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Computer system charts students' improvement

Teachers, parents using Galileo to track progress, help improve test scores.

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Molly Danielson, 10, is proud of the certificate she earned recently at Goodnight School, marking the fourth-grader's increased reading scores from 54 percent to 84 percent during the first few weeks of the school year.

CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/BRYAN KELSEN -- Robert Vise, executive director of assessment and technology for Pueblo City Schools, sits at a computer terminal at Goodnight School and demonstrates how administrators and teachers develop benchmark tests that can be used to measure academic growth.

Her teacher, Nadine Montoya, said that Molly's improvement was typical of most of her class as students worked hard to bring up scores on benchmark tests.

Part of the problem, Montoya said, was that the students either didn't take seriously the first round of tests at the beginning of the current school year or weren't in the right frame of mind. But by the time the second set came, she said, "they all wanted to earn certificates."

While the youngsters are getting into the routine of regular benchmark tests, Montoya and fellow teachers are enjoying a new tool that is increasing their effectiveness. Montoya picks up a yellow legal pad with names and columns and says, "This is what I used last year." This year she has a stack of folders on her desk, each one containing printouts that show student performance in a number of subjects on the first tests and then the second round that was taken around the Thanksgiving holiday. A third round will be given in January, at the end of the semester, and a final one at the end of the school year.

The tests are generated by the Galileo computer system, a product of Assessment Technology Inc., and used throughout Pueblo City Schools to measure student performance.

Importantly, the tests are aligned to the Colorado Student Assessment Program measurements and can track the progress of students in gaining proficiency in the subjects the CSAPs test.

It was a major part of the district's strategic plan to give teachers more accurate ways to measure student performance, address problems and to get the students and their parents involved in the process.

A show of hands in Montoya's class of students whose parents have accessed their files over the Internet revealed that about 80 percent had. For Molly McCoy, 11, that meant extra nights at the kitchen table going over practice spelling tests with her parents.

Parents and students can go into the system any time they want to check on progress, get a list of assignments and soon will see text postings by teachers with specific requests for extra study. All they need is an Internet connection at home or they can go anywhere there is a computer available. They need their child's student ID number. Help is available at the schools.

When they enter the Web site, pages show CSAP performance, test scores, assignments and other information.

CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/BRYAN KELSEN -- Gabby McCoy, 11, talks about her experience with the **Galileo system** put into action this year in Pueblo City Schools. The program uses four benchmark tests to assess how students are progressing,

At another level of access, teachers can pull up data on all the students in their classes and use the Galileo system to generate quizzes pegged to the year's lesson plan.

Administrators also have access so principals can monitor the performance of classes and work with teachers who might need help with some students, even pulling groups of students together on the fly during the school year for special help.

Goodnight Principal Marne Milyard said that the most important thing is seeing a year of growth. "We tell the students at the beginning, when they take the first test, they're not expected to know everything. If they score 50 percent, it's OK if they make 70 percent on the next test, then 90 percent and 100 percent at the end of the year. What we want to see is growth."

At the district level, it's up to Robert Vise, executive director of assessment and technology, and a panel of teachers in various subject areas to assemble the benchmark tests. The Galileo system has

about 50,000 questions developed from the Colorado standards. Vise and the teachers pull up a blueprint test and then make appropriate adjustments, rejecting and replacing some questions for a total of about 36 in each subject area. More than that would skew results, he said, because the children would not apply themselves that long.

When the tests are taken, mostly on computer but some on paper, a bar graph is instantly generated showing how each student performed on each question. There also is a table with the names of every student in a class and columns for every question, with cells that turn green for right answers and red for wrong ones. Clicking on the column header shows the question itself in a separate window.

Vise said he was checking one school's page during a testing session and only a handful of children had answered questions. He was about to call the school and ask why when the screen refreshed and more names came up. "That's how fast we get results," he said. "They were still taking the test."

The program also can analyze results and flag students as high risk, needing extra help.

The Galileo program is part of an overall strategy to develop individual education plans for every student in the district so that teachers, administrators and parents can see how those youngsters are progressing according to their grade level and what they're expected to learn during the year.

Unlike the federally mandated Individual Education Plans for special education students, Vise said these student plans are a compendium of Galileo data, CSAP scores and other diagnostic tools like the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills tests used to see who needs special help with reading in the early grades.