

Columbus schools hope kiosks lure children, adults into more reading



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Aaliyah Fuller, 8, and Justin Duling, 9, of South Mifflin Elementary School, read to Superintendent of Columbus City Schools Dan Good after unveiling automated short story kiosks at the Downtown Central Education Center in Columbus on Thursday, December 21, 2017. Similar to ATMs, the machines dispense short stories to promoting reading and literacy skills for school-age readers. [Barbara J. Perenic/Dispatch]



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Following the prompt to "Press. Read. Enjoy!" was easy enough for 8-year-old Aaliyah Fuller.

With the push of a button, Columbus City Schools' new, automated reading kiosk blinked, buzzed and then printed a short story on a 3-foot slip for the eager third-grader at South Mifflin STEM Academy on the Northeast Side.

Aaliyah announced the title, "Leah Little Dreamer," then dove right in.

"I enjoyed my story," she said. "I really like these stories."

The Columbus district is hoping that Aaliyah's eagerness to seek out fresh reading material becomes a common experience.

The district unveiled, during a news conference on Thursday at its Downtown administrative offices, five automated kiosks that dispense randomly generated short stories on paper slips. A kiosk user can choose between children's or general stories — all meant to be read in five minutes or less.

The goal is to promote reading and literacy skills among readers both young and old, Superintendent Dan Good said.

The first kiosk will appear in the lobby of the Downtown Central Enrollment Center, 430 Cleveland Ave., in spring, when renovation work is completed.

"We are really taking reading advocacy here in Columbus to a whole new level," said Good, who will retire at the end of the year. "From my very first months as superintendent of Ohio's largest school district, we have been focused on grade-level reading and literacy skills."

There will be at least one kiosk at The Columbus Dispatch Home & Garden Show at the Ohio Expo Center, which will run from Feb. 17 to Feb. 25.

Reaching proficiency in reading by the end of third grade is a major factor in a student's ability to excel with more complex subject matter in the future, Good said.

Nine of 10 third-graders in Columbus schools in the past few years have met or exceeded the state's third-grade reading guarantee that's required to advance to fourth grade, Good said. Last year, about 4,100 Columbus third-graders advanced.

"It was not an easy path," Good said of the district making the commitment to improve reading skills.

In fall 2013, 42 percent of third-graders started the year testing at a level considered proficient by state reading standards, according to Columbus City Schools. By the next summer, the rate had increased to 88 percent. The following year, rates climbed again to 91 percent and held for another year. The district estimates that last year's rate of children reading at standard would have been even higher, 92.3 percent, if the scoring threshold had remained in place.

South Mifflin STEM Academy Principal Pamela Eberhardt-Horton said the machines only increase the opportunity for readers to introduce themselves to new material.

"They need to be everywhere possible," she said of the kiosks. "Anywhere kids could possibly go or adults could possibly go."

The kiosks have popped up in five other locations in the United States, including Boston and San Francisco. Columbus' machines are the first in the Midwest and the first provided by a school district, Good said. The kiosks' libraries draw from a catalog of short stories provided by French developing company Short Édition.

The machines feature multicolored children's drawings and two buttons: one that randomly generates stories for young readers, and the other that spits out stories geared to all ages.

Pizzuti Companies agreed to buy the five kiosks for the district as part of a tax-abatement agreement approved by the Columbus Board of Education in September. The five were estimated to cost about \$160,000 at that time.

Locations for the other four machines are still up in the air, but Good said the district wants to place them where they'll get good exposure to children and adults hoping to sneak in a quick read.

