

A Hatch Breakthrough Moment Success Story

“A Remarkable Rate Of Success”

How **Hatch TeachSmart Technology**
Is Helping A Mississippi School System
Engage Students With Special Needs



The Early Learning Experts

P.O. Box 11927 > Winston-Salem, NC 27116 > 800.624.7968

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“Where children come first.”

Located in the northeast corner of Mississippi, Alcorn County is a place that puts a lot of emphasis on its history. A visitor planning a trip to Corinth, the largest town in the county, is offered a variety of historical buildings and museums to see, or told about tours highlighting the role the town played in the Civil War. But while many in Alcorn County are focused on the area’s heritage and history, the schools in the Alcorn School District are looking strictly to the future. “Our vision is to be a district where children come first!” their website says, and one way they are making that a reality is through the use of cutting edge Hatch TeachSmart technology in their special needs classrooms.

The district serves about 500 students with special needs in ten different elementary, middle and high school locations, and they have been using the TeachSmart systems in their classrooms since 2010. The district acquired the technology after seeing it demonstrated in a Hatch webinar, says Stephanie Clausel, Director of the Alcorn School District. She and several teachers watched the webinar and were excited by what the technology would allow them to do. Combining an interactive whiteboard with more than 1,100 researched- and standards-based activities, TeachSmart is the only content and activity management system of its kind. But beyond offering rich content for the students, it also offers many features that benefit the teacher, like the ability to easily plan lessons or create custom content.

“It has made a big difference.”

For teacher D. J. Plymel, one of the key benefits of adding the TeachSmart system to the classroom has been the way the children respond to the technology. “With my kindergarten and first grade children, many of them have trouble writing their first and last names, especially their last names,” she says. “I get on the TeachSmart system and let them use the pen and even the tennis ball to write their name, and they love that interaction of being able to write their name and see it up there. When a child has a hard time remembering the name and the sound of a particular letter, I let them write the letter, say the letter, and say the sound. We do that consistently on a daily basis, and that seems to really help.”

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Where she would previously do such exercises using a chalkboard, she finds that doing them using the TeachSmart technology has a more lasting effect. “So many times with my children, if we do it on the chalkboard, then they couldn’t apply it to other environments. As the year went on, things we would do on the TeachSmart system they were able to transfer to other activities. They could transfer that knowledge easier with the Hatch technology.” She also finds that the TeachSmart activities included in the system are helpful. “The activities where they drag the items over into circles and match up the shapes, all of those helped as far as organizing, and categorizing and classifying things,” she says.

Teacher Sheila Harbor also cites the TeachSmart technology as being something the students respond to well. “The kids love it,” she says. “We do some of the same things we did in the past with just a CD player, but it’s much more inviting to the children to have it up on the big screen.” For her, it has become a centerpiece of the classroom instruction. “We get them at three, and most of the time they’re totally non-verbal, but when they leave us at the end of kindergarten, most of them are reading and functioning on grade levels. So yes, I feel like it has made a big difference.”

“When we do the activities, he really likes to get up there and participate.”

The teachers also cite ways the TeachSmart system has benefited individual students. Stephanie Clausel spoke of one 14-year-old visually impaired child in particular. “The TeachSmart board is really good for him,” she says, “because it’s bigger and he’s able to get close to it, and when they’re counting and working on matching, he can actually get close to the board and see to move the items and the numbers together.” And she reiterates that while he could do similar exercises before the system was installed, he is now more engaged. “They have the counters – the bears are his favorite – and he would just do it hands-on at the table in the classroom and work on counting skills that way,” she says. “But he just likes working with the computer, as most kids do. They like that technology, and he does, too.”

Teacher Tasha Barnett also talks about a student who has responded particularly well to the addition of the TeachSmart system in the classroom. “I have a special needs child that I’ve been working with,

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and because we have the TeachSmart system, he is becoming more open to do things,” she says. “He’s a non-verbal child, but when we do the counting on TeachSmart, he will actually say the numbers. He’ll count them. When we’re going through the gallery and looking at different pictures, he’ll start talking to us and naming things. And when we do the activities, he really likes to get up there and participate and write on the board using the pens. He likes that it’s technology and you’re able to touch it and manipulate it.”

“It has helped him in speaking and expressing himself.”

While all the children delight in using the Hatch technology, the teachers have found that their autistic students are especially drawn to it. According to Stephanie Clausel, adding the TeachSmart system has had a profound effect on one student with autism. “We had one older autistic student that was kind of quiet and reserved,” she says. “He was one of those that when you walked into the room, he would put his head down on his desk, and didn’t have a lot to say to people until he got to know you. He could read on about a second grade level. And I have actually seen him at the TeachSmart board, using the pointer and reading out loud in front of people. That was a huge step for him.”

The teacher who worked with that particular student was D. J. Plymel, and she says much the same thing. “When we first had the TeachSmart system installed, it was just he and I in the room that particular day,” she recalls. “We pulled up a Living Book, which highlights each word as it’s read, and he read along with it. We read the entire book, and he got to interact with it and pick different things to get the little objects to move and sing, and he thoroughly enjoyed that. So that was a major thing to open up a relationship with him. And everyday he would come in and he would want to go through one of those books, which we did. He would talk about different sections of the story and he would re-live in his mind the different things. It was almost like he got lost in it. He just loved it, and it has helped him in speaking and expressing himself. He’s much more confident.”

“He gets interactive with it.”

