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Lifestyles

'Chalk it up?' - Not anymore: Chester Park COLT uses digital technology

Story posted Nov 22, 2006 - 00:22:58 EST

to engage, motivate and teach students

By MARISSA C. WHITE / Staff Writer

Dusty green chalkboards, worn-out black erasers that streak the board white, broken sticks of chalk used down to nothing...

These familiar items, the trademarks of education for decades, are now nothing more than memories. Today, students are more likely to use markerboards, dry erasers and multicolored markers as tools for learning.

What Chester Park Center of Literacy through Technology offers, however, is a far cry even from that.

COLT is one of the few schools in the nation that boasts the Promethean Interactive Classroom, a system of digital technology used to "engage, motivate and teach" students.

The system consists of the Promethean Interactive Board, which allows the students and teacher to interact electronically via the ActivBoard, a laptop-type tool; ActiVotes, devices students use to answer multiple choice questions; and Phonic Ear, a microphone and surround sound speaker system.

Leading the way

COLT is now in its second year. It came to be through a need to create smaller schools to better serve students and parents.

Chester Park was originally designed to accommodate 2,000 students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade but was later broken down into three separate schools - COLT, which focuses on technology; the School



First-grade teacher Linda Carter uses an ActivBoard to bring up images on her Promethean Interactive Board.



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of the Arts, which concentrates on drama, music and other art-related subjects; and the School of Inquiry, which meets on a year-round schedule.

COLT Principal Christina Melton promptly set about the business of moving her school forward with the newest technology available.

"We set a goal to have our classrooms interactive in five years," Melton said. "Last year, half of our third- through fifth-grade classes and a special education class were interactive."

Melton's goal of five years was realized sooner than anticipated - in only one calendar year, every classroom in every grade, including special education, was interactive, a feat Melton attributes partly to the Chester County School Board.

"Instead of asking for extra staff, we asked for money," Melton said. "We got \$80,000 in start-up funds last year. It is so exciting to have a school board that works with and supports student achievement."

After the initial \$80,000, grant requests were fulfilled from various organizations, providing even more money to help COLT go digital.

COLT is the only school in the county using the advanced digital teaching technology. It is referred to as the flagship of technology, a title Melton is proud of.

"COLT is a model school for the Promethean system," she said. "We've got school representatives from Clover and Spartanburg coming to see what we're doing here in Chester. Chester is often shunned by the larger cities, but they're now learning from us. It's so exciting."

Melton said the interactive classrooms have led to an increase in student attention, better behavior, better teacher recruitment and retention. She believes it will ultimately result in a greater high school graduation percentage.

There is currently only one year of PACT test results for COLT, which leaves no basis of comparison to see if students are improving under the new digital technology. MAP test results, however, are promising, she said.

In the fall of 2005, for example, 63 third-graders scored below basic in math. By spring 2006, that number had dropped to 25, a 38 percent improvement. In the same grade, the number of students scoring advanced went from zero to 10. Each grade showed an improvement in each subject.

"The students are engaged and excited about learning," Melton said. "They truly enjoy and benefit from this technology. There's the misconception that students are sitting in front of a computer all day with no interaction and that's just not the case."

Interactive boards

In Linda Carter's class, first-graders do not spend their school days stuck in front of a computer monitor. They're energetic, enthusiastic and get excited about the interactive board used in their classroom.

Carter uses a wireless ActivBoard, a laptop-sized piece of wireless, portable equipment operated by a stylus pen, to bring the interactive board to life.

What she writes on the ActivBoard, even though she cannot see it herself as she writes, appears on the Promethean Interactive Board for all to see.

The device frees her up to move about the class instead of being forced to stay at the front by the board and write. This teacher mobility is one element that has caused student behavior to improve, because she can be among the students more and see more of what they are doing.

Carter is able to access the Internet and use graphics to enhance her lesson and hold the students' attention. The images on the board appear via a projector attached to the ceiling.

She pulls up the November calendar dotted with turkeys, pilgrims and Indians and has a student, Marquavious Chisholm, come to the board to work.

