

Press Room

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Aboard the eBus

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ELECTRONIC EDUCATION OF ARIZONA VISITS SCHOOLS WITH MOBILE COMPUTER LAB

It was a dismal winter afternoon, with a rainstorm blowing in over the horizon, when **Linda Wang's** first-grade class made its way into the parking lot at Sacramento's Nicholas Elementary School. But inside the eBus they boarded there, a dozen computers were warmed up and ready to scroll.

Any parent who has watched a preschooler adapt to the mouse would not have been surprised how quickly the students slipped into their individual headphones and started working away at the Waterford Early Reading Program that lit up the screens.

As **Charlotte Cassidy**, an area sales director for Electronic Education, and **Ronda Jones**, a Waterford sales specialist, explained to an observer what was going on, the key phrase seemed to be "tracking progress student by student."

The computer program the students were working their way through was designed to encourage them to go as slowly or as quickly as they needed to master basic reading concepts and build what the experts called "foundation skills."

The Waterford Early Reading Program is a computer-based approach which Los Angeles Unified is spending \$44 million to install in 244 of its lowest-performing schools, placing three computers in each kindergarten and first-grade classroom.

In Sacramento that February afternoon, after she had spent 30 minutes consulting with her students as they manipulated the program, teacher **Wang** concluded, "it is good to supplement the (regular) program."

She made it clear that she wasn't ready to turn the job of teaching reading to her students entirely over to the computer.

But that is not exactly what Electronic Education proposes. The company suggests that students spend 15 to 30 minutes a day at the terminal, working their way through the concepts. And the system comes with a lot of backup — printed material for teachers and parents at home to work with the students.

Cassidy and **Jones** emphasized that the Waterford system has been adopted by the State Board of Education so that it can be used as a basic medium for delivering reading instruction to students in kindergarten through third grade.

And Electronic Education, which is a division of London-based Pearson PLC, has been using the eBus to introduce Waterford to teachers and administrators in California school districts with large numbers of low-performing schools. It's eBus is a high-tech school bus and mobile technology demonstration lab that is touring select elementary schools across the United States.

The Waterford programs were developed by the Utah-based non-profit Waterford Institute, an Electronic Education partner in this commercial effort. Waterford says its reading program is based on "eight years of research into how children acquire literacy skills."

A study of the success of the program in some LAUSD elementary school classes during the 2000-01 school year concluded that a group of kindergarten students who used it improved "significantly more" than a control group on one narrow measurement.

And overall the students exposed to the Waterford program seemed to do much better on the state's SAT-9 test than they had the year before, although researchers had trouble attributing this improvement solely to the system, because the students were exposed to other intensive reading instruction as well.

But the researchers gave the Waterford approach a significant share of the credit.

"Waterford usage data shows that although the software program was used less than recommended, the average student still used it over 9 minutes per day and completed approximately 50 percent of the program," the researchers noted. "Recognizing that the Waterford program is built to function as a one-on-one tutor with the student makes this especially significant."

Wendy S. Johnson, evaluation specialist for Electronic Education, says: "Students who have not had their 3,000 hours of pre-literacy exposure in the home come to kindergarten not ready for learning how to read. And there has been a lot of research done by a variety of other people that shows if you don't intervene at those early grades, those students are going to be too late to catch up in grades three and on."

Electronic Education officials don't like to generalize about the cost of the program. **Johnson** said that "it is really impossible to give any firm cost estimate. Because we customize specifically to each school's needs, there is no one specific implementation I can price....There are so many different scenarios and variables involved in each implementation for a school that make a cost estimate inaccurate."

However, one of the two sales representatives at Nicholas Elementary in Sacramento estimated the cost at "approximately \$300 a student spread over three years."