Press Room

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Program wins fans at Druid Hills

by Les Tracey
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Teachers at Druid Hills Elementary School know who to blame – or credit – when kindergarten students begin singing a song they've never heard before.

"Some of the songs are really catchy, but we don't hear them," Barbara Davis, a kindergarten teacher, said of the Waterford computerized curriculum. "So the kids will start singing them and I have to say, 'Where did you hear that?'"

The students most likely heard it during the time they spend on the computers with the Waterford program, where they learn basic reading, math and science skills in small segments each week.

"It's very much like having a second teacher in the room – one who never interrupts you," said Suzanne Steele, a kindergarten teacher.

All the schools in the Martinsville School System use the Waterford system, but Druid Hills recently was one of six schools in the nation recognized by the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based company.

Davis' class has been a pilot classroom for two of the company's new programs, and Druid Hills is trying out first-grade software for the second year for the company.

The award, the Best Practices National Recognition Award, was given to the school for how it used the program, Davis said.

"It really was an honor," she said. "We were so surprised."

She and Steele will go to a Waterford conference in November and may give a presentation on the school's use of the curriculum.

Bill Vickers, principal of Druid Hills Elementary, said the school's teachers have embraced the program and helped make it a success.

"Waterford may be giving our children a decided advantage," he said. "We think that children now learn to read earlier."

Each of the four kindergarten classrooms has four computers – two for the reading curriculum and two for the math and science curriculum.

Students go through lessons in 15-minute intervals throughout the day in an order determined by the computer program.

“The students get on the computers and we just go on with our lessons with the rest of the kids,” Davis said. “At the end of the program, the computer tells the student to get Johnny, or whoever’s next. And it just goes like that all day.”

Most kindergarten students are familiar with computers, needing only short lessons in using a mouse and a keyboard.

“I had my kids on it (the computer) from the first day,” Steele said. “Only one had a problem. I showed him how to do one little thing, and he was fine after that.”

The teachers get a daily report on how their students did on the program, but it requires little work from them except for maintaining the computers and fixing bugs. Part of the program includes a small test at the end of each lesson and if the student does not earn at least 80 percent, the computer repeats the lesson at some point in the future.

It does so until the student earns 80 percent on the test for that lesson. On the reading side, students go through the alphabet, learn blended sounds (such as “br” or “ch”) and phonics.

In math and science, the students learn to count and add, and go through lessons on a variety of science topics, such as invertebrate and weather.

The school system introduced the reading program in 1997 mainly for the benefit of students who were not prepared for kindergarten, Davis said.

“We got it for the aren’t-prepared-for-kindergarten students, but we found it also helped the average kid and the above-average kid,” she said. “We do our thing and we let the computer do its thing. It’s an independent supplement to what we do.”