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Colusa County superintendent discusses educational challenges, literacy

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California County Superintendent Roundtable was held last month via Zoom to discuss the successful strategies for addressing learning loss through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Superintendents across the state including Michael West, Colusa County superintendent of schools for the Colusa County Office of Education (CCOE), discussed the statewide early literacy campaign, bilingual literacy model, universal transitional kindergarten and the use of technology and social media to engage parents and children.

Represented under the CCOE are the school districts of Colusa Unified School District, Maxwell Unified School District, Pierce Joint Unified School District and Williams Unified School District.

“We’re a very rural agricultural community. We’re located north of Sacramento. We have two cities in the county, five towns,” said West during the roundtable. “Our residence numbers are a walking 21,839; not a lot of us are very rural as I said but out of those 60 percent of those residents that we have are Hispanic and then our K-12 group about 21 percent of our children are English language learners. Unfortunately, within our county we have a really high dropout rate, which is a challenge.”

To address the challenges the county faces in education, West talked about “Innovative Approaches to Literacy,” a grant from the U.S. Department of Education and a countywide literacy project put in place to promote bilingual reading and writing skills. According to West, the grant was an estimated \$2.3 million for three years and was awarded in 2019.

“For a small county like that, that is super impactful,” said West. “That’s \$750,000 a year to improve our literacy out there.”

Through the “And Literacy For All” initiative, the CCOE distributed over 22,000 books countywide in which 68 percent of the distributed books were recognized as bi-cultural. According to West, the CCOE was able to supply 48,000 books to enhance local district and county libraries and provided over 75,000 books to residents.

“We all know kids still need to touch and feel those books and those pages and still develop their media skills as well, so with that amount of money we were able to get from that grant and our partnership with Footsteps2Brilliance has been outstanding,” said West.

A partnership with Footsteps2Brilliance has allowed the CCOE to provide digital learning through iPad programs provided by Footsteps2Brilliance -- an app used by many school districts to promote early literacy work.

Other participating superintendents and panelists from San Benito, San Bernardino and Napa counties all discussed the success their districts have had through Footsteps2Brilliance. According to West, families within the county are lended an iPad each year as a supplement tool to the classroom. The CCOE has purchased over 1,100 iPads and distributed 700 to families with children enrolled in preschool to third grade.

West called Footsteps2Brilliance an essential resource for English language learners and their parents. Through Footsteps2Brilliance, CCOE was able to host a spring break challenge, a virtual summer school program and a summer climb curriculum. On the app, parents have the opportunity to see their child’s progress.

West described utilizing the power of social media and community outreach to engage parents and young children in youth literacy. Through Footsteps2Brilliance, the CCOE has also been able to host activities such as a math madness challenge and an alphabet letter study. Through the power of social media, like Facebook and the CCOE YouTube channel, the CCOE has been able to feature bi-culutral virtual storytimes.

The CCOE has also utilized Facebook Live to feature a business and highlight its support of literacy. The CCOE has also had the opportunity to reach out to incarcerated parents who have had the opportunity to read with their children.

“None of this means anything unless you look at the success of the program,” said West. “Since the adoption of Footsteps and the launch of our ‘And Literacy For All’ and through the help of the ‘Innovative Approaches to Literacy’ grant which we all started back in 2016, my families here

spend about 33,500 hours on Footsteps2Brilliance literacy development. The kids have created over 100,000 e-books. They've read over 243,000 e-books. They have accumulated over 418,000 literacy comprehension games and have read 104 million words more."

According to West, students throughout the county have increased their logical awareness skill set by 10 percent, their phonic skills have improved by 6 percent, their logic and reason skill sets by 7 percent, their language by 5 percent and their reading comprehension skills by 11 percent.

"This is an average increase of about 8 percent in literacy skills development in just one year with an average proficiency in the literacy domains of 81 percent across the boards," said West. "Those are numbers you want to look at."