

Pomona Unified literacy 'app' up and running with first year goal of reading one billion words!

If you don't think Pomona Unified School District's new "Early Learning Literacy" program is a big deal, stop by a school where the kids have been using it in the pilot program and see pre-kindergarten students – that's ages 4 and 5 – reading the lessons off the computer touch screen on the wall and on their tablets.

Just to put it in perspective, when some of us at La Nueva Voz were beginning school in the early 1950s, it wasn't until first grade that the actual reading started.

In kindergarten, La Nueva Voz was still using fingerpainting as the primary method of communicating (although from memory, we were pretty good at it).

And in pre-kindergarten, we were specializing in riding tricycles around a tree house in an old oak tree in a University of Tennessee nursery school that is now part of the Department of Child and Family Studies.

Still not convinced? Ask mom Bernice Morales whose daughter, Emily, 5, has been involved in the pilot program at Pomona's Vejar Elementary School since right before the Christmas break.

She told La Nueva Voz this month that she has two older children – both boys, age 10 and 17, and the difference is "amazing."

Her comments came during the roll-out of an innovative interactive bilingual program to promote literacy throughout the school district – and throughout the community – that is all based on a cell phone mobile learning "app" and a program goal of reading one billion words in the first year.



Emily Morales, 5, a pre-kindergarten student at Vejar Elementary School in Pomona, demonstrates how the Footsteps2Brilliance "app" is used on an interactive "smart" board in a classroom at Pomona's Lincoln Elementary School.

Literacy 'app' goes districtwide

The roll-out – which took the program districtwide for the first time following a successful pilot program – was held at Pomona's Lincoln Elementary School to introduce Footsteps2Brilliance, an early learning technology company based in Washington, D.C.

The company's "app" targets pre-kindergarten through third grade but is available to everyone – even adults and adult English learners – to improve literacy skills.

How does it work? The concept is based on downloading a mobile "app" to a cell phone, tablet, computer or other device for use either on line or off line, so no additional monies are required for hardware, infrastructure or maintenance.

Pomona Unified School Board President Adrienne Konigar-Macklin told an audience of 150 elected officials, school district staff from Pomona and surrounding districts and members of the community that early childhood education is "near and dear to my heart."

"It is the way to equalize what happens in the third grade," Konigar-Macklin said. "It is the way to ensure that sixth graders are interested in the curriculum in the seventh grade."

"It has been the building block for them to go on to high school, to have a thirst for knowledge and want to go on to higher education or develop a career," she added. "It is well known that students who don't have access fall behind, are discouraged and probably never succeed or believe they can."

She said the literacy program is "a testament to our beliefs in all of our students."

Eugene Narsco, co-founder and chief operating officer of Footsteps2Brilliance, told the audience he grew up "down the street" in La Puente.

"I saw what it was like growing up in a place where 48 percent of kids who enter kindergarten, that's their first day of school," he said. "By the time they come to school they are always playing catch up."

"When we co-founded this company, we needed to invent two things – one thing was can we turn on every mobile device," Narsco said, explaining that 80 percent of parents own mobile devices today.

He said this would enable a scaling of the program citywide in 30, 60 or 90 days.

"And the second thing we did... we broke the rules of licensing," Narsco said. "Instead



Members of the Pomona City Council and representatives of other elected officials joined the Pomona Unified School District at this month's "Early Learning Literacy Innovation Summit" for the roll-out of an innovative interactive bilingual program to promote literacy throughout the school district. Pictured, from left, are Gregory Spencer, representing the Footsteps2Brilliance program; Pomona Unified Supt. Richard Martinez; Pomona City Councilmembers Debra Martin and Paula Lantz; Pomona Unified Deputy Supt. Stephanie Baker; Pomona Mayor Elliott Rothman; Pomona Unified School Board President Adrienne Konigar-Macklin; and Pomona Unified School Board members Dr. Roberta Perlman and Frank Guzman.

of licensing one to one, we said what if we had a vision that we license the entire city, even kids not enrolled in school."

Chipping away at a 30 million word 'gap'

He added that Pomona now has the opportunity to "think big, scale and really create an equitable model to help all kids transition the 30 million word gap that we're seeing when kids come to school on their first day."

Pomona Mayor Elliott Rothman said the citywide literacy program "shows a lot of vision by the Pomona Unified School District."

"A better educated citizen equals more jobs, better pay, they go to college," he said. "The City of Pomona is on the uptick and we need better educated people with jobs... to participate in our city."

Rothman called the program "another step towards the goal of achieving a 100 percent literate society in which we live."

Stephanie Baker, Pomona Unified's deputy superintendent of instructional services, said the program goal is to have 500 million words read by Sept. 1 to decrease what is known as summer learning loss.

She said the program will support all learners in the district – which serves Pomona and part of Diamond Bar – from birth through

second grade "so we can have maximum impact on child development during those critical and most formative years."

One of 12 school districts in California implementing program

Pomona is one of 12 school districts in California – which includes

more than 1,100 school districts altogether – participating in the program as "model innovation cities."

The literacy "app" is available to everyone in the district's service area – even students at private schools.

The achievement gap becomes even more significant in Pomona



Pomona's Lincoln Elementary School folkloric dancers performed for guests at this month's roll-out of a new districtwide early learning literacy program.



Eugene Narsco, co-founder and chief operating officer of Footsteps2Brilliance, demonstrates how the new literacy "app" can even be used on a cell phone.



Students at Pomona's Lincoln Elementary School work on their literacy "app" using tablets in a classroom during the program roll-out activities.

where more than one third of the students are English learners and two thirds have been English learners at some point in their educational experience.

"This uniqueness makes the need for a resource that students and families can access even more critical for our district," Baker said in a video presented at the event. "If you want to have successful students in

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the 12th grade, you need to invest in them in the first grade.”

The program is simple, easy to understand and a user friendly way for parents to access information, allowing them to think in terms of entertaining their young children in a more educational way.

“It’s really a launching, a launching of literacy and the importance of literacy in Pomona,” said Pomona Unified Supt. Richard Martinez. “It’s not that it wasn’t happening before, but it’s something that we want to make sure that we bring it to the forefront and to the attention of everyone – that Pomona’s going to be a literate community to ensure that we have a future for our children.”

Martinez said he wants to “use third grade not as a point to determine how many beds we need in prison systems later on, it’s how many seats we need in college in the future. That’s what I’m after.”

He said it will build a strong foundation to “help us launch an initiative that will transform this community and change the trajectory not only of a few kids of one school but



Jacob Alexander Rodriguez, 5, a student at Pomona's Lincoln Elementary School, shows what he can do using the Footsteps2Brilliance early literacy "app" on a tablet.

thousands of lives.”

Educators attending the roll-out traveled from as far away as Stockton and Palm Springs.

Parents of students living within the Pomona Unified School District can download the free “app” by going on line at www.myf2b.com/register/pomona.