



July 23, 2015

Dear Google Impact Challenge Advisors:

This letter is to express the strongest possible support for the grant application being submitted by the California Association of African American School Administrators (CAAASA), in conjunction with its partner organizations and the Footsteps2Brilliance Early Learning Literacy Platform. We have successfully partnered with CAAASA, its task force members, and Footsteps2Brilliance in the past and this grant will allow the work to have an even greater impact and better provide for underserved students.

The problem of preparing all children for success in reading has been ongoing since I began teaching in the 1960s. A child's academic success is directly correlated to their attendance and engagement at school, especially for Latino, African-American, and underserved communities.

While there has been a great deal of outstanding research done on the topic of literacy attainment, our solutions to date have not solved it. From my perspective, as the leader of a countywide educational agency, the quintessential question that has not been answered is what sort of interventions will directly change the lack of exposure to oral language/vocabulary Hart and Risley observed in the deficient communication between parents with low incomes and their preschool age children. More current research by Professor Emeritus Dominic Massaron at UC Santa Cruz has found that reading picture books to children is far more effective in providing them with the necessary vocabulary than talking, because we tend to use primarily the 5,000 most common words when we speak, while books introduce children to a far greater variety of interesting words and phrases.

At the Napa County Office of Education, we have been investigating the use of digital early literacy in our preschool classrooms and in children's homes as a means of increasing their language and literacy exposure. We have five years of experience with *Footsteps2Brilliance, (F2B)*, a proprietary program that exposes young children to 1,000 words that are essential for Kindergarten success. It consists of more than 1,000 beautifully illustrated and animated e-books and activities written by famous authors, accompanied by over 200 related educational games that are accessible via download on any mobile device or computer, with or without internet access. The materials are in both English and Spanish. *We have made F2B available via a variety of mobile platforms in our classrooms and in children's homes. The results to date have been very encouraging.*

Our successful use of this program further engages students, parents, and the community. As a result, attendance is improving and I see that the "Kinder-Right: Getting the Right Start in School" coalition program that CAAASA is proposing would bring greatly increase outreach to students and parents.

We began in 2011 with a small, very successful pilot program in one preschool summer boot camp. Based on these early results, we expanded and studied the program, which has continued to show outstanding growth for all preschool children, with the most rapid growth in children who are English learners. The second year we conducted a pre- and post-test and found statistically significant results on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test of receptive language. Based on these findings, we implemented the program in all 23 preschool classes run by our office, and several transitional kindergartens run by local school districts. Beginning in February 2014, we offered F2B at no cost to every family with a preschool child in Napa County to use at home, and we have conducted more than 20 workshops for parents, in English and Spanish, to help them download the program on their personal devices, as well as showed them how to use it. Two local nonprofit corporations have helped us to provide families who don't own a smart device with affordable options for purchasing portable devices for use with their children. The back-end database of the F2B system documented that from February to May 2014, 320 preschool children were exposed to almost 6,000,000 words, with half of this amount occurring in their homes. Many parents have embraced the program as a way of helping their children get ready for school.

In September, 2014, we began a 5-year study, preschool to third grade, on a cohort of children to see if reading scores of students who have participated in *F2B* are significantly different from scores of students who have not. Along the way we are comparing results of standardized instruments administered by our schools, but the most important findings will be related to whether or not children are proficient in reading when they leave third grade. Funding this grant application would allow us to further partner with CAAASA and show longitudinal data over the next 3 years as we would support this evaluation study into our largest school district, Napa Valley USD.

The work we are doing could potentially have implications for every child in the United States, particularly those who are English learners and/or at-risk students. Again, thank you for your consideration of the CAAASA grant application. Rest assured, they will have my full support and that of our county office of education, districts, and community.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or information you might need. You can reach me at bnemko@napacoe.org or at 707-253-6823 (work) or 707-480-2797 (cell).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barbara Nemko". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Barbara Nemko, Ph.D.
Napa County Superintendent of Schools