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Englewood residents to get access to app aimed at narrowing word gap

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ENGLEWOOD — A smartphone and tablet app called Footsteps2Brilliance aims to narrow what education researchers call the 30 million word gap, and will be available for free to anyone in the city starting next year.

The word gap is the difference in words heard by children as they approach kindergarten. The children of middle-class and affluent parents hear about 2,000 words an hour. Poorer children hear only about 600 words an hour.

Those words multiply and compound over time, said Shannon Ayers, a research professor at Rutgers University's National Institute for Early Education Research, and that compounding results in the gap.

That means that 46 percent of students nationwide start school at risk for failure, and 88 percent of them will never catch up, said Ilene Rosenthal, whose company developed the app.

The more words a child hears, especially if those words are neutral or positive and in the correct syntax, can be predictors of academic and professional success much later in life.

Providing the app is just a small cog in Superintendent Robert Kravitz's plan to overhaul the city school district, which has been one of Bergen County's worst as measured by several different metrics.

The app is critical here for many reasons. About 80 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunches. The Hispanic population is growing and many parents are non-English speakers.

The city's poverty and language barriers provide the perfect conditions for young students to begin their education on the wrong end of the gap, he said. "It gives us that jumpstart we need to get kids on the path to success," Kravitz said.

Most people have a smartphone today, which is why Rosenthal wanted to develop a program where learning could happen anywhere.

"We wanted to leverage the tech that all parents have, and provide them with the tools they need," Rosenthal said.

The research into the word gap shows that not only do more wealthy parents speak to their children more, but they engage them in conversation.

The program provides original books, Aesop's Fables and children can write and illustrate their own stories. The app's program can read the stories to children and they can play games — get quizzed — on what they just read.

The program also toggles between English and Spanish so that parents can read with children.

If parents allow it, the school district will be able see data on how the children interact with the program, so that teachers will have an idea of where a student's strengths and weaknesses lie.

While closing the gap is the ultimate goal, Ayers said. There are other related gaps that are just as important, like math and social skills. Language and engagement are what help develop those skills, too, she said.

"A family reading a book together in the app is a good thing," Ayers said. "But so is going to the supermarket."



A screenshot of the smartphone and tablet app called Footsteps2Brilliance.

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There, parents can have conversations about size and weight or different foods.

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