

Olympian Kristi Yamaguchi encourages students at Concord's El Monte Elementary to 'always dream'

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CONCORD -- Riding a smooth, 17-year glide at the helm of the Always Dream Foundation, Olympic gold medal skater Kristi Yamaguchi is helping underserved children in Contra Costa and Alameda counties to dream -- not just big, but bigger.

Announcing an expansion of the nonprofit's "Always Reading" initiative, from 2012's five schools to 12 Bay Area schools, Yamaguchi asked 4- and 5-year-olds at El Monte Elementary School if they'd like to hear a book read to them. Receiving universal nods from the group of 35 young students, she said, "Well, you're in luck! I've written two of them."

Her New York Times bestselling "Dream Big, Little Pig" and "It's a Big World, Little Pig" tell the story of Poppy, an improbable ice-skating champion who's also a fearless dreamer supported by her loving family and friends.

"When I start a book," Yamaguchi said, in comments after the presentation, "I think of the message I want to send. Winning the Olympic medal was a moment in time that allowed me to create the foundation. I'll never forget it, but making a difference in kids' lives is big: it's become my 'next chapter.' "

The Always Dream Foundation was created to advance the cause of childhood literacy through innovative reading programs and partnerships. "Always Reading" puts digital e-readers into the hands of underserved kindergartners and first-grade students, but also pairs the technology with print books and family participation.

The expansion will provide a total of 228 Nooks to eight schools in Concord, Oakland, Santa Clara, Redwood City, Fremont and San Jose, and 10 iPads to supplement Blacow Elementary's iPad equipment already in their Fremont classrooms.

Joining Yamaguchi at the Nov. 5 launch, Mt. Diablo Unified School District Superintendent Dr. Nellie Meyer said, "It's wonderful we're getting technology in the hands of our youngest students. Especially for those who come from families that can't afford computers and e-readers. There is a gap in access to devices and this will help to close it."

The digital readers won't be the only gift students and their teachers will receive. Through a partnership with "Raising a Reader," a national organization working to build solid, home-based reading infrastructures, local families will join a 100-book-a-year routine.

The program rotates print books through students' homes, while a subsection of the books are loaded onto classroom e-readers. RAR's parent and teacher training enhances the shared experience and helps to break the pattern of illiteracy due to limited access to resources.

The schools will also benefit from Footsteps2Brilliance, a digital learning platform created by educational experts that will be loaded onto the devices. The application will introduce 1,000 essential vocabulary words and related educational games.

"This will make words and images come alive," Sun Terrace teacher Holly Scudero told the students. "We've just scratched the surface on all the ways to use technology to become better readers."

El Monte Principal Christina Boman interrupted her maternity leave to attend the important day.

"We're the lucky recipients of a wonderful opportunity to get free technology," she said, thanking teachers and staff at El Monte and Sun Terrace Elementary for their part in applying for and winning the ADF grant. "It's a one-year grant with an option to renew -- and you bet we'll renew," she promised.

In a news release, Boman said the program would initiate in their transitional kindergarten, kindergarten and K-2 autism specific special day class programs.

"I am always looking for ways to instill excitement and motivate students to read and, in this era of technology, incorporating the use of tablets in the classroom allows us to do both. The program also has a wonderful family-engagement aspect, which is just another way to ensure that our students will be immersed in literacy," said Boman.

Yamaguchi answered questions about her medals (many), her children (two girls, ages 7 and 10), and her next book (out in a year). One question stood out; demonstrating that the foundation's intended impact -- eager readers, dreaming big -- had already begun.

After listening to Yamaguchi's reading of "It's a Big World, Little Pig," a young student asked, "Are you going to read another book, please?"

Childhood literacy

For more information about the foundation and programs, visit always

dream.org, raisingareader.org and footsteps
2brilliance.com.