

Wednesday, October 10, 2007

Story last updated at 10/10/2007 - 12:18 am



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Teachers David Slagle, seated left, of Greenville, S.C., and Natalie Mathew, seated right, from Dallas, Texas, listen as Matt Frankenbery, director of education for PITSCO, demonstrates training in the company's new Synergistic Modules educational system Tuesday at the corporate headquarters in Pittsburg. The Pittsburg Community Middle School received approval Monday to purchase computers to implement one of PITSCO's modules to help teach pre-algebra.

Math pilot to start at PCMS

By Peter Euler | The Morning Sun

Parents, are your children struggling with math no matter how many times you go over their flashcards? Relax and tell them to use the computer more.

That's exactly what students at Pittsburg Community Middle School will be doing in the near future, as Pittsburg USD 250 recently approved the purchase of 29 computers that will be used in conjunction with a new pre-algebra pilot module offered through Pitsco's Synergistic Systems.

PCMS is one of two schools testing the new program over the next two school years, along with an alternative school in Leesburg, Va.

Matt Frankenbery, director of education, Pitsco, said the program was created to help better teach math skills to students.

"The biggest reason (is) the national need for an answer for teaching pre-algebra and algebra to students because there is such a high percentage of students who are not obtaining the skills they need in traditionally-taught Algebra," Frankenbery said.

Frankenbery said the program is quite different than the traditional program where teachers lecture from a book and then give homework assignments to students. He said students take a diagnostic test which tailors lessons to their strengths and weaknesses.

"First off, it's not in an everyday classroom," he said. "They (PCMS) are actually remodeling a room in the middle school to accommodate the furniture and what we call the 'learning environment' that encompasses this program.

"So it is a complete shift away from a traditional rows-and-columns classroom. It looks more like a business environment where it facilitates cooperative learning."

While the program has already been started at the school in Leesburg, PCMS is hoping to start it by the end of October. PCMS teachers will start training on the new module on Friday and then must wait for the arrival of computers and completion of room renovations.

PCMS is no stranger to Pitsco modules, as the school has already implemented three such programs in science and technology.

"We have a history of programming from Pitsco that in my opinion does a really good job of addressing the application side of learning and we believe this may be one of those that will do this for mathematics," USD 250 Superintendent Gary Price said.

"We really feel blessed to have somebody that is as much on the cutting edge of learning tools in the country and to be able to use those with our kids. I think it has given our kids a leg up."

And while many technology-based programs have been a tough sell to more traditional teachers, it was never an issue with PCMS principal Cory Gibson and the four seventh and eighth-grade math teachers that will be using the module.

"According to Cory, it was extremely well-received by the four teachers that will be using it," Frankenbery said. "When he went in and then gave them a general idea of how it was going to work, they all four volunteered. ...

"That's not typical. A lot of the traditional teachers are comfortable with standing in front of the room and lecturing. ... After they see the results of the student engagement, nearly everybody is a believer and they convert over."

Gibson said that technology-based education is the wave of the future and USD 250 students have been lucky to have ready access to it.

"We see more and more of it," he said. "It will never replace a teacher ... however I believe that one of the positives of computer-based (education) is it does automatically have an engagement piece.

"Students are automatically engaged with computers in today's world. Another part of this particular project is a lot of the hands-on learning and we're finding more and more research about hands-on mathematics learning just happens better for students."