

Bridging the Gap

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Classroom Technology Is Key to Success at Title I Schools

By **Christine Roulston**

In Jocelyn Johnson's eighth-grade art class at [Parks Middle School](#), students are eagerly raising their hands. Johnson is teaching a unit on impressionism and has pulled images of paintings up on her [SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard](#). She picks one student who jumps up and correctly identifies the Monet painting as an impressionist work. While it may seem like a typical art class, Johnson is doing much more than teaching art. She is helping to paint a new future for disadvantaged students.

"I dispel the myth to my students that residing in a lower class community means that your education is inferior to that of your counterparts who reside in a wealthier setting," Johnson says. This is no small task in the community of Pittsburgh, Georgia, just south of Atlanta, where 97 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch and half the parents are without high school diplomas. But despite the odds, students are thriving. While it had eight years straight on the state's list of schools requiring improvement, Parks has achieved [Adequate Yearly Progress \(AYP\)](#) since 2005.

Helping to level the playing field has been [Title I](#) funding. As one of 50,000 Title I schools across the United States, the federal government provides Parks with funds to hire specialized staff and purchase extra resources to address gaps in student learning. Through Title I and various partnerships, Principal Christopher Waller has spearheaded special programs to address students' deficiencies in core subject areas. A large part of the funding has been used to purchase laptops and eight SMART Board interactive whiteboards.

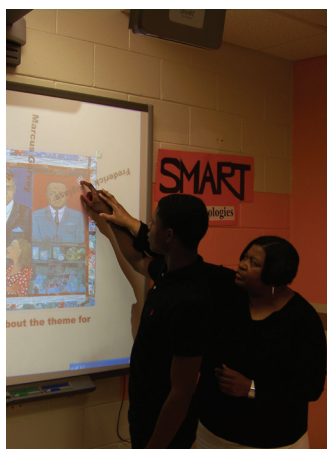
Teachers like Johnson have integrated the technology products into their daily instruction to nip achievement gaps in the bud. "I monitor the students' test data very closely, and if I see a deficiency in a particular area, I develop SMART Notebook™ lesson activities to increase their understanding of that subject," she says. "The best thing is that the SMART Board motivates my students to learn because they feel as if they are having fun while learning."

Entitling students to a first-class education

Though it's been through various iterations, Title I funding has been in effect since 1965, when Congress enacted Title I, Part A, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Success stories like Parks' demonstrate the value of Title I – to provide students with an opportunity to obtain a high quality education to reach proficiency on state academic assessments.

Within most districts, Title I coordinators manage the funds and ensure the school receiving the funding is aligned with the federal and state statutes. Rhayda Barnes-Thomas, Title I Coordinator at [Charles County Public Schools](#) in Maryland, says as a technology-driven district, Charles County devotes much of its Title I funding toward the purchase of additional classroom technology.

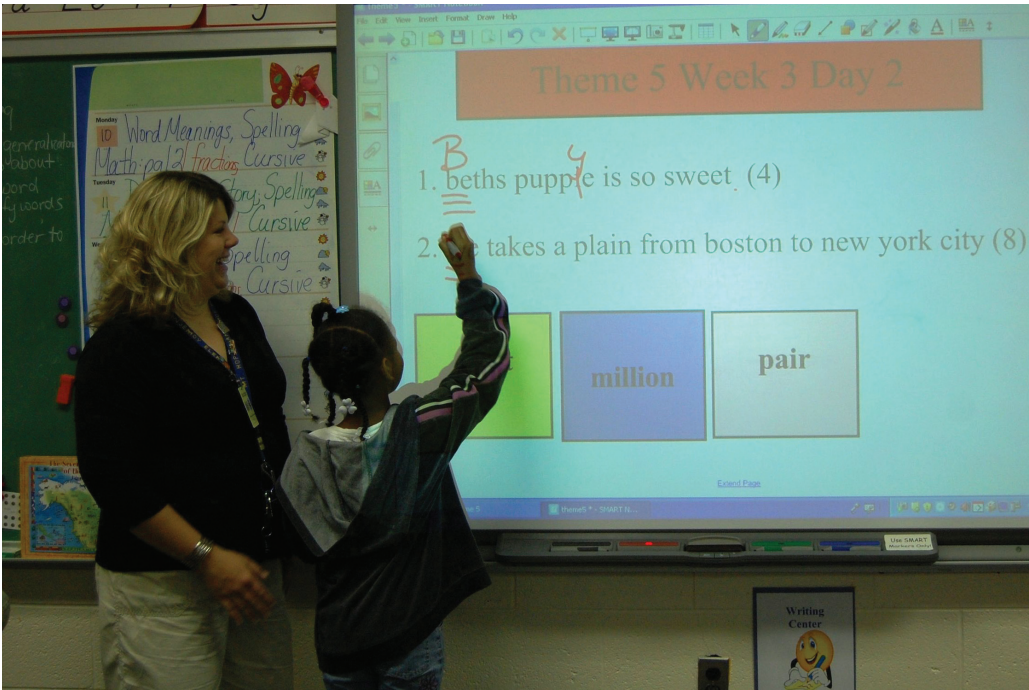
"The funding allows us to go above and beyond and provide students in that building with opportunities that let them get to the next level," Barnes-Thomas explains. "We're essentially providing an equitable opportunity for students, so they have the same resources as other schools." To date, the funding has enabled the district's six Title I schools to equip each classroom with a SMART Board interactive whiteboard and to purchase extra laptops.



