

JACKSON CITIZEN PATRIOT



NOVEMBER 16, 2008

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PARKSIDE

'Bubble' students get help for MEAP

By Claire Cummings

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Taylor Jayne reads at a sixth- to seventh-grade level, even though she is an eighth-grader at Jackson's Middle School at Parkside.

"I feel like I should be higher than that," Taylor, 13, said.

Taylor is known as a "bubble" student, someone who just missed passing the state reading exam.

Each day, she works on reading lessons tailored to her level in a small elective

class of fewer than 15 students called Alpha Reading.

Taylor hopes the course boosted her skills enough to pass this year's Michigan Educational Assessment Program exam, which wrapped up in October.

School and district officials have similar expectations for other bubble students.

"We know we're not going to get every kid to improve on the MEAP," said Sherri Reed, one of five Alpha instructors. "But hopefully there will be

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Patricia Matherson, 13, an eighth-grader at the Middle School at Parkside, spends time with a book in the Alpha reading class at the school on Thursday morning.

Students get help to prepare for MEAP

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some gains."

There are about 900 students at Parkside, and about a third of them are enrolled in Alpha reading and math. The program will have served nearly 500 students by the end of the year.

About 65 percent of Parkside's eighth-graders and 55 percent of seventh-graders passed the reading MEAP last year. About 50 percent of eighth-graders and 48 percent of seventh-graders passed math.

The school was below the state average on those tests.

MEAP scores are important because they are tied to everything from the attractiveness of a district to families deciding where to send their children, to federal sanctions schools face for poor performance.

The district allocated about \$674,500 to Parkside for Alpha, using federal funds available to schools that need help bringing students up to grade level.

About \$332,000 in salary and benefits was budgeted for four and a half teaching positions, \$67,700 for Alpha licenses and materials, and roughly \$102,000 for an instructional specialist, according to the district's finance department.

Parkside brought back the Michigan-based Alpha II learning system this year. It has been used on and off for at least 20 years in Jackson.

Alpha, which started in 1967, uses research-based materials that have been in classrooms for 30 to 40 years. Students are given a "prescription" after taking a math or reading test and follow a set of lessons based on their skill levels.

They are placed where they will succeed immediately so they can feed off their achievement and make further gains, teachers said.

The students are continuously tested on progress and cannot move on unless they master material. They can

Students improve on tests

Here is how students improved on tests after being in the Alpha II system at the Middle School at Parkside, according to data from the company.

1991-92

Subject	Number of students	Average of grade levels gained
Reading	71	1.4
Math (7th grade)	79	1.1
Math (8th grade)	47	1.2

Fall 2008

Subject	Range of grade levels gained
Reading	0.6 to 3.4
Math	0.4 to 3.3

test out at the end of the trimester.

Students who are far below the bubble will enter Alpha courses next trimester.

Alpha contracts with about 20 schools, some community action agencies and juvenile detention centers, including Columbia schools and Jackson's Community Action Agency, said John Clark, owner of the company.

"Coming here and saying, 'You're not reading,' was a shock to them," said Shelley Bedore, a teacher who taught the system in adult education two decades ago.

A few students resent being in the class.

"It was just a fluke," said eighth-grader Cameron Foster, 14. "It's so easy, these tests. That's half the reason I get bad grades in here ... I just want to be in a regular class."

But in Cameron's case, the data shows he missed several MEAP questions, meaning he needs help concentrating and reading longer passages, Bedore said.

Seventh-grader Cristal Raigoso, 12, comes from a family whose first language is Spanish and reads at a third-grade level. She likely did well enough to test as a bubble student by chance,

they were simply picking lottery numbers.

But Taylor said she thinks they concentrated more this year, knowing they could be placed in an Alpha class.

Teachers would like to see the program extended to elementaries.

"It's easier to catch a first-grader up ... than it is to learn how to add and subtract in eighth grade," Reed said.

Instructors won't know until January if the system raised MEAP scores. They are hopeful, though, based on gains they see already.

The leaps from September to November range from students going from a third-grade level to a sixth-grade-level to some gaining just a half-year in grade level.

Teachers say data used in schools is transforming instruction. Instead of teaching a group what they thought they needed to know, teachers can now teach them exactly what they don't know.

"I think we will find that more students will meet the standards than ever before," Jackson Superintendent Dan Evans said. "It will become obvious that we need new research, new techniques to bring up the bottom ... And we'll never give up on that."

Bedore said.

Other students just missed a piece of the reading or math pie along the way, from prefixes to place holders.

"The goal is to fill in their gaps," Parkside Principal William Patterson said. "As the gaps fill in, their general math or English classes begin to make sense, too."

Students say some peers don't take the MEAP seriously, filling in bubbles as if