

Technology Drives Student Success at Alternative Education Center

by Bridget McCrea

Anytime a school can boost its students' performance with the use of technology tools that require no additional manpower or instruction, it's a victory. And when an alternative education academy achieves those results--and earns an award for its efforts--that victory is especially sweet.

That's exactly what happened recently at the John T. Simpson Alternative Center for Education in Easley, SC.

Comprising four Pickens County School District alternative education academies, the school's student body is made up of students who have not been successful in the typical school environment. It focuses on individualized instruction, discipline, and technology--an approach that has resulted in improved test scores and national recognition for dropout prevention.

The Simpson Alternative Center for Education enrolls 144 students in grades 6 through 12. Fifty-eight percent of students are economically disadvantaged, and 61 percent come from single parent homes. In addition, 24 percent of students are learning disabled, which is double the county average of 12 percent.

With the goal of improving those students' state, standardized test scores, Tim Mullis, director, got his school on board for a Classworks software district-wide program. Developed by Curriculum Advantage, Classworks includes more than 11,000 instructional activities, along with assessment and reporting capabilities, to engage students and increase performance in math, reading, and language arts.

"Classworks aligned well with our state standards, so it was pretty much a natural fit for our teachers," said Mullis, who said he especially likes the way the software highlights every students' strengths and weaknesses. "In the past, all we had to go on was a baseline score, but no detailed information. With this data at their fingertips in Classworks, teachers can see what they need to do to improve each child's skills."

To address students' diverse needs effectively, Simpson began using Classworks comprehensive K-12 instructional software in January 2008. The school first implemented Classworks in the "Putting Relevance In Discipline & Education" (PRIDE) Academy and the "Teaching Education Academic Mastery" (TEAM) Academy.

Students work in Classworks for a full class period two to three times a week. PRIDE is designed for middle school students who have not been successful academically or behaviorally. TEAM is a self-contained program for middle and high school students who are emotionally disabled.

In fall 2008, Simpson expanded Classworks to the "Students Taking Active Roles" (STAR) Academy. STAR is an accelerated program for students at least 15 years of age but performing below the ninth grade level. It gives students an opportunity to catch up and, upon completion, advance to the 10th grade.

Available as a Web-based or networked solution, Classworks' activities are correlated to national and state learning standards and state tests and include prescriptive and summative assessment, remediation and

reporting tools. Classworks Language Learner Series, another part of the program, addresses English as Second Language learning with content that focuses on auditory, visual and tactile/kinesthetic components.

Cathy Sump, Curriculum Advantage's director of research and curriculum, said Classworks is a particularly good fit for alternative schools like Simpson, namely because the system takes a proactive approach to decreasing dropout rates. "A lot of programs look at credit recovery, and trying to get students to take specific courses after they've failed," said Sump. "Classworks, on the other hand, uses a dropout prevention model, and helps schools recognize early if students are at risk for failure."

In addition to using the tools to provide individualized instruction, teachers at Simpson use Classworks to provide group and whole class instruction aligned to the South Carolina Curriculum Standards. To help students prepare for state tests, the school also imports Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) scores into the system to create individual learning paths for students. All Simpson students take the computerized MAP assessment three times a year.

Since implementing Classworks in early 2008, the school's students have achieved significant gains on the MAP. From fall 2007 to fall 2008, PRIDE Academy students achieved a 69 percent increase in reading scores and a 62 percent increase in math scores. TEAM Academy students earned a 62 percent increase in reading scores and a 38 percent increase in math scores.

In 2008, the STAR Academy earned recognition for its success as well. In the summer, just before implementing Classworks, the STAR Academy was selected for the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network's 2008 Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention.

Implementing the system came with challenges, according to Mullis, who said the biggest obstacle stemmed from the "information overload" that hit teachers who suddenly found themselves swamped with new details about their students and their abilities.

"It's great information to have, but it can definitely be overwhelming for teachers," Mullis said. "To help them work through that challenge we try to help them understand that they only need to use the relevant information, and ignore the rest."

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