**MindPlay Reading Helps Homeless Students Advance Their Literacy Skills**

**Interview with:**Molly Petrus, Program Manager, Project ACT Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Cleveland, OH

**District Profile:**38,949 students; Grades Preschool to 12; 100% Free/Reduced **Lunch**

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In 2017, The Director of Project ACT, Dr. Marcia Zashin, heard about MindPlay Virtual Reading Coach (MindPlay) from a professional colleague and purchased 16 licenses.

Today Project Act works with 50 MindPlay licenses to ensure that homeless children are given the same opportunities to advance their education as all the other students in Cleveland. MindPlay teaches them reading skills they can use in school and throughout their lives.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District’s Project Act provides direct instructional and support services to children and youth residing in temporary emergency shelters, traditional housing and/or doubled-up students staying with other families due to loss of housing. A holistic and comprehensive approach is used to deliver the instructional and support services necessary to ensure a child’s success and ongoing participation in the educational system.

Project ACT Life Skills Coaches provide one-on-one emotional and instructional support to homeless students within the school building where they work.

**Use of MindPlay**

The Life Skills Coaches assess each student in the area of literacy, and along with classroom teachers, determine the best way to support students academically and which students will benefit from MindPlay. Students, depending on their need and time, work with the Life Skills coach two-to-three times a week for 45 minutes and can use MindPlay during these sessions. Homeless students placed on MindPlay are typically a year or more behind their peers academically.

Those who have the most success are the students who come to school each day and use MindPlay at least three times a week for 30 minutes. Occasionally a student will login in at the library or from a computer that is accessible to them. Unfortunately, the majority of homeless students do not have access to computers or other internet access devices.

**Homeless Students Succeed on MindPlay Fifty Project ACT**

Homeless students from first through third grades who were at risk and below grade level in reading were placed on MindPlay. Homeless students can be enrolled in the Project ACT program at any time of the year.

Students who stay at a school building where there is a Life Skills Coach all year have the opportunity to work with MindPlay until they reach grade level. After 20 usage hours on MindPlay, some students can gain a reading level. The students who have had higher success rates with MindPlay are those who began the school year with the program and continued with it throughout the year. These students were assessed with the MindPlay Universal Screener, state tests, easyCBM (a set of measures for assessing early literacy skills from kindergarten to sixth grade), and classroom work.

Students who work with the program consistently see success in different areas after just a two-week period. Students learn phonemic awareness and phonetic rules that apply to their everyday classroom work. Mindplay teaches students to slow down while reading, try to break down words by sounding them out, and use the tools they were taught.

**Student Encourages Others to Work on** **MindPlay**

A new homeless student was enrolled in Project ACT in the middle of her third grade year and began immediately working with me. The student was reading at a K-1 grade level according to the MindPlay Universal screener. She hated reading and felt she couldn’t do the work. I collaborated with the teacher who allowed her to work on MindPlay not only with me, but also in her classroom during free time. She made great strides that year in a short time, but unfortunately, not enough to be promoted to the fourth grade.

She worked on MindPlay the following year and was caught up by the end of that school year. She now loves reading and writing. She tells other students: “I worked with MindPlay and it works. You should try to go on it as much as you can to become a better reader.”

**Free Time, Snacks and Prizes Motivate Students**

When my students finish their lessons, I typically give them free time on the computer and small snacks. The Universal Screener assesses progress and determines which medal was earned. Students earn prizes such as small toys and candy from a prize box. A student who earns a bronze medal gets one prize; a silver medal earns two prizes; and a gold medal earns three prizes. This seems to motivate students to work hard on their Mindplay lessons and/or to complete the Mindplay Universal Screener.

**Praise for MindPlay**

I like that MindPlay is consistent and easy to use. I also like the Universal Screener because it pinpoints weak areas of reading that need to be strengthened, student successes, and grade level goals. The MindPlay Manager enables teachers to create reports for an overall class and/or break them down by individual students, and the Universal Screener assesses students every two weeks. This program is successful with our students. Homeless students have many inconsistent factors in their lives, such as a lack of food, shelter, and clothing. A school needs to be a safe and consistent environment to help these students feel that they can succeed.