

How Pomona Unified is helping low-income preschoolers bridge '30-million word gap'



Photos by Monica Rodriguez Diego Del Cid, 5, with his mom, Veronica Martin Del Campo, both of Pomona, uses the Footsteps2Brilliance Early Learning Literacy App on Friday. The app has helped him expand his vocabulary as he prepares to enter kindergarten in the fall.

By [Monica Rodriguez](#), Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

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Diego Del Cid, 5, with his mom, Veronica Martin Del Campo, both of Pomona, uses the Footsteps2Brilliance Early Learning Literacy App Friday (April 22, 2016). The app has helped him expand his vocabulary as he prepares to enter kindergarten in the fall. Photo by Monica Rodriguez

POMONA >> Every day, 5-year-old Melanie Low comes home from school and after tapping her "super secret" password into a small tablet, spends an hour doing what she calls homework using a specialized app.

The program is the modern-day version of grandma's lap — a grandma with an extensive library. Called the Early Learning Literacy App by Footsteps2Brilliance, it's loaded with more than a 1,000 children's books, nursery rhymes, songs, educational games and more.

Across the country, educators are recommending it, targeting low-income families who may speak 30 million fewer words to their children than affluent parents by age 3 — what they call the “30 million-word gap.”

The app has had a noticeable impact on Melanie, who will enter kindergarten in the fall, said her mom, Pomona resident Sandra Low.

“Her vocabulary has expanded,” Low said. “She says new words. She’s recognizing more letters and numbers.”

That’s just the effect Pomona Unified School District administrators and educators are expecting to see in children across the district.

The district began using the app in fall 2014 as part of a pilot program in its early education programs. But next month, the district plans to roll out the application with a major campaign designed to spread the word about the resource available free to all families living within Pomona and the portion of Diamond Bar served by Pomona Unified, said Oliver Unaka, district spokesman.

The app contains educational material suitable for children from infants to second grade, according to the school district.

For children to be successful from the first moment they walk into a classroom, they must have developed their vocabulary, said Stephanie Baker, deputy superintendent of instructional services.

Studies have shown children from low income families have a significant gap in their vocabulary skills compared with peers from more affluent communities, an academic disadvantage hard to overcome. With proper preparation, however, children can develop a rich vocabulary so that by the time they are in third grade, they are strong readers, Baker said.

Third grade serves a milestone to predict student success over the course of their academic career, Baker added.

Educators can see children using the app are learning based on their ability to express themselves, using words correctly, said Barbara Nemko, Napa County superintendent of schools. The Napa County Office of Education began using the program as part of a pilot project in 2011 and took the program countywide in February 2014.

Once skeptical teachers are excited to see how children using the app engage in casual conversation and easily incorporate words such as “appetite” and “experience” correctly, she said.

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Closer to home, the app has been used successfully in the Buena Park School District, a district with a large number of Latino students learning English as a second language, along with a growing number of

students whose first language is Korean, said Superintendent Greg Magnuson. The district also has a large number of students whose families are at or below poverty level.

Children using the program in kindergarten and first grade as part of a pilot program picked up English faster, he said. After two years, the program was expanded.

Pomona's launching of the program toward the end of the academic year has an added benefit, Unaka said.

Children often forget some of the material they learn during the academic year. Having the app available during summer break will reinforce the learning that took place during the school year, he said.

From "May 4 to Sept. 1, we'll raise awareness and put a hard stop to the summer learning loss," Unaka said.

Melanie used her writing skills while on a recent family vacation, Low said.

"She took her tablet, and she wrote a book at the beach," she said. Then, while still in Mexico, her teacher was able to see the book.

Parents and children will be able to use the app in both English and Spanish, allowing children and families to develop vocabulary skills in both languages.

That's important to Pomona Unified, a district where residents have an interest in English, Spanish and other languages.

"We are purposely celebrating diversity in this district," Unaka said.

School districts can use the app in different ways to meet their individual goals, he said. Pomona educators envision children using the app to write and illustrate their own books, allowing them to master the written language earlier in their education.

Diego Del Cid, 5, has been using the Footsteps2Brilliance app. Diego's mom, Veronica Martin Del Campo, downloaded the app on both her phone and on a tablet. Like Melanie, Diego's vocabulary has been growing, but Martin Del Campo has noticed something else.

The app allows children to record themselves as they are reading books. Sometimes, Diego has difficulty pronouncing the letter 'R,' and when he listens to recordings of himself, he will correct his pronunciation, his mom said.

"This is like an extra for him," Martin Del Campo said.

Those working in the childcare field have recently begun accessing the app as well.

"To me, this program is about bringing the world to children," said Xiomara Lopez, who for 20 years has run Lopez Family Childcare, a childcare program from her house in Pomona.

"They are delighted" with the app, Lopez said in Spanish of the children under her care. "They're all happy."

Lopez said the app will open learning opportunities for her charges, allowing them to develop skills to explore and learn multiple subjects, including science and math.

Tarin Gayles, who teaches 4- and 5-year-olds at Peace of Mind Preschool in Pomona plans to blend the app into her lesson plans starting this week. She has a student who will be traveling outside of the country with his family soon.

"I'm texting his mom so he can use this while they are in Jamaica," Gayles said. "He won't lose his schooling skills."