# eSchool News

# SUCCESS STORY

# Waterford helps close early gaps in students' skills

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*Maryland's Prince George's County uses Waterford Early Learning software in all K-2 classrooms to help differentiate instruction—and level the playing field for disadvantaged students*

Sixty-eight of the 80 elementary schools in Prince George's County, Md., are Title I schools, and students come to school from a variety of circumstances. Many come from low-income households or families where English isn't spoken at home, and their exposure to rich English language and vocabulary has been minimal.

"Because we serve such a wide range of students, it can be challenging to meet all of their needs," said Deborah A. Mahone, director of state and federal programs for the district. "We find that our youngsters are often lagging behind when they get to school, and we see large gaps in performance across various groups."

Prince George's County is closing those gaps early on with help from Waterford Early Learning software.

"This program can very quickly bring young students up to grade level," Mahone said. "It's affordable—and it's making a difference."

## Personalized instruction

Waterford Early Learning is a research-based program that adapts to each child's skill level automatically, giving students a unique learning experience that is tailored to their own pace and abilities. As students progress through the engaging, multimedia lessons, they are getting reading, math, and science instruction that targets their specific learning needs.

The software sends progress reports to teachers, so they know which students need extra time on certain skills. These reports also let teachers know which students have excelled and are ready to move to another level. In essence, the reports show teachers exactly what they need to focus on for each child—helping them place students appropriately for small-group instruction or identify which children might need individual attention.

Prince George's County started using the software in some of its Title I schools, and the program proved so successful that it is now used in every first and second grade classroom in all 68 Title I schools. This year, the district began using the software's reading component in all kindergarten classrooms as well.

"We have found that the schools using it every day are the ones making the biggest gains," said Title I and Instructional Technology Specialist Terri Jefferson.

What's more, these gains continue with students as they advance to higher grade levels: Teachers have seen a noticeable difference in the reading skills of their fifth graders who had used the Waterford software in the early grades compared to those who did not, Jefferson said.

## Changing the culture

Test scores are one indicator of success, but Mahone pointed to another benefit that has arisen from the district's use of the Waterford software: The culture of its schools is changing as well.

For students who begin school already behind their peers, "providing a level playing field helps boost their confidence," she said. "We've seen a lot of excitement and engagement in learning."

"Since I started using Waterford with my students for at least 30 minutes a day, I have seen dramatic improvement in their vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension skills—especially among my English language learners," said Rosemarie Taguba, a first grade teacher at James McHenry Elementary School. "You can see the eagerness in their faces whenever they have a chance to work in Waterford."

In what might be the program's biggest achievement, Taguba observed: "I could see that they were more engaged (in their education)—and they began to love reading."

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