Birmingham students earn video game playing time answering curriculum questions in Kid's College

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By **Marie Leech -- The Birmingham News**

Avondale Elementary School 5th-grader Miguel Losoya, 11, is awarded a diploma in snowboarding, one program of Kid's College, an online gaming program launched last year that helps reinforce classroom skills in math, science and literacy. (The Birmingham News/Linda Stelter)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Brian Thomas stares at his computer, answers seven multiple choice reading questions, and suddenly hits the slopes.

For 20 seconds, he is transported from his fifth-grade classroom at Birmingham's Avondale Elementary School to a mountainous terrain with a dozen feet of freshly packed snow. He snowboards his way down the hill, doing flips and spins to earn extra points, until he makes it to the bottom of the mountain.

And just like that, he's back in his classroom answering questions such as: "An artist wrote a story for children about not being afraid to try to draw. From what point of view is the artist writing?"

He ponders for a moment before answering correctly: "The point of view wants to encourage young artists."

This is Kid's College, a Web-based program that combines sports video games with math, reading/language arts and science instruction and is aligned with the state's curriculum in those subjects.

Children love the program, said Avondale Principal Ann Curry, because it motivates them to answer the questions correctly so they can play a video game for up to 20 seconds.

"It's all sports integrated so it's engaging for students," she said. "It's so self-motivating."

National program

Kid's College is a national program created by Learning Through Sports, but is tweaked for each state to align with the state's standards and curriculum. The Alabama Kid's College is for students in kindergarten through eighth grade -- mainly in lower-performing schools or in urban areas -- and is in 164 schools statewide.

Schools that want the program apply for a grant through the state Department of Education, and then the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools sets the program up and offers support in the form of academic

coaches, said Jim Chesnutt, assistant executive director of CLAS.

As a former educator, Chesnutt said he would have loved access to a program like this for his students when he was in the classroom.

"There was no doubt in my mind that kids were going to eat this up," he said. "It's the kind of thing where you bop yourself in the head and say 'Why didn't I think of that?'"

The program requires students to answer multiple choice questions in various subjects, consistent with what students see on the Alabama Reading and Math Test and the Stanford-10 Achievement Test.

If they answer enough correctly, they are redirected to a video game in the sport of their choice -- they can choose from volleyball, football, basketball, baseball, skateboarding, snowboarding, soccer and other sports -- for up to 30 seconds, where their score is stored, and they can earn trophies and other rewards. The teachers can set their own controls for how long students can play the games, ranging from 5 to 30 seconds.

As motivation, students can check to see their rankings against other students in the class.

When their game time is up, it directs them back to answer more questions in whatever subject they choose.

The program can be configured to provide educational hints when a student answers a question incorrectly on the first attempt. Teachers can collect data reports on each student to see what students know and what they are having trouble with.

"I pull a daily report to see how my students are doing and where they are," said Earlean Reed, a fifth-grade teacher at Avondale. "I give Kid's College two thumbs up. The kids think they're not learning because they're playing a game and having fun. But they are learning."

Teachers also can adjust the levels of questions for students, based on where the students are in their academic progress. For example, if a fourth-grader is still only able to do third-grade math, the Kid's College program

can be adjusted to ask third-grade questions until those skills are mastered.

This also makes the program ideal for special education students, said Chesnutt.

Because the program is Web-based, students can log in from any computer. That means that not only can they use the program at school, which is required, but also before and after school and at their homes if they have Internet access.

Good results

Several elementary and middle schools in Birmingham, Jefferson County, Shelby County, Hoover and Midfield use Kid's College, and Chesnutt said he hopes more schools apply for the grant.

The program originally began as a pilot project in Alabama in five schools during the 2006-07 school year.

The results since then have been astounding, according to a report done in March 2010 by an outside research consultant.

The report, "Research Findings on the Impact of Kid's College on Student Achievement in Alabama," showed that the majority of schools that did not meet state goals on standardized tests, called Adequate Yearly Progress, did make AYP after implementing the Kid's College program.

"In 2008-09 ... 12 out of 16 schools using Kid's College and who had not made AYP for either 2006-07 or 2007-08 made AYP," the report found.

Aliyah Carson, a fifth-grader at Avondale, was working on math -- her favorite subject -- and had a scratch sheet of paper in front of her. The problem she was trying to solve: 7,361 x 825. She scribbled on her paper for several seconds until she finally came up with the correct answer: 6,072,825.

Suddenly, she was transported to a soccer match.

"I love how you get rewarded for learning things," she said.

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