

## Technology helps engage special needs students

New technology being piloted this year at Sidney Lanier School is giving a voice to students who can't speak for themselves.

Six classrooms at the school, which serves students with physical and cognitive disabilities, are now equipped with iPads loaded with special programs such as Mimeo that allow students to respond to their teachers' questions and participate more fully in classroom activities.



"People sometimes see technology as a replacement for teachers," said principal Buddy Kamman. "That's not what this is. This is about enhancing quality teaching for students with special needs."

Some of the students in Joanne Wazykowski's classroom and throughout the school are non-verbal. During classroom activities, those students would often engage in what Kamman calls 'off-task behaviors'--extraneous movements or sounds, for example--because they weren't able to participate. She pointed out one student who has a tendency to move his head around and flail his arms when he's not fully engaged. But now when Wazykowski asks the class a question, the iPad will speak for him with just a few taps.

"He really appreciates being a part of the group and knowing that he can participate in the lesson just like everyone else does," said Wazykowski. "It's a great motivator."

Wazykowski says the technology gives students instant feedback, which is not always possible for a teacher who is working with a classroom full of students, whether or not they have special needs. It's also effective for students who have limited mobility and can't easily get up to their classroom's smartboard. The iPads come in special protective cases and can be mounted on desks, wheelchairs and other equipment based on a student's specific needs.

Kamman says he decided to implement the program after seeing it in action at a school in central Florida. He and some of his staff visited that school and continue to stay in touch. Currently Sidney Lanier School has about 40 students using the technology, but Kamman hopes to expand it schoolwide. He believes it has the potential to boost the achievement of most of his students.

"I'm a strong advocate for pushing these kids because I know they are capable of so much more than most people realize," he said.

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