

Contact: Ericka Almeida
Email: ericka.almeida@gmsrd.org

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Great Falls – Paving the Way to Math Proficiency

Great Falls Middle School is leading the way to student mathematic proficiency through the use of a new web based program called SkillsTutor.

Recent studies have shown that algebra and other higher mathematics are often a stumbling block for many students entering high school. The current research indicates that many 9th graders are without core math skills such as being able to add, subtract, multiply and divide integers (positive and negative numbers, including zero). This lack of core abilities puts them at risk of failure.

“SkillsTutor is a good tool for looking at each student as an individual and determining their individual strengths and weaknesses”, said Wendy Abrahamson the Great Falls Math Coach and administrator for the Skills Tutor math program.

Since the programs adoption in November of 2008 each Great Falls student attends a 45 minutes class every other day in which to use the program. In the beginning each student was started at a level lower than where they should be for middle school, "It was a sifting process", said Abrahamson. "That way if there are any gaps they will get sifted to the top."

After a student's level of proficiency is determined the program begins to administer a series of pre-tests to assess whether a student has the basic skills needed in a specific concentration area. Whatever area the student is proficient in- the program will look at it and not go further, instead it will concentrate on the students' weaknesses. "It's called diagnostic and prescriptive", said Abrahamson. "In the pretest it will have a little of everything, and whatever the student is weak on, the program will prescribe tutorials for the student to work on. This way they are not getting bored doing things they already know".

Once a tutorial has been completed and proficiency is attained in a concentration area the program administers a post test and a report is generated. "The results are real time and can be utilized in the classroom, so teachers will know a child's strengths and weaknesses. What this program is doing is really building the skills that allow them to shine in their daily math class," said Abrahamson.

"One of the major benefits of the program being in the classroom is that the graphics are so wonderful that the students are completely engaged. Since students are fully involved, the room is quiet enough to hear a pin drop; that complete student involvement allows a teacher the opportunity to have great one-on-one conversations with individual students," she added. 7th Grade student Courtney Eugin agreed the graphics were helpful, "I'm a visual person and they really help. I think it also helps in our regular math class, I can think back on how I figured it out with SkillsTutor," she said.

Another benefit of this program is that it is internet driven. Students have the opportunity to work on it from home. Abrahamson feels it's a great opportunity for parents to sit down and find out what their students are learning. She also suggests to parents that it become a way for kids to earn computer time. "I highly suggest that before the student goes on and plays on the internet and facebook that possibly they do a half hour of SkillsTutor." Abrahamson recently took an informal survey to determine how many students have accessed the program outside the classroom; she calculated it to be about 35%.

Great Falls Principal Donna Fitzpatrick has been pleased with the program. "It's a method of differentiation. Differentiation is a big issue in education. More and more people are realizing that you have a wide range of students in your classroom and this program allows us to easily differentiate because it's individualized to each student."

SkillsTutor is still in its early stages but its effects are already being seen in the core math classes. Great Falls Math Teacher Amanda Kaczinski is seeing results in her 8th grade students. "I think that this new program is helping students close the gaps that they have of basic math knowledge and skills, for example multiplication and division facts and operations of integers. I think the combination of grade level math classes and math applications with the use of SkillsTutor is great for these students. The fact that they get to work at their own level and at their pace with the guidance of the teacher is a benefit to all students. I am seeing students making progress and it is exciting."

SkillsTutor is a product of the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Corporation a leader in learning technology. It is also available in other disciplines including language arts. Great Falls teachers have recently completed training in the language arts component and the administration in looking forward to the opportunity to utilize it in the near future.