

# Waterford Early Learning helps prepare Mobile County students for kindergarten

*Alabama's largest school system is using this interactive program in its pre-K classrooms to give young children a strong foundation for success*

Connecting families with high-quality early learning programs is among President Obama's top priorities. It's also important to Alabama's Mobile County Public Schools (MCPS), and the district is using research-based software from the nonprofit Waterford Institute to prepare young children for success in kindergarten and beyond.

In 2010, MCPS implemented Waterford Early Learning to help ensure that 4-year-olds were on track for kindergarten success. Since then, 73 preschools in Mobile County have used the software, and in that time, kindergarten readiness has improved dramatically, said Paula Reese, manager of school, home, and community programs for the district.



"Eighty-five to 90 percent of our pre-kindergarten students come in with very low pre-reading skills," said Reese, who oversees all of the county's public preschool programs. By the middle of the school year, she said, more than half of these children have progressed from the most basic level and are ready for more advanced instruction.

Between 1,300 and 1,400 qualifying pre-kindergarten students, including special-education students and students living in Title I attendance zones, use Waterford software in their classrooms. The county follows Alabama's Early Learning Guidelines for pre-kindergarten students, and teachers use Waterford as an intervention program to support those guidelines.

After completing a baseline assessment to gauge their abilities, students receive reading and math content that is

targeted to their specific needs and skill levels. "Waterford's baseline test puts the students exactly where they need to be, so they can learn exactly what they need to learn," Reese said.

Preschool students use the Waterford software at one of several learning centers they circulate among during the school day. Each student receives 30 to 45 minutes of instruction per day on the software, and they can use the program during quiet time as well, if they are not able to nap.

The early learning system is designed so that students don't slip through the cracks or progress without developing important skills.

"Waterford is giving each child that extra personalized dip for what they need," Reese said. "If they're not progressing with a skill, Waterford is going to re-teach it to them. Waterford provides that re-teaching mechanism that is so often needed for our students."

The software sends progress reports to teachers, so they know which students need extra time on math or reading tasks. These reports also let teachers know which students have excelled and are ready to move to another learning level. In essence, the reports show teachers exactly what they need to focus on for each child.

Student reaction has been nothing short of enthusiastic.

"The students love it," Reese said. "They lose sight that they're in a classroom. You hear them singing and commenting out loud. You see the excitement on their faces—Waterford allows them to be successful, and that success carries over into their school day."

Besides learning math and reading skills, the students also learn "how to use the computer for something other than playing games," Reese said. And by working independently, the children learn self-regulation and how to follow directions.

Use of Waterford Early Learning has been so successful at the preschool level that three MCPS elementary schools are piloting the program in grades K-2 this year as well.

"Waterford provides the intervention needed so students stay on track," Reese concluded. "It is developmentally appropriate, it's geared toward those skills students need to be successful in kindergarten, it lets students move at their own pace, and it gives teachers the information they need to work with each child."

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