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FEATURED

## Digital readers piling up words by the millions

Schools embracing program; greater community outreach planned

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NEWMAN - A digital literacy platform purchased by the Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District as part of a school-readiness initiative has been a hit among many lower elementary grade students.

Now, district leaders hope to increase its use of the Footsteps2Brilliance literacy app among families with children 4 years of age and younger - a target market that is crucial to the goal of developing early literacy skills among youngsters before they walk through the classroom door.

Overall, use of the digital app has exceeded expectations.

Superintendent Randy Fillpot in November issued a challenge for eight million words to be read by March 1.

"We hit that goal about a month later, so we reset it to 16 million words by March 1," Fillpot told Mattos Newspapers. Now, with the word count standing at more than 14 million, he said, "it looks like we will hit the new goal of 16 million words by the end of this month."

The benefit of Footsteps2 Brilliance, Fillpot emphasized, goes well beyond the number of words students are exposed to at an early age.

"The total number of words is important, but comprehension is a huge piece. Right now we are at about 77 percent comprehension. I would like to see us get to 80 percent," the superintendent shared. "They are not just opening the book up and letting it run. They are participating and being involved (in the various activities which are part of the app). That is what we also want as well."

The app is being used at each of the district's four elementary schools, primarily in grades TK-3.

Use by students has accounted for all but a few hundred thousand of the words read, Fillpot reported.

About 40 community users with no students enrolled have signed up for Footsteps2Brilliance, Fillpot told Mattos Newspapers - although some younger siblings of current pupils are registered as students and their word counts are part of those tallied at elementary sites.

The district, Fillpot said, is working on making connections with families who have young children but none currently of school age, hoping to put the app in their hands to better prepare those youngsters for school.

"Our teachers are doing a tremendous job. Now we need to reach out to the community folks who don't necessarily have contact with the district," he explained.

The district is working with the Newman Family Resource Center, he said by way of example, in efforts to raise community awareness of the literacy app and its benefits.

“We really are going to try to form a closer partnership with them, not just around literacy but other things such as nutrition and counseling services,” Fillpot noted.

Ultimately, he said, the district hopes to develop a grass-roots network of ambassadors who can share information about the program through family members, social groups and organizations.

“We are being very deliberate,” Fillpot acknowledged. “Sometimes it takes time, but you get to a tipping point where it just starts expanding. We have hit that point with students and staff; I want to get to that point within the community as well.”

Footsteps2Brilliance is offered free of charge to the community. Families need not have students enrolled in the district to use the app.

The Footsteps2Brilliance app offers a variety of reading activities and games which instill literacy skills.

Available in Spanish and English, Footsteps2Brilliance can be downloaded onto any smart phone, tablet or traditional computer.

The app offers a range of features geared to various ages and literacy levels.

The program, for example, can read to younger children as they follow along on the device and click on words or illustrations to bring them to life. E-books are offered through the app, and users can take part in activities such as creating their own book or completing other skill-based exercises.

The app allows parents and teachers to track the number of words to which their children have been exposed, the number of books read, comprehension levels and more.

For more information about Footsteps2Brilliance, visit the Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District website or call 862-2933.