

EasyTech supports Chicago center to build students' technology skills, confidence

Learning technology skills opens possibilities for teens with wide range of physical and mental disabilities

The Ray Graham Training Center
Chicago Public School System

185 students
Serves 14-21 year olds with severe developmental and physical disabilities

85 percent free and reduced lunch

58 percent African American

33 percent Hispanic

4 percent Asian

4 percent White

Challenge

Gayle Ryan, a 34-year veteran special education teacher, struggled to find an effective way to teach technology skills to her students at Ray Graham Training Center. The center is a public school in the Chicago Public School system dedicated to serving 185 students ages 14-21 with a wide range of severe developmental and physical disabilities. Most students are from economically disadvantaged central city neighborhoods.

Many students had little or no exposure to computers, let alone a variety of technology skills. Her goal was to provide them with basic computer literacy that would help them in life once they graduated.

Ryan's students come to the center with a wide range of disabilities, including students with profound mental retardation, autism, and brain injury. Many have multiple handicaps, and nearly all are functioning at the kindergarten through second grade levels.

While few can read, all can learn, Ryan emphasizes.

Solution: Learning.com's EasyTech

Every day Gayle Ryan works with her students to find ways to engage and encourage them in lessons and activities that will be meaningful and rewarding. In 2001, Ryan found EasyTech by Learning.com and she's delighted with the results. EasyTech is Web-delivered and provides Ryan's students with engaging lessons and activities to learn basic computer skills such as moving a mouse to building a spreadsheet, all within lessons in language arts, math, science and social studies.

While EasyTech was not specifically designed to teach cognitively delayed students, Ryan finds the program is perfectly suited for introducing her students to computers. They respond with overwhelming enthusiasm to EasyTech's interactive lessons. The animated characters and step-by-step narration keep students focused and motivated.

"I have kids light up all the time when they use EasyTech. The graphics and auditory reinforcement built into EasyTech makes it a wonderful tool. They're constantly smiling," Ryan says.

Ryan is also seeing an increase in the numbers of Hispanic students she serves, and she's able to meet their needs with the Spanish version of EasyTech, making a dramatic difference in the quality of instruction she can provide for this special population.

Supporting Family Involvement

EasyTech also has provided an effective way for families to become engaged in their child's education, and at the same time learn valuable technology skills themselves. Because EasyTech is delivered over the Internet, families can work with their students at home on lessons any time they wish.

"Besides reinforcing the lessons the students do at school, parents are also learning valuable technology skills," Ryan says. "We send math and reading homework with the kids. With EasyTech, parents are able to do the lessons right beside the students."

Ryan also invites families to come to the school once each week and Ryan finds EasyTech an excellent way to engage the families and help them learn new technology skills with their children. Many families do not have computers at home, or have never worked on computers. For these parents, EasyTech is an excellent resource to get instruction in critical technology skills.

Results

Ryan can measure EasyTech's success with her students in the confidence and pride they show when they print a certificate at the completion of a lesson. The certificates provide positive reinforcement to students who have often not experienced success in their school careers, Ryan adds.

"The certificates are so valuable. My students need that immediate reinforcement to show them their progress," she adds. Most of her students do not receive traditional report cards with letter grades, so the certificates serve as excellent positive reinforcement for a job well done.

Just as important as the pride and confidence EasyTech helps build are the life skills these students are gaining, Ryan says. Most of the students have had little or no exposure to computers in their earlier educational experiences. Often in special education classrooms in their younger years, they did not receive any computer time, she says.

Through EasyTech, they are able to learn how to use a mouse and navigate through software. They learn to use a word processing program, print documents, browse the Internet to find information or even music they like. It opens their world, Ryan says.

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– Gayle Ryan
34-year Special Education Teacher
Ray Graham Training Center, Chicago IL

For those students who go on to employment, Ryan says it's valuable for them to know basic skills that allow them to, for example, enter in their employee ID numbers, or print documents, on the job. One student working in the center's office helps alphabetize records using a printout of the alphabet from his computer. He learned to do this through EasyTech.

"It is a joy to have high school students on a kindergarten academic level enter my room and head straight for one of the computers," Ryan says. "In all, EasyTech has been the most rewarding and productive experience for me in 30 years of teaching. It has given my students motivation and a new sense of self esteem."