

FACTIVA**DOWDONES**

Metro

Assessing students' skills -- Software gauges reading, math levels

Sherri Drake Silence drake@commercialappeal.com

548 words

5 December 2010

[The Commercial Appeal](#)

MMPH

Final

B4

English

Copyright 2010 Scripps Howard Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Lucy Elementary School fourth-grader Kolby Jones carefully considered the questions asked of him by the animated, earthworm-like professor on his laptop screen.

The 9-year-old was listening and watching an animated lesson on weather taught by the "professor" and answering multiple-choice questions about the subject on a recent day at the Millington school.

"It's fun," Kolby said after the lesson. "I learned ... a rain gauge can tell you how much rain fell and an anemometer can tell you how fast the wind is blowing."

While Kolby enjoyed learning, his answers were being analyzed by **iStation**, a software reading assessment program that places him in one of three proficiency "tiers" and suggests a detailed instruction plan for him.

And it does the same for his classmates.

Since 2007, Shelby County Schools has incrementally introduced a reading intervention program, such as **iStation**, for all students in grades K-8. The district added grades 6-8 this year.

Also this year, the district added a similar math intervention program for students in grades 3-8.

District officials say they aim to increase student proficiency based on the state's academic standards for reading and math. So far, they've seen good results.

In 2007, 329 Shelby schools' first-graders were identified as "at risk," which means they were at a low or basic proficiency level.

Officials were able to track 239 of those students. By fourth grade, 76 percent of them were "on track," meaning they were at grade level or advanced.

District-wide, referrals to special education have reduced by 12 percent.

DeAnna McClendon, reading specialist for Shelby schools, said the new "intervention" approach allows teachers to know each student's strengths and weaknesses. They're able to meet their needs through one-on-one time or group learning.

Gone are the days of blanket lessons, she said. The students now experience lessons tailored to individuals based on their skill level.

"It's a different way of teaching," McClendon said.

Every week and sometimes ever day, students are on the assessment programs, which identify specifics, such as a student struggling with the "th" sound. The more proficient they get, the harder the lessons on the program.

Advanced students may go to an enrichment class.

Robbin Pennington, a third-grade teacher at Lucy Elementary, said the assessment program is a great teaching tool. Student reading levels in her class vary from pre-K to seventh grade.

Using the assessment results, she makes sure some students are reading one-on-one with her every day. She puts students into reading groups, with a mix of strong, basic and weak readers.

"We're not wasting time trying to figure out what to do with these kids," Pennington said. "We were teaching to the middle too much, and that leaves out two groups of children."

- Sherri Drake Silence: 529-2510

Photos | Photos by Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal; ; ; Lucy Elementary student Briana Taylor concentrates while working with some of the iStation software in Claudia Echols' fourth-grade enrichment reading class Tuesday afternoon.; Desmond Jones picks a laptop out of the cabinet to begin work. The software program assesses students in reading and math.

Document MMPH000020101207e6c500037

© 2012 Factiva, Inc. All rights reserved. 