessary for kindergarten."

According to the Brigance K test, 37 percent of Erlanger-Elsmere children are ready for kindergarten. With the programs that are now in place, the children have come a long way, but those children who are not in any preschool program are the ones who are keeping the percentages down, and Burkhardt thinks cost is a factor. Even though she thinks Footsteps 2 Brilliance is a small puzzle piece, she realizes that this could be a way to reach those children who stay at home or go to a relative's house for childcare during those early formative years.



Burkhardt said they have purchased the program for a year, and will renew based on numbers.

They have partnered with the Northern Kentucky Educational Council to help with the funding.

Covington Independent Public School District is impressed with the program, and although it has committed to putting Footsteps 2 Brilliance into the district, the funding is not totally in place yet, but should be by the time school starts.

"We have committed to purchasing the license for one year and will go for other years if we have data to support it," said Alvin Garrison, Superintendent of Covington Schools. "We are very thankful to the public, they have been very generous in their support. We haven't gone to the city for help. We are in partnership with Children, Inc, and other donors and are hoping we can make it work."

Covington's Brigance K score is 46 percent, and they also have other programs in place to prepare preschool children for kindergarten, but again the problem is reaching the children who are not in any other program. There are three zip codes that Footsteps 2 Brilliance will cover once it is in place. Garrison is working with the Center for Great Neighborhoods and other organizations so that they are familiar with the program and can help introduce it to parents.

"We know that our most influential partner in education are parents," said Lisa Swanson from Newport. "We have a day before school where we go out and do home visits so we can meet parents and they can see who will be teaching their child. We are going to include information on Footsteps 2 Brilliance at these visits. The important thing about this program is to let parents know it is here, and it is no cost to them. We will help them download the app if they need help, and we will be available to help with the program if they need it."

Newport schools have partnered with the City of Newport to fund the program at a price of approximately \$11,000 per year for five years, split evenly between the board and the city. They have also informed all of the day cares and preschools in the city about the program so everyone will be on the same page, and children will have access anywhere they are.

"The public libraries are also included in this outreach program, and children who don't have access to a smart device anywhere else can go to their public library and get on their computers which will have the program," said Swanson. "We want to reach as many children as we can. We will also be having our first training session for parents who want help on September 9 at 6 p.m., and we will have an informational table at the Welcome Back Bash on August 10 from 5 to 7 p.m."

Erlanger-Elsmere will also inform parents of the program at home visits, as well as in their district newsletter and at all informative get together sessions before school starts. Burkhardt said it is important for parents to know the program goes through third grade, so that they don't stop using it when their children get into school, or decide not to use it because their child is already in school.

As of now, both the Newport and the Erlanger-Elsmere programs are live. Newport parents can access information at [this link](#). Superintendent Kelly Middleton said that they prefer that any child already enrolled in kindergarten through third grade to wait to register until school starts to avoid double registration and passwords, but any child under four who doesn't go to a Newport Public School can register and use the system now.

Anyone who resides in the Erlanger-Elsmere school district can also get onto the site immediately through [this link](#).

"If the program works like they say it works it will be a good instrument for preschool and the community," said Alvin Garrison. "If we can improve just one student, that is a win. As an intervention strategy for those students who are struggling, it will be extremely helpful. I feel it can be a game-changer for our students."

Written by Patricia A. Scheyer, RCN Contributor

Top photo: RJ Craig, 2, of Newport, playing on his mom's phone.

Second photo: James Hayden, 2, of Newport, doing a test run of the Footsteps2Brilliance program.

Third photo: Alyson Ramiyez, 5, of Newport, also testing the Footsteps2Brilliance program.

Follow Northern Kentucky's News Leader on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

Tags: [TOP STORIES](#) [EDUCATION](#) [ERLANGER](#) [ELSMERE](#) [COVINGTON](#) [NEWPORT](#)