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Jocelyn Johnson

Teacher
Parks Middle School
Pittsburgh, Georgia



By all accounts, it seems to be money well invested. In September, the [State Educational Technology Directors Association](#) and the [National Title I Association](#) prepared a [guide](#) examining technology's potential to make a difference among low-income student populations. Its authors provide dozens of examples of Title I schools from across the United States that show test scores rising after classroom technology implementations. They conclude that educational technology plays a critical role in helping to address the needs of the nation's underprivileged schools.

A new dimension to teaching

However, technology implementation alone cannot bridge the chasm to student achievement. Passionate teachers and sound pedagogy are necessary to back it up. In the Title I classroom, teachers face a unique set of challenges. A lack of resources and parental support at home mean students are more likely to come to school ill prepared. Instead of teaching new material, teachers are often forced to reteach information before they can move ahead.

Nanjemoy, Maryland, a rural community in Charles County, is an example of an area where industry and business are growing at a rapid pace but much of the community remains underprivileged. Teachers at [Mt. Hope/Nanjemoy Elementary](#), a Title I school, are charged with bridging the achievement gap for children in this geographically isolated area.

Barbara Anderson has taught at Mt. Hope for 12 years and says one of the challenges in teaching students new skills is their lack of personal experiences. "As close as we are to Washington, DC, a lot of the children have never been there," she says. "So, when we talk about monuments, they've never seen them. They don't know what I'm talking about." Anderson has developed strategies to address these gaps in experience. She regularly takes her students on virtual field trips using video clips and has them interact with digital content on her SMART Board interactive whiteboard.

Anderson finds the technology product is a great way to reach all her students, no matter their background. "I remember receiving my SMART Board midway through the school year. And the difference between my students from the beginning of the year to the middle of the year was amazing," she says. "Their level of engagement changed dramatically."

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Rhayda Barnes-Thomas
 Title I Coordinator
 Charles County Public Schools
 La Plata, Maryland

Barnes-Thomas says the turnaround in student interest has been just as remarkable in other Title I schools across Charles County. She believes the major reason for the shift is that teachers are able to use it to reach all learners. “We’ve seen a level of differentiation that can occur in the classroom since teachers started using the SMART Board,” she says. “Because of the software, the teachers now have the flexibility to create multiple lesson activities for different learning styles.”

Parks is also making use of classroom technology to help reach all its students. [Atlanta Public Schools’](#) low test scores prompted the district to create Success for All, an initiative aimed at improving student reading performance. Each teacher now spends an hour each day outside their normal subject matter, teaching reading and writing, and focusing on oral language development. At Parks, many teachers use SMART products to help them teach reading. Johnson has developed lesson activities using [SMART Notebook collaborative learning software](#) that enable her students to hone their vocabulary, oral and descriptive writing skills. “Students use the SMART Board and [SMART Document Camera](#) daily to review vocabulary, brainstorm, highlight important facts, divide words into syllables and interpret text,” Johnson says.

Both schools also offer several programs to extend their reach into the home and help parents become more involved with the life of the school. Among them, Mt. Hope offers a laptop sign-out program that allows students to bring technology products into their homes, while Parks offers night classes for adults in the community wishing to obtain computer skills.

Results tell a story

Efforts at these schools have been paying off. In addition to engagement being up, absenteeism is down – both schools have near perfect attendance records.

At Mt. Hope, Anderson has noticed her student test scores improving on the school-delivered quarterly assessments. The school and the other Title I schools in the district have achieved AYP for the past six years. At Parks, reading test scores are now the highest in the district.

The increasing test scores are getting noticed, bringing a new sense of pride to the area. Johnson, who has been at the school for four years, has witnessed the transformation. “Parents who would normally take their kids to the wealthier side of town are now selecting to place their kids at Parks because our test scores are so high,” she says. How’s that for painting a different picture? **EC**

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