Using the stylus pen, he points to each picture in the pattern and calls out what it is. The excited students watching him call out things such as, "Good job!" as he works.

When he gets to the first blank square in the calendar, he has to figure out what comes next in the pattern. Is it a turkey, a pilgrim or an Indian?

It's an Indian, he soon decides, and uses his pen to touch a picture of an Indian in the lower left corner. He drags the picture up and places it in the empty square in the calendar.

Carter can use the pen to choose everything from the fatness of the digital pen she will use to the color of the text. She can pull up images of everything from shapes to money and even has an eraser tool in case mistakes are made.

"This technology gets the students engaged in learning," Carter said. "I just love it. I look forward to coming to work everyday."

ActiVotes

Down the hall in Charlotte Shannon's second-grade class, the mere mention of ActiVotes causes an uproar of excited yells.

"Yay!" the students shout as Shannon pulls out her briefcase of ActiVotes. The palm-sized, egg-shaped devices, used for multiple choice quizzes, are numbered to correspond with student numbers. Answers are tracked via these numbers.

The students squirm anxiously in their seats as they wait for Shannon to post a question on her Promethean Interactive Board. They impatiently fiddle with their ActiVotes, getting their trigger fingers ready.

"OK, class, here's your question," Shannon said as she points to the board. "Read over it and select your answer."

A hush falls over the classroom as the students ponder the question, "What state do we live in?" The choices are Chester, North Carolina and South Carolina.

The students point their ActiVotes toward the board and press the letter of their choice, either A, B or C. A strip at the top of the board lights up each ActiVote number as it is used, telling Shannon when every student has voted.

When she knows everyone is finished, Shannon can view the results of her quiz immediately in pie chart or bar graph form. The graphic shows the percentages of those who got the question right and those who missed it. This information allows Shannon to know what the students are struggling with and subsequently what she needs to go back over or spend more time on.

The technology also shows Shannon exactly which student got the

question right or wrong without that student having to be called out in class and needlessly embarrassed. This can help her know who she may need to spend one-on-one time with to offer extra tutoring.

"The students are so attentive," Shannon said. "This is so hands-on. Everything is right there at my fingertips. There's no more waiting to find out how students did on a quiz, I can find out right away."

Second-grader Eric Davis said the digital technology has helped him in his studies.

"It helped me learn math and writing," Eric said. "I'm glad I'm in this class. It is fun. I like to come to school."

Phonic Ear, other technology

Second-grade teacher Nikki Reid-Ellis wears an unusual piece of equipment around her neck while in the classroom.

She is one of few teachers in the school so far to have a Phonic Ear, a microphone on an adjustable band worn like a necklace. The microphone is connected to four speakers mounted in each corner of the room.

The Phonic Ear is designed to help captivate the students' attention and will soon be seen in every classroom at COLT.

"It gets their attention because it's louder," Reid-Ellis said. "It also saves my voice because I don't have to talk as loud. The students can better hear my articulation."

Both Melton and Reid-Ellis agree that the Phonic Ear will be useful for students with hearing impairments.

Reid-Ellis's students are benefiting from the device as well, however.

"If she talks low we can hear her better," one student calls out.

"If she's sick and can't talk well it helps her voice be louder," another says.

"It helps me to pay attention and to focus," another student chimes in.

Other ways COLT teachers help their students focus and achieve are the LeapFrog learning toys and the AlphaSmart NEO personal word processors, used in every classroom.

The LeapFrog educational toys are used as a fun way for students to learn. They especially teach reading skills and are even used to quiz students. Like the ActiVote system, scores can be seen immediately.

Students also benefit from typing on the NEO personal word processors, which run on Palm Pilot technology. They can type stories and do other assignments and instantly "beam" their work to their teacher. They can even print their masterpieces.

"A lot of kids don't have computers at home, so we want to expose them now," Melton said. "We want to captivate them and make them good at technology. We challenge our students to pursue their interests and dare them to dream. If you set goals for yourself, you can be successful in life."

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