



SCHOOL BOARD LOOKS AT WHAT'S NEXT FOR OSCEOLA READS AFTER 5 YEARS OF GIVING KIDS A HEAD START TOWARD SCHOOL SUCCESS

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Osceola Reads, in partnership with the School District of Osceola County, local city and county governments and the Education Foundation Osceola County, launched five years ago.

The push for literacy and fostering a love for reading in children yet to start school centers around the app Footsteps2Brilliance, purchased by the School District of Osceola County. Children log in to the reading activity program on any device, only needing an internet connection to initially start up, and have their reading minutes logged.

Since then, county kindergartners who scored proficient on a readiness assessment rose from 13 percent in 2015 to 47 percent.

With the five-year benchmark reached, School District Superintendent Debra Pace has sought feedback from the School Board on how to proceed with Osceola Reads to grow early-age literacy as a community initiative as opposed to a school district initiative.

“We believe there’s an opportunity to have a greater partnership between all the different agencies to promote this effort,” she said during a presentation at last week’s School Board meeting. “I do believe the community focus on early literacy that Osceola Reads represents is critical for us. Going away from it would be a step in the wrong direction.”

From the beginning, marketing company Reach has handled Osceola Reads’ branding, website, its content and marketing and forming community partnerships through many sponsorships.

“Making sure the initiative was adopted by the entire community was something very important from the beginning,” Reach Chief Strategist Kelly Trace said. “We have the funding partners and all the right people at the table, but literacy should be important to everyone.”

Among the highlights has been rewarding young students using the Footsteps2Brilliance app who read the most minutes with Amazon Fire tablets, and creating “literacy lounges” in libraries and other public places.

Osceola Reads has registered over 10,000 app users, and usage doubled from 2018 to 2019. Eight sponsored stations located in public areas throughout the county saw 554 hours of usage in 2019, with three more stations coming.

The Osceola Reads brand is now recognized around the county, on a \$90,000 annually marketing budget coming from government partners



and the Education Foundation, and about \$50,000 in School District contributions over four years.

Trace has suggested years 6-10 would, among many ideas, utilize libraries' available tech in reading challenges, place "book nooks" in places like laundromats and the DMV, start a program similar to the Education Foundation's Bookmark Buddies for VPK-aged pre-K children.

School Board members, while supporting the big picture of fostering a love of reading before children start kindergarten, have asked to see the mechanics of the strategies going forward to creating greater community buy-in.

Thank you to the Osceola Reads team and all its community partners for helping to make a positive difference in the lives of Osceola County's youngest readers over the last five years, and for giving the county's preschool through 2nd grade children a head start toward school success.

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