



Breakthroughs

## Tools For Learning

Heather Struck, 07.21.09, 9:00 PM ET

Some 80 middle school math students in New York City have been going to a completely different kind of summer school for the past few weeks, courtesy of a partnership between the New York City Department of Education and a handful of technology companies.

MS 131, an experimental public school in Chinatown, transformed its library into a space where the students have practiced algebra and simplified fractions this summer, supported by a battery of computers, software and what the Education Department calls "playlists" that help them focus on what skills they need to improve. "I thought they would never pull it off," an awestruck Arthur Levine, formerly the president of the Teachers College at Columbia University, marveled at the highly specialized and computerized learning environment that the project creates. "I was blown away."

Called the "School of One," the project involves a radically different organization of computers and students, promising something that school administrators and teachers have been aching for: individualized learning.

The summer school project is at the "1.0" stage of development, declared New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein at a press conference on Tuesday. The technology back-end of the program, which resembles the control center of a corporate IT department, analyzes and measures the students' skill levels on a daily basis, reconfiguring their "playlists" (thanks, iTunes) to identify the weak subjects or skills they need to focus on every morning when they come to the classroom.

The program's start-up price tag: \$1 million, of which 70% came from private sponsors, led by Cisco, Microsoft and education publishers including Pearson and McGraw-Hill. The New York City Department of Education put in the rest. Some 90% of the funds went to pay for the hardware and software supporting the algorithms for developing the students' playlists and gauging their activity. The other \$100,000 paid for the teachers and typical classroom expenses.

During the Tuesday press conference, students in the classroom clustered here and there, many on computers, and others in smaller groups with instructors or student teachers.

According to Joel Rose, chief executive for human capital within the New York City department of education and founder of the School of One, the new model will not require schools to add staff--but it will take a different type of planning.

Even so, getting the summer program up and running seemed to involve quite a few administrators: A staff of 12 was involved in brainstorming and implementing the summer school, in addition to the consultants provided by the technology sponsors. Gene Longo, Cisco's project manager for the program, said that technology takes a supporting role to the teachers and the needs of the students.

"More teachers are looking to use technology as a tool," Longo said. "It is not alien to younger teachers, and there has been more emphasis on preparing teachers with technology."

Levine, who learned about the project in early July, says it is the most exciting project that he's heard about in a long time.

The School of One is "focused on learning," he said, and on "assessing what students don't know and focusing on that." The computers aim to provide instruction geared to the way a specific child learns. Success is measured by how much a student learns, not by how much time he or she has spent in the classroom.

New York City plans to open three middle schools with the School of One model in the spring. Levine hedged his excitement with the reminder that "it's just an experiment."

Provided that the project can attract outside funding, it could expand to deliver a full term of instruction in three middle schools beginning in January 2010. It is part of a broader initiative, NYC21C, that began last year and looks for ways to educate students beyond the classic model of one teacher, one lesson and a 35-student classroom.