

Prescott classroom tests county's first SMART Table

by Bailey Darrow

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PUTNAM COUNTY -- Students in Leslie Mullican's kindergarten class at Prescott Elementary School are getting a special learning opportunity. The very first SMART table to be used in Putnam County schools has been provided to the classroom through a research grant led by Julie Baker and Jeremy Wendt of Tennessee Tech's Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

The students will help Baker and Wendt analyze the effectiveness of adding the multi-touch, multi-sensory learning device.

"The whole idea behind it is that you take a normal table but you make it interactive -- multi-touch, multi-user up to eight students at a time," Wendt said.

The SMART table is new technology, so much of the software is still developing, Wendt said. But Mullican's students are doing activities like counting, sorting and putting processes in order all with their finger tips.

"Really anything you can think of doing with hands-on manipulative. It takes it and adapts it and converts it to electronic," Wendt said.

Geared toward pre-K through third grade students, Wendt and Baker plan to look at the effectiveness of implementing the SMART table into this first classroom to help school systems determine if the SMART table is worth the cost of implementation.

"What we are trying to accomplish with the research study is that we are trying to determine if students learn better using this in addition to their regular learning as compared to learning without having one at all," Wendt said. "What we would hope is that this, coupled with their teaching, will help them do things, like sorting or counting for example, better."

So far, Mullican's students are enjoying using the table in the classroom.

"It has really been amazing," Mullican said. "They just love it because it is so interactive. It has been an amazing tool to use to enhance their skills."

One student even went home and told her parents that she wanted a SMART Table for her birthday. While the SMART Table might not be the kind of learning device that every child needs at home, Mullican says that it is a great classroom tool.

As part of the SMART Table's software, teachers can write their own games to match what they are teaching in their classroom.

"I have the software to adapt to my children's needs and not rely on someone else," Mullican said.

As the school year progresses, Mullican will record the amount of time that the students spend using the SMART table and then the students' achievement tests will be compared to the achievement tests of other students.

"The most ideal way to do it would be to compare the same teacher's students from this year with students from last year," Wendt said. "The catch is that students are going to improve throughout the year anyway. We are really going to have to try to show that these students are improving more than the other students."

Wendt expects to know by the summer whether or not the use of the table was effective.

The \$6,500 SMART Table has been provided through the research grant but Wendt hopes to make it a permanent part of the Putnam County School System with the help of successful research and grant funds.

"The table officially came out of a grant that we have here at the university and we are trying to get another grant that would allow us two more that could be in the school system more permanently," Wendt said. "If that grant goes through, the tables would become Putnam County's."

The interactive nature of the SMART table is what gives it so much potential for success in helping students who are surrounded by so many multi-media experiences, Wendt said.

"It is becoming more difficult to keep the kids engaged," Wendt said. "We have to try to figure out what tools are going to work."

One activity that the students can do involves counting caterpillars. The screen will display eight caterpillars. The students must then count the caterpillars and place one finger tip on the screen for each one. When eight fingers are on the screen, the table will then light up and indicate to the students that they have gotten the correct answer.

"Aside from the novelty of being able to do it, it enables the students to have one more station of reinforcement of learning without the teacher helping through

every single step," Wendt said. "It takes the multi-touch and takes it to the next level."

So far, the students say they are enjoying getting to use the new table.

"It is one of those things where you sit down and use it and you just say, 'Wow. If I had this when I was in kindergarten it would've been amazing,'" Wendt said.

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