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## Kids College combines learning and video games

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TUSCALOOSA | Nine-year-old Guadalupe Garcia leaned back in his seat in Shayla Finklea's fourth-grade class at University Place Elementary School on Friday, playing a volleyball game on his computer while other students did math and reading problems on their computers.



But Garcia wasn't goofing off. He was actually doing schoolwork, even ahead of the other students.

Garcia and his classmates were participating in a program called Kids College, an online computer gaming program that incorporates Alabama curriculum standards to help reinforce students' math and reading skills.

To play the game, students have to answer seven reading or math questions on their computers. If they get seven correct, they get to play their choice of video football, basketball, soccer, volleyball, baseball, golf, rugby, hockey, snowboarding or skateboarding.

They get to play the video game for 20 seconds and once the 20 seconds are up, the students have to answer seven additional math and reading questions to get the chance to play video games again.

The students compete while playing the games, and are scored on how well they play each game and earn trophies based on their performance.

"The kids enjoy it," Finklea said. "They don't realize that they're making a connection between learning and enjoyment."

Finklea said the program starts off by asking questions at the students' grade level and then scales the difficulty of the questions depending on how well or how poorly each student answers.

If a fourth-grade student keeps answering fourth grade-level questions correctly, the program will begin to ask the student fifth grade-level questions.

If a student doesn't do well answering questions on his own grade level, the program will begin asking the student questions at a grade level below.

"Kids College has an assessment that determines where they are," Finklea said. "In this class we have students ranging in aptitude level from second grade to sixth grade."

Finklea said the program is a benefit for her because it shows her what she needs to

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Anna Turner, 9, right, and Jaylen Sullivan, 9, participate in a learning game at University Place Elementary School in Tuscaloosa on Thursday. University Place Elementary has participated in the Kids College program for three years.

teach — or reteach — each student.

“The (individualized) reports will actually say, ‘You need to teach Roman numerals,’ or ‘These students need help on numbers and operations,’” she said.

The individualized reports are based on student performance with Kids College.

Anna Turner, a 9-year-old fourth-grader in Finklea’s class, said she likes the program a lot.

“It gives me a challenge,” Anna said. “You just don’t go to a game. It makes you learn and then lets you play a game. I like using it for math. It gives me fractions and a vocabulary of math problems. I really like the questions better than the games though.”

Kids College has been offered to Alabama public schools for the last three years and is used by 164 schools in the state.

The program is free through an effort by the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools, a professional organization for Alabama school administrators, and funds from the state Department of Education.

Jim Chesnutt, the liaison between the education department and CLAS, said that CLAS wanted to offer the Kids College program to schools for free because it saw that students needed more help, especially at schools that can’t afford to buy programs and technology.

“The money for this comes from the state Department of Education,” Chesnutt said. “If the school was to have to purchase this, it would cost anywhere between \$10,000 and \$12,000.”

Chesnutt said the goal for the program is to help schools make Adequate Yearly Progress, a state measure of student achievement.

University Place Elementary School has met all of its AYP goals for the past five years.

Deron Cameron, principal of University Place Elementary, said that all of the school’s students use Kids College.

Thirty-five percent of students even use Kids College for free at home, he said.

Cameron said the program has been a great asset to students and teachers.

“It’s another tool to help us identify what students’ needs are,” Cameron said. “We’re lucky to have it free through a CLAS grant. We’ve applied for it each year.”

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