

News

Powerful Touch: Davie school is test site for special 'table'

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Journal Photo by David Rolfe

Chris Cornell, a second-grade student at W.R. Davie Elementary, draws on a SMART Table.

By Michael Hewlett
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MOCKSVILLE

The three children stood around a blue-framed table at Davie Elementary School, their hands dancing around an interactive computer screen.

The screen acted as their canvas as they painted a rainbow of colors with their hands.

"We made a mess," Reina Martinez, a second-grade student at Davie, told her teacher, Diane Ireland, on a recent morning.

That was OK, Ireland told her. They could clean it up. Then Martinez and the two other students, Chris Cornell and Abbey White, balled up their hands and moved them across the screen. Soon, their messy masterpiece was gone.

The students were working on a SMART Table, a kid-sized table with an interactive screen on which students can do different kinds of activities with a touch of the hand.

SMART Technologies chose Davie Elementary and 11 other schools across the country to test the table.

Ireland said she has been using the SMART Table in her class since January. She said she likes the fact that it forces students to collaborate. For instance, there is a game in which students guess the shape of a certain object. Students have to agree on each answer before going on to the next question.

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And if they want to end a certain program, they all have to agree by touching buttons on the edge of the screens.

"It helps engage the students," Ireland said.

Many students already live in a world where technology is a given, so they expect to see technology in the classroom.

In Davie County, students already have access to plenty of technology. Several years ago, philanthropist Allen Mebane, who died last year, challenged Davie County Schools to raise \$1.5 million for technology. He said that his foundation would provide \$750,000 over three years.

The money was raised, and some of it went toward the construction of preschool buildings on each of the county's six elementary schools. The rest went toward such instructional technology as SMART Boards, which are touch-screen chalkboards, said Butch Rooney, the director of technology for Davie County Schools.

Tanya Brusse, the senior product manager for SMART Technologies, said that the company, which is based in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, put out a call for schools to be part of the testing program. The company wanted to have a cross-section of schools to be testers, she said.

The schools ultimately chosen ranged from ones that were technologically-savvy to those that had little to no technology at all, Brusse said. The company also wanted the tables to be used by students in different grade levels.

One table was placed at a school where some of the students were autistic, Brusse said.

Davie Elementary is the smallest of the schools in Davie County, with 420 students. It is a Title I school, which means it gets a certain amount of federal money because it has a high percentage of poor students. More than 40 percent of the students are on free and reduced-price lunch programs.

Robert Landry, the superintendent for Davie County Schools, said that this technology is critical to helping students learn. But getting more SMART Tables for the school system might be expensive.

The tables are \$7,000 to \$8,000 each, officials with SMART Technologies said.

"The economy we're in is pretty rough," Landry said.

The school system still has to pay to maintain laptops for the teachers and the SMART Boards already in the schools.

"We certainly like for it to fit in," he said.

■ Michael Hewlett can be reached at 727-7326 or at mhewlett@wsjournal.com.

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