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Free app a success in Fitchburg Public Schools

Footsteps2Brilliance helping bring literacy into homes



In this May 2017 file photo, pre-school student Christopher Gonzalez-Hernandez, 4, plays with the Footsteps2Brilliance app on a tablet at the Fitchburg Flourishes Early Learning Literacy summit at Fitchburg High School. SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE/JOHN LOVE

By **CHAD GARNER** |

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FITCHBURG — What a brilliant idea.

Fitchburg Public Schools has been on a mission to provide every student with the tools necessary to become successful readers and writers by using an app called Footsteps2Brilliance that every family in Fitchburg has access to.

The app offers a library of books, songs, nursery rhymes, folktales and games to provide children ages 2-9 with the support to become a skilled reader who enjoys reading.

The entire library is dual language, both English and Spanish, with Karaoke Nursery Rhymes and traditional Spanish songbooks. Footsteps2Brilliance is revolutionary and has received many awards, both for technology, content and its support of diverse learners.

Footsteps2Brilliance can be accessed with or without an internet connection on any Apple or Android tablet or phone, as well as on a traditional computer.

And the best news is that the app is free.

“Reading and being read to stimulates vocabulary and language development, and both are connected to measures of intelligence,” said FPS Early Literacy Coordinator Kathryn Brady.

“A daily routine of speaking and reading to your child will increase their intelligence and lead to success in school.”

There’s also been plenty of success in children in the city and school system utilizing the app.

From Aug. 14 to Dec. 15 this year, Footsteps2Brilliance data shows that 3.8 million words and 6,821 books have been read by FPS students and children in the community.

“For every book that a child reads, there are two to four skills they are learning in conjunction with that book,” Brady said. “These important skills are phonics, vocabulary, spelling and reading comprehension. And the children are learning these skills in a game format, so this learning is enjoyable.”

Pre-K classes are the largest population using the app in FPS, while 4 year olds represent the largest portion of active students using it in the community. FPS has begun using it in some kindergarten and grade one classes, as well.

The increased use of this tool during the early pandemic is extremely noticeable, especially in the spring.

“We saw a word exposure increase of 19% and usage of 42% in spring of 2020,” Brady said.

During summer activity there was also a growth of 53% for word exposure and 52% for usage. FPS hopes to increase the use of F2B throughout the winter months.

Why did the summer use increase so much?

“Our students, Fitchburg families and children in the community used this tool much more in 2020,” Brady said. “Part of this was the isolation of COVID, so FPS reached out to families, offering this support tool. We created an email with Superintendent (Bob) Jokela’s picture on it and we sent it out to all of our families who have pre-K and K-aged students and let the parents know that there was a free app for them to use and bring literacy into their homes. That resulted in literacy growth for children in Fitchburg and we’re really happy about that.”

In the year-by-year comparison, word exposure has increased from 19 million to 23 million from 2018-19 to 2019-20, respectively.

“Every single year that we have used this app we have seen significant growth,” Brady said. “We have more children and families using it in the community than we had the year previous. The news is really wonderful when it comes to the use of Footsteps2Brilliance.”

Brady spoke at a recent FPS School Committee meeting and said Footsteps2Brilliance is a “15-minute-per-day app. It’s approved by the Federal Department of Education in terms of exposure using a device for 15-minutes-per-day. Our families are using it in lots of different ways. We are seeing considerable growth. It’s not a primary tool, it’s a supplemental tool. It’s something they would do in addition to whatever would be happening in the classroom.

“Teachers are using it as a read-a-loud and then getting students to then use it for outside of school time. Close to 75 to 80% of the use that we’re seeing is outside of school hours. That means that the students are really enjoying this and using it to their benefit during out-of-school time.”

Footsteps2Brilliance is also conducting a “Winter Reading Challenge” from Dec. 20 to Jan. 20. The top three readers with the most time spent on Footsteps2Brilliance will win a Kindle Fire tablet, courtesy of the United Way of North Central Massachusetts. The winning students will be notified after Jan. 20.

Students are also encouraged to submit their best writing to books@footsteps2brilliance.com and become a winter reading champion.

If your child is not on Footsteps2Brilliance yet and you would like to receive this app, visit myf2b.com/register/FPS to register.

Garner is the FPS’s communications coordinator.

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