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Games that teach

By Angie Long

Few things are more fun and involving for today's youth than an exciting video game. What if you could combine academic skills practice with online sports video games?

That's the idea behind a new program, "Kid's College: Learning Through Sports."

Greenville Middle School is one of just five pilot schools across the state participating in the program, which claims to offer "motivated practice for the video game generation."

Dr. Jewell Henderson, a professor at Auburn University and consultant for "Learning Through Sports," was at the middle school Thursday to share in several workshop sessions with teachers. The instructors got to see the potential benefits of using the program to enhance reading, language arts and math skills as they tried out demo programs for themselves.

Henderson, a former middle school teacher herself, said the goal of the program is to reinforce skills and knowledge already taught in classrooms.

"This program can help you improve the areas where your students need help. I know you made AYP (Average Yearly Progress) but there are other areas where you need to improve," Henderson told the GMS teachers.

The program offers targeted instruction to identify skill gaps and helps students achieve success, even if it's several grades lower.

As soon as these skills are mastered, the student quickly climbs back up to grade level.

Students pick one of five sports to play - baseball, soccer, basketball, football or volleyball - and correct answers earn them points and the chance to, for example, make a touchdown, kick a goal or hit a homerun.

The program seemed to be a hit with the teachers attending the last session of the day.

“This is great. We used to have the Compass Program, but it got so old and outdated,” math teacher Kathy Pickens said.

“Now we'll have something fresh and new to use with the kids and that will be wonderful. Getting middle school kids interested is a challenge in itself. I think they will definitely like this.”

The “Learning Through Sports” program can also be accessed from home computers, Henderson said.

“Once everything is set up and the students have their individual passwords, they can use this program in the classroom, the library, at home - any place where there is an Internet connection. A student's points will accumulate no matter where he uses the program.”

Executive reports will be e-mailed regularly to teachers so they can see which students need re-teaching in specific skill areas.

“There will also be a building report for the (GMS principal) Mr. Hill so he can track how each class and grade level is performing. A report will go to (superintendent) Mr. Looney so he can see at a glance how each grade level is performing on key skill areas,” Henderson explained.

Since GMS is part of the pilot project, its teachers will have the opportunity to fine-tune the “Learning Through Sports” program.

“If you find something that doesn't work or a question that is inappropriate or needs to be re-phrased, please contact me via e-mail and I will let the company know. We want to get that feedback from you,” Henderson said.

As one of the pilot schools, GMS is receiving the program, which normally costs approximately \$10,000, free of charge.

“We have had a very good success rate in the schools where this was first used, including Hueytown and Woodstock, Georgia. The teachers here at GMS seem very receptive and motivated to use it, which is exciting,” Henderson said.

Students in the GMS after school program got to enjoy a pizza party along with their own demo of the “Learning Through Sports” program.

For more information, go to www.learningthroughsports.com