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OKEECHOBEE — The focus of the day was on “one of life’s most important skills – reading,” explained Okeechobee County Superintendent of Schools Ken Kenworthy at the Okeechobee County School District OkeeReads Early Learning Literacy Innovation Summit, held May 1 in the auditorium of the Okeechobee Freshman Campus.

“Our teachers have been coming to us saying our children have been coming to us not ready for kindergarten,” he said. Of those who register for kindergarten in Okeechobee County, only 33 percent are “at or above expectation level” for starting school, he said.



North Elementary School student Mylah Wright shows off the Footsteps2Brilliance app to Okeechobee Mayor Dowling Watford (right), County Commission Chairman Terry Burroughs (far left) and Bobby Keefe. Photo by K. Elsken.

Of the remaining 67 percent, 18 percent are “on watch,” 19 percent are “at need of intervention” and 30 percent “need urgent intervention.”

Students who start school at risk have trouble ever catching up.

Statewide, 61 percent of third graders are not reading at grade level, and Okeechobee falls behind the state average.

A new program available free to every young child in Okeechobee County is geared to help parents and teachers bridge that gap.

“Our mission is to make sure every student is prepared to enter college or a career and to function as productive citizens,” said Mr. Kenworthy. “To get every senior to walk across that stage,” he said, the school system has to start with pre-school learning.

“Kindergarten readiness used to be a judgment of if you knew the alphabet song, you were ready for kindergarten,” he said. “That is not true anymore.”

Mr. Kenworthy said educators have long known it is important for young children to have access to books, but not all children have books in their homes.

He said local surveys indicate 85 percent of parents report their child has access to Wi-Fi in the home.

OkeeReads, a free community-wide learning program, includes the Footsteps2Brilliance app which will get instructional materials into the hands of the students much earlier, he said. The materials are geared to children age pre-school through second grade. The goal is for all of the children to be at grade level when they enter third grade.



He said since they started using the program this school year, 49,648 books have been read by local children using Footsteps2Brilliance.

That’s over 15 million words, he said.

“We need to increase the vocabulary as early as we can,” said the superintendent. Reading, or listening to someone read to them, helps children increase vocabulary.

“Every family with children has free access to Footsteps2Brilliance early learning app which gives them online access to an online library of books in English and Spanish,” said School Board Chair Jill Holcomb.

“We hope every child will be able to start kindergarten ready to read,” she said.

“We started using Footsteps in October with our students,” said Amanda Dodson, Everglades Elementary teacher.

“As a kindergarten teacher, it is helpful for students to have another way to listen to books,” she said.

“They can listen to non-fiction books, and fiction stories.

“The illustrations are even animated for them. They really enjoy it.”

She said the students also enjoy the word and letter games.

If a child does not know a word, all he has to do is touch the word to hear it.

“It’s really wonderful for them to have extra help in the classroom,” said Ms. Dodson.

The materials are bi-lingual, which means the user can toggle back and forth between English and Spanish.

“After working in the elementary level for more than 20 years, I watched students struggle to read, and then the day the light bulb went off and they were almost crying because they were so excited they were able to read,” said Mary Hurley, president of the Okeechobee Educational Foundation.

Ilene Rosenthal, co-founder and CEO, Footsteps2Brilliance, said Okeechobee County is the first model county in Florida’s Heartland to participate in the program.

“In this new world that we live in, we know it is not enough to contain education to the four walls of the classroom,” she said.

“We have to involve the community and the family.

“In 2011, research came out that nearly 50 percent of all children in the nation were entering kindergarten at risk of failure,” she said. “It meant they were one, two or three years behind where they should be.”

She said of the children who start school at risk of failure, more than 80 percent never catch up.

“It became clear that in the early phase of brain development, it is a critical phase for learning language and grammar,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what language you learn in, you need to have those brain connections early on.”

Not every family has books to share with the children, she continued.

“We need to have a way to get thousands of books, songs and games to everyone in the community,” she explained.

“We know that 80 percent of the English language learners in the United States came from Hispanic background.

“We created a system you can use on any phone or tablet,” she said.

The program has a toggle switch which allows the user to go back and forth between English and Spanish.

Footsteps2Brilliance created a geofence around Okeechobee County so that anyone in the county can download thousands of books, songs and games in English and Spanish for free. The books were written by children’s authors and are the copyrighted property of Footsteps2Brilliance.

Public school children are registered at the schools. Families with children who do not attend public school, or who are not yet old enough for school can go online to www.okeereads.com and sign children up for a password to use the programs.

After a child reads a book, Footsteps2Brilliance gives the child the opportunity and the tools to use the characters to create his or her own books.

Ray Chirnside, of Footsteps2Brilliance, said the app allows the user to download one or two books and games, or the whole library. He said this is helpful for those who do not have Wi-Fi at home, and for parents who want the children to have books and games available when they travel.

The app works on all computers, cell phones and tablets.

Jenn Faber, of Florida Children’s Council, said they currently have 15 communities in Florida that are grade level reading communities and “Okeechobee is lined up to be our next community.”

“It’s about bringing together all of the people who want to see this happen,” she said.

Mr. Kenworthy said plans also include expansion of the pre-k program. Through a state grant, the school system to have two new units of pre-k at South Elementary next year.

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