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FOOTSTEPS TO BRILLIANCE FOR MANASSAS CITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Story and Photo by Deila Engstrom

The transition to kindergarten has now been made a little easier for many children in Manassas City with the help of the Virginia Preschool Initiative and its new Blended Learning Program. The initiative, which distributes state funding to schools, ensures that quality preschool programs are in place for at-risk four-year-olds not currently served by Head Start. However, two obstacles have always stood in the way of reaching those children: classroom space and English proficiency rates.

In the past, nearly 100 students were put on waiting lists each year due to lack of space at Manassas City elementary schools. That means nearly five classrooms worth of preschool students were not being reached each year. English literacy rates for kindergarteners are a major concern. Recent studies from the National Assessment for Educational Progress have found that vocabulary and comprehension issues lead to distinct gaps in educational achievement. With over 50 percent of K-2 students identified as English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), it was imperative to reach these four-year-olds to prepare them adequately for school.

Educators found a solution with the Blended Learning Program. At schools such as Jennie Dean Elementary, students attend preschool two days a week and continue their lessons at home with their parents with free bilingual mobile literacy software called Footsteps2Brilliance. The Footsteps2Brilliance academic language program platform delivers a library of e-books and educational activities and games to parents, children and teachers anytime/anywhere through technology. Footsteps2Brilliance has a toggle that allows parents to switch between Spanish and English. Parents will have the ability to learn English with their children while also listening to stories, games, music, etc., in Spanish; therefore, supporting their children's learning. The software creates e-books in a unique way that links imagery with vocabulary and comprehension. This platform is device agnostic: it can be used on iPhone, iPad, Android, computers, tablets and laptops. The platform is supported with resources for teachers, lesson plans and professional development.

Certified teacher Caroline Wittenberg and her assistant Rosana Catala greet the same 15 preschool students on Mondays and Tuesdays and 12 different students on Wednesdays and Thursdays. On alternating Fridays, students attend school with their parents. The remainder of the time is spent working at home on lessons using Footsteps2Brilliance. This learning module frees up classroom space and reinforces the necessary literacy tools students need to succeed in the future. Jennie Dean Principal, Dr. Zella Jones, said that, "The biggest strength of our VPI blended learning program is that we are now able to reach more children through this model. We were so limited with space and this allows us to partner with parents in a unique way, so students are better prepared for kindergarten. The framework we have implemented allows us to provide early exposure, which is so beneficial for the children."

Upon reaching the classroom, Ms. Wittenberg quizzes the students on letters posted outside the classroom door before they hang up their coats and backpacks. At 9 a.m. students begin circle time and prepare for the rest of their four-hour school day that will be filled with instructional and play time. Footsteps2Brilliance is also used within the classroom allowing students to access interactive and engaging children's books that increase vocabulary, reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

While the Blended Learning Program seems like the answer to the problem that has plagued local students and schools like Jennie Dean, Dr. Jones said, "One challenging aspect of this implementation has been that there is not another model like ours in the country, so we have not had a guide or reference to use as we work through the process. It's new territory, but the work is worthwhile because more students can be helped." Details about the school's program can be found at Manassas City Public Schools mcpsva.org.

Deila Engstrom (dengstrom@princewilliamliving.com) is a part-time writer and photographer and full-time mom to two high school students. She has a hard time believing she's closer to sending a child off to college than she is to sending one off to preschool."

