

Fitchburg schools out to close reading gap

Grants will fund app-based program for children

By Elizabeth Dobbins, edobbins@sentinelandenterprise.com

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FITCHBURG -- Only a few hundred preschool students in the city have access to a reading and vocabulary program aimed at closing the gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers, according to the district's top administrator.

But several grants accepted by the School Committee Monday night will open up the program, Footsteps2Brilliance, to not only other students in the school district, but the community as a whole, said Fitchburg Schools Superintendent Andre Ravenelle on Tuesday.

"It really gives you a way to help students access more vocabulary," he said.

Employees from the superintendent's office have been applying to grants for the past year to purchase a five-year, \$200,000 license, which covers access to Footsteps2Brilliance's app-based reading activities for anyone living in the city of Fitchburg.

The app is interactive with activities, such as a lower-case and upper-case letter writing program, that can be downloaded onto most smart phones, tablets and computers

"They're reading, but things are highlighted," Ravenelle said. "It's very interactive."

Ravenelle said the district, with assistance from ReImagine North of Main, has been using a pilot version of the program since fall 2015 in the district's preschool and several private preschools.

"We got some really great feedback," he said. "The data was really rich."

In January, Ravenelle said the district plans to introduce the program to all district students in preschool to second grade.

The district plans to partner with private schools and "any group that works with pre-K to second grade" for citywide access starting in March, he said.

Footsteps2Brilliance co-founder and Chief Operating Officer Eugene Narcisco said the program is meant to narrow the gap between students -- which often starts before children enter school -- as early as possible. He said research has shown that children living in poverty have heard hear 30 million fewer words than students with more affluent backgrounds by the time they enter school.

"It's always playing catch-up," he said. "The whole goal is to get kids kindergarten ready and reading proficient before third grade."

Ravenelle said, though the district has increased the number of minority and low-income students taking Advanced Placement tests, he wants to start closing gaps earlier and give children a way to access new vocabulary outside of school.

The app can also translate the stories giving children as well as older family members a way to learn English, he said.

To fund the purchase, the district received a \$75,000 grant from the Fitchburg Education Foundation and three \$25,000 grants, one from the George Progin Foundation, another from the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts and a third from the George R. Wallace Foundation. The remaining \$45,000 was covered by Footsteps2Brilliance in exchange for classroom and school level aggregate data from the program that the district agreed to share.

Though the district will be able to see data and the progress of individual students, neither the company nor the general public will be able to access this information, Ravenelle said.

Narcisco said the Washington D.C.-based company, which was founded in 2011, has worked with several other communities in Massachusetts including Malden, Revere and Everett.

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Ravenelle... sees program as resource for the community