



Espy Smith, engineering design teacher

Taking control of the computer lab

No matter how many times Michael Williams rearranged his computer lab, he could never get it quite right. Like every teacher, he wanted to see the screen of all the students in his class. But the computer lab at Early County High School was so big, he could never get the sightlines right.

"It always ended up with me moving all the computers and tables, and still not being able to see all the monitors at the same time," he recalls. So he had to make endless circuits around the classroom to help students along and ensure they stayed focused on their schoolwork.

The Early County School System is in Blakely, a town of 11,000 people in rural southwest Georgia. The district's career technical agricultural education director, Billy Walworth, says the biggest challenge for educators in this farming community is "to get kids to see what's out there in the real world."

Fortunately, computers provide a window to a larger world. The district encourages every high school graduate to be computer literate. Students can learn the fundamentals of word processing, spreadsheets and other software by attending the business ed computer lab. And they can take those courses in any grade.

That means every computer lab class includes students of different ages, skill levels and knowledge. It's a big challenge for the teachers, especially when they can't watch the whole room.

Early County Schools

SMART story

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Michael Williams,
technology director

“You’ve got 24 computers scattered over a large area, and it’s impossible to see what all the students are doing,” says Walworth. “When you’re in the front – and you know some kid is doing something they shouldn’t be – by the time you walk back there, they’re doing exactly what they should be!”



Quick facts

Location Blakely, Georgia

Student population 2,400

Number of computer labs 7

Technology SMART Sync software currently used in four computer labs with plans to expand to all seven

Impact on learning Better control of computer labs, less time spent on administrative chores

Walworth thought there had to be a better way. So in the late-1990s he looked for a system to help him monitor the computer lab. When he came across SMART Sync classroom management software, he liked everything about it and convinced his administration to buy it.

“That was in 1999 or 2000, and I’ve used it ever since,” he says. Today, teachers use SMART Sync software with a school license to manage four busy computer labs. And they plan to install SMART Sync in three other labs soon.

Walworth says the software’s easy-to-use interface means teachers have no trouble learning to use SMART Sync. “It’s easy. Once they sit down at the computer and start using it, they love it.” The classroom management software shows every student’s screen as a thumbnail on the lab monitor, so the teacher can see what everyone is doing at all times.

Michael Williams went a step further, using a wireless tablet PC so he could roam the computer lab and still monitor all his students. “That was the appeal for me – to be able to manage the room from anywhere I was standing,” he says. “I could walk around the room and not be stuck at a desk, but still see every monitor in my lab.”

And with a couple of mouse-clicks, he could lock and unlock applications, send and receive files, get every student on the same webpage and even take a quick poll to see how many students understood the current topic.

Being able to pay attention to individual students in the computer lab is another important benefit.

“If I have a student who takes a little longer, I can give them more attention without having to point them out to the rest of the class,” notes Williams. “A lot of them really like it because they can keep on going, without having a lot of attention drawn to them.”

On the other hand, SMART Sync software can also help advanced students work faster. “Some students like to finish a lesson in five minutes, and I can tap into their computer and show them the next thing to do without interrupting the rest of the class. So I can really accelerate that student,” says Williams.

All in all, the system helps teachers keep students on track in a low-key way. “I really use it more as a teaching tool than as a behavior tool,” says Williams. “It allows me to redirect students. Some students need to be prompted to continue in their work, so if a student is off task or not paying attention, I can write something on their screen to prompt them along. I don’t have to embarrass them in front of the class, but they get the picture.”

In Early County High School, SMART Sync software is helping students see a wider world and get prepared to step out into it.