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Looking for an Edge: Schools Look to Technology for Early Childhood Learning

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By Seth Daniel

Several years ago, when the Revere Public Schools were looking to get an edge, they invested in full-day kindergarten for all students – and the rewards have born out with major awards for the high school recently and students that tout impressive resumes.

Now, looking to maintain that edge, but strapped for classroom space, Revere schools are looking to technology to get a jump on early childhood education. The City's Model Innovation City designation using the new technology – called Footsteps 2 Brilliance – was rolled out on Monday.

Supt. Paul Dakin said the schools have been using the computer program with parents who set up accounts for two years now, and it's achieved remarkable results. Revere was the first district in the state to launch the program, though many have followed since then.

"We have 650 kids in any one class and we're only able to accommodate about 200 students in a part-time early childhood program," he said. "In a district where early education is critical to close the achievement gap, we needed a way to engage with 3 and 4 year olds that we didn't have room for in our program. We came up with this solution."

The Footsteps 2 Brilliance program is available to any parent in Revere of a child who is preparing to enter school. Using a smart phone, a tablet or a home computer, children can access books, educational games and assignments. By using it regularly, Dakin said the kindergarten teachers can tell just where every student is before they arrive in the classroom.

"It not only engages the students, but also gives us an early look at their progress," he said. "It brings everything they do from 3 years to 4 years and gives that to us when they get to kindergarten...We can see where a student using Footsteps 2 Brilliance is at and where they are in their reading levels on the first day of kindergarten...We feel this is a perfect opportunity to provide 3 and 4 year olds and their parents with a program that will provide them with all the tools that will help them get where they want to be when they enter kindergarten."

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Omlade Adeniyi (left) and Jackson Martel are shown during Monday's roll out of the Footsteps 2 Brilliance early childhood program in City Hall. Both children worked intently on their iPads using the program during the entirety of Monday's program.



He also added, "When we have kindergartners with a good foundation achieving at a high level, what that leads to is first grade teachers being able to do more and then second grade teachers can do more with them. It goes on and on."

Mayor Dan Rizzo said the program is akin to economic development – noting that \$17 is returned for every \$1 spent on education.

"Education is an urban revitalization strategy," he said. "If we look at the future of Revere's economic potential, we realize that it hinges upon our ability to integrate our diverse and vibrant communities into the educational system at an early age. I commend Dr. Dakin's foresight in creating a ubiquitous strategy that reaches beyond the four walls of the classroom and launches us into the 21st Century."

The program was rolled out for all to see by Ilene Rosenthal, CEO of Footsteps 2 Brilliance, in the Council Chambers.

A quartet of children who have been using the program on iPads were also in attendance, and couldn't keep their minds off their lessons during the program – mostly focusing on the reading instruction as the adults talked.

At one point, Rosenthal asked the kids what they were doing, "Footsteps!" they all yelled in unison.

Rosenthal explained that many kids don't have access to books, and the program not only gives them that, but also allows them to publish their own stories.

"Many students don't have books in their home," she said. "With this, now they have full libraries...Beyond that, the children are able to create their own books when they're done reading them. In the 21st Century, it's not enough to be a recipient of knowledge; you have to be a producer of knowledge."

She finished with some statistics, saying that since Aug. 2012, students using Footsteps 2 Brilliance in Revere have read 107,291 books and have gained 42.19 million new vocabulary words.