
OSCEOLA NEWS-GAZETTE

Bellalago Academy Goes High Tech

Students enthused with 'modern' chalkboard

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Securing a grant to buy the latest technology is always exciting for teachers, but getting an interactive board that essentially replaces a chalkboard — like at Bellalago Academy — the students become enthused as well.

Wendy Norton, a science teacher for grades 5-8, was chosen for a nationwide grant to purchase the interactive board technology out of a pool of more than 100,000 applicants. The new equipment was brought in at the beginning of the school year. Norton said she was both flattered and surprised when she managed to secure a grant for the expensive equipment, which has made a world of difference in getting students excited about learning.

"They're more engaged, especially the fifth-graders. They love to be able to click and drag. It's really nice because they want to be up and out of their seats," Norton said. "If you're going to be a teacher today you've got to be able to entertain. They want instant gratification."

Fifth-graders were particularly excited about a project this week in which they could select various ingredients to create a comet. After they are finished selecting ingredients, Norton hits "mix" and the screen displays what such a comet would look like, complete with animation.

Seventh-graders spent the week playing a game similar to Clue where they formed groups and solved the mystery of who took missing science projects and where they were hidden. The students could hardly wait to get to the board and help cross out one of the rooms that had been eliminated. When it was time to go to the next room, almost every hand in the classroom shot straight up.

"I like it because you can do a lot more stuff with (the white board) and we get a lot more group projects," said seventh-grader Dylan Pravato. "We get to work on projects almost everyday. It's pretty fun."

Seventh-grade classmate Paige Webb agreed and said that the new board is much easier to use and makes the class more fun.

"It's more interesting, and we get to work in groups a lot," Paige said.

The "white board," as it's called, resembles an over-sized flat screen computer monitor that hangs on the wall at the front of the classroom. The system operates much like a computer, complete with Internet. It also has the ability to create charts and graphs, to display photographs, or show PowerPoint slide shows or movies.

The technology features a wireless "pen" that students can use when they are called up to the board to answer questions, and features a smaller mobile unit with a pen. Anything that is written on the mobile unit will display on the white board, which Norton said works well for accommodating older students.

The system also came with a variety of interactive software that students have found particularly engaging, such as the software that shows students how to create comets.

Amazingly, the system also has prompted students to look forward to test days. The system features 32 small handheld "turtles" that each student can use to answer multiple-choice questions that are posted on the white board.

Norton said the turtles allow her to quickly determine whether students understand a particular topic, and allow the students to having fun doing it.

"I mostly use to it gain their attention," Norton said. "It's really remarkable. Now they ask me: 'Can we take tests?'"

Grant guidelines stipulate that the equipment must remain in Norton's science lab, prompting students to look forward to taking her courses since she is the only teacher with the high tech equipment. Norton said she would love to see the technology added to all classrooms but said that the expense would make that very difficult.

"I was just very, very lucky," she said.