

Wired for sound

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Tanaya Lucas, 9, sits in perhaps the worst seat in her fourth-grade classroom at Donaldson Way Elementary School. She is in the back of the class, in the last row, and in the corner. Two weeks ago, though, her teacher Anne Johnston's words became clearer.

Johnston began using the Front Row Active Learning System, consisting of four speakers around the classroom and a headset microphone, or one that's hung around the teacher's neck. With the system, Johnston's voice is projected from all corners of the room.

"(The system) helps me hear all the way back here," Tanaya said. "When (the teacher) reads she catches my attention better."

Johnston and her class join 11 others in the Napa Valley Unified School District taking part in a pilot study by Front Row. The systems are provided through a partnership between the Napa County Office of Education and Front Row. Teachers use the systems for 6 to 9 months, then report their findings to the company.

Pueblo Vista and Browns Valley elementary schools are participating in the study as well. Each school has four systems in various classrooms such as English Learner and special education classes.

The response so far

Although the systems have only been in the Napa classrooms for a few weeks, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Students and teachers have seen changes in how class is run and how students learn.

Most students admit that they pay more attention because of the systems.

"No matter where you are you can always hear (the teacher)," said Luke Silvertone, 11, a student at Browns Valley Elementary.

Keleigh Vigil, 7, a first-grader at Browns Valley, noticed that the systems have helped teachers even when disciplining.

"When we're across the room making noise, (the teacher) doesn't have to come over and tap us, she can just talk," she said.

A feature about the system is that students can also participate in the action. Each system come with a wireless microphone for student use.

"It's cool, they have a microphone!" Jess Varner, 10, a student from Browns Valley Elementary raved.

The microphone has also been helpful in English Learner classrooms and when working with shy students. Teachers noted that students are now eager to participate because they get to use the technology.

"Kids who wouldn't read, now read -- it's been huge with them," Amye Scott, a Pueblo Vista English Learner teacher said.

Teachers are also pleased with the system. They can now speak at a normal level and be heard by the whole classroom.

"It saves my voice -- I don't have to shout over them," Michelle Oyao, a special education teacher at Donaldson Way said.

The partnership

Jan Sabo, director of curriculum and instruction for the county office of education coordinated the partnership with Front Row to see how it would affect learning in the Napa Valley.

"We have a large amount of second language learners and feel passionate to do anything we can to improve instruction for those students," Sabo said.

The technology was also brought in for the teachers.

"When you've been teaching for 20, 30 years it affects your voice quality. (With the new system) you can talk in a normal voice and not put any stress (on your voice). It is a win-win for students and teachers," Sabo said.

In 2005, Front Row began developing technology to improve students' listening. Since then, it has been successful with many school districts across the nation purchasing systems. Some districts bought systems for every classroom.

In Santa Rosa, 60 systems were purchased.

Salvador Elementary in Napa was so impressed by the product the administration decided to purchase systems for their classrooms without having a trial.