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Boston District Launches Smartphone-friendly Million Word Summer Challenge

By Stephen Noonoo • 06/17/14

To help close a pre-literacy achievement gap among preschoolers, [Revere \(MA\) Public Schools](#) is partnering with its local community and reading software provider [Footsteps2Brilliance](#) on a million word summer reading challenge, aimed at kids in pre-k through third grade that will get students reading on devices like smartphones and laptops.

As part of the challenge, Revere, about five miles from downtown Boston, is offering the software free to all families, and working with local community centers like libraries and restaurants to provide free wi-fi access and help publicize the challenge. According to Paul Dakin, the district's superintendent, almost 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and some of them hear up to 30 million fewer words by the time they reach first grade.

Students in kindergarten and above are already enrolled in Footsteps2Brilliance, a literacy software program with storybooks designed for K-3 readers that lets students highlight text and have passages read aloud. While they're encouraged to continue reading over the summer months, the program is really aimed at the district's incoming cohorts--those aged 3 to 4 years old--to encourage their progress before they enter kindergarten. Parents can sign up for free accounts and access stories and reading materials on any internet-enabled device.

Beyond improving literacy skills, the program will also provide the district with actionable data that can be used to help differentiate instruction. "When a kid shows up to kindergarten, my tech people can take their accounts, open it up, and teachers can automatically see where they're reading," Dakin said. "They can start the first day of school with data behind them showing exactly how far they've progressed."

By using a tool compatible with devices like smartphones, Dakin hopes to engage parents as much as students, and hopes teachers will start to see improvements over the next few years. The students targeted by the program, he said, "don't see or hear as many rich vocabulary words" as other children. "This is a way to unlock a library to them through a smartphone, a laptop, an iPad, or a computer."

About the Author

Stephen Noonoo is a contributing editor. He is on Twitter [@stephenoonoo](#).

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