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Education Notebook  
Virginia

## Computer program lets students read at own pace

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Pretend for a minute that you are a teacher and let's see what a slice of your day in the classroom might be like.

The subject is reading and there are about 20 students in your class. The students read at a variety of paces, and their ability to comprehend differs. Some are proficient readers who need some extra work to hold their interest; many others require varying levels of remediation, or basic instruction in reading. A student or two may be English Language Learners, meaning English is not their native language.

How do you, the lone teacher, juggle the multiple needs of all the students?

Technology is one tool that helps.

I visited Jennifer Harshbarger's second-graders in a computer lab at Westside Elementary School in Roanoke on a recent morning. Nineteen earphone-clad children sat in front of computers for vocabulary, spelling and comprehension lessons tailored to each individual's needs.

The **istation** software, launched at Westside and Hurt Park elementary schools in late February courtesy of a \$13,000 grant, features a reading curriculum for pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students with an integrated assessment to measure progress.

Activities vary, depending on the student's ability. For example, an ELL student may learn vocabulary and read a short story that contains sight words. Beside him, a more advanced reader may peruse a lengthier nonfiction selection and answer questions to measure comprehension. Harshbarger's students spend 30 minutes three times a week reading with **istation**.

Two of Harshbarger's students said they would rather read using **istation** instead of a book.

"They can tell you words you can't read," said Sylvestre Nyintelese, a 9-year-old boy from Tanzania.

Chadler Balisage, 7, said reading on the computer is better because "chapter books are so long."

"You walk in and see how engaged they are, mouths wide open looking at the screen," said Westside Principal Seydric Williams.

Lynn Jacomen, the city schools' reading and Response to Intervention coordinator, said she hopes the software will boost students' performance on the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening. PALS is a state-mandated reading assessment for public school students in kindergarten through second grade. About 33 percent of Westside students last fall failed the screening, which is an indicator for the Standards of Learning tests that begin in third grade.

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