Tasha Barnett also talked about the level of engagement and interaction the TeachSmart system has sparked in her autistic students. “One autistic child likes to push the ears to hear the person on the

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TeachSmart system give him directions, and once he hears that, he'll begin doing whatever it tells him to do,” she says. “And he will even push ‘Next’ to go on to the next level of it, or the next example. He gets interactive with it, he will repeat it, and there are a lot of times he will verbalize the story. He really enjoys it. He would rather have something educational than have a regular DVD movie. So in that aspect the TeachSmart activities are great because he can go back and touch things and it repeats them. I mean, he's just amazing. For a child like him, it's definitely building his skill levels, because he will continue to go higher with the skills that he's working on with those activities.”

Why are children having autism in particular so responsive to TeachSmart and Hatch technology? Teacher Sheila Harbor sees it as a reflection of our times and the influence of technology in general on all children, but especially autistic children who may have difficulty with person-to-person relationships. “The children who are autistic really like the computer and have worked with it from a very early age,” she says. “Some students we have that are developmentally delayed and come from an impoverished background don't have computers at home, so this technology is new to them. But with the higher level ones that really have more of a communications problem, that have an autistic diagnosis from a doctor, what we find is that most of the time they come to us familiar with the computer because they've worked with it their whole lives.” For these students, the TeachSmart system is a way for them to interact with technology in a group setting, allowing them to open up and communicate more readily.

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The responsiveness and engagement of the students is also important, as it helps the teachers and administrators in the Alcorn school district meet the IEPs established for the students. But having the students wanting to use the technology is only the first step. Having technology that can be geared to fit individual IEPs and goals is equally as important, and a key part of what makes TeachSmart such a useful educational tool in the special needs classroom. The TeachSmart system allows teachers to track the progress of individual students and provides scaffolded activities, allowing the children to move up in learn-

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ing levels as new skills are acquired. “I know which students have accomplished a certain skill and then we can go up to the next one,” says Sheila Harbor. “It works well.”

Tasha Barnett is also an advocate of the scaffolded learning. “I have three-year-olds this year,” she says, “and I’ll bring them to the board and we will go into the TeachSmart notebook and we’ll go to a counting activity, and they will go up to five. They will take the frogs or dinosaurs or whatever is on the screen and put them in the jar or the bowl, or on the island or whatever it is, and they will count to five. But the oldest ones that I have in the afternoon will go up to ten, and last year the group that I had went up to twenty. So we are using the steps that it has in the counting activities.”

“It has a remarkable rate of success.”

By offering such a wide range of scaffolded activities (over 1,100), the TeachSmart system has proven to be a great boon in meeting the needs of a wide variety of students with special needs in the Alcorn classrooms. Teacher Sheila Harbor puts it this way: “Some of the students have very specific goals on their IEPs, while some just have a developmentally delayed ruling and we’re trying to prepare them for kindergarten. For that group one of the goals will be that they’re going to meet the benchmarks set by the Mississippi Department of Education with 70% accuracy in meeting objectives set up by the teacher, so that criteria is pretty broad.” Given that, a system such as TeachSmart, which focuses on the key benchmarks of math and literacy, is especially helpful.

Tasha Barnett agrees, saying that the TeachSmart system is both practical and successful in working with children who have special needs. “If there are different goals we need to be working on with the kids, there are activities on the TeachSmart system that we can use for those children. It has a remarkable rate of success for those kids,” she says.

Teacher D. J. Plymel also finds the variety of activities available in the TeachSmart system useful in doing assessments. “I had to do an alternate assessment on a little girl who couldn’t hear,” she says, “and I used several of the Hatch activities to assess her. I wrote down a description of what the skill was and what she had to do. I also used it in reviewing and preparing for a pencil-paper type of assessment on different types of skills with her.”

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“The parents have really been in awe.”

Perhaps the toughest judges of the system’s success are the parents, who naturally want the best possible outcomes for their children. For them, as with the teachers and administrators, TeachSmart has been a welcome addition to the classrooms. Sheila Harbor says parents often see the system being used as they drop off or pick up their children. “They’re all always impressed with it,” she notes. Tasha Barnett has had the same experience. “There were lots of times parents would come in to pick up their children and I would be working on different activities with their child using the TeachSmart system,” she says. “The parents, all of them, have really been in awe.”

“I use the TeachSmart notebook every day.”

As a result of the many advantages the TeachSmart system offers, it has become a key component in Alcorn’s special needs classrooms. “With our preschoolers, like three-, four- and five-year-olds, it’s a centerpiece for them,” says administrator Stephanie Clausel. “In the morning when they start circle time, they will use it. In one of the classrooms they use it when they’re doing the days of the week, when they’re working on colors and numbers. They use it a lot for group instruction.”

Teacher Tasha Barnett verifies this. “In the TeachSmart notebook, we have pretty much tried out everything,” she says. “I use the TeachSmart notebook every day.”

The best part is that the teachers themselves acknowledge that they have only begun to scratch the surface of what they can accomplish using the Hatch technology. They are continuing to learn ways to incorporate and use the many different features available. As time goes on and they utilize more of the capabilities the system offers, it will benefit both them and the children they teach.

Alcorn County, Mississippi has a rich and storied past. By adding Hatch technology to their classrooms, the educators of Alcorn County have given their students with special needs the opportunity to be better prepared for what’s ahead in the future.

For more information about Hatch technology products, visit www.HatchEarlyChildhood.com.