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## **A S.M.A.R.T. new program at Jefferson**

S.M.A.R.T. program develops balance, motor skills; corrects developmental deficits

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NEW ULM - The kindergartners in Holly Syverson's class bounced, rolled, crept, crawled, balanced, spun...

Sounds like a phy ed class?

While it easily could have been one, the vigorous, fun activities, obviously enjoyed by the these "bundles of energy," were actually part of a program called S.M.A.R.T. pioneered at Jefferson Elementary School this year.

S.M.A.R.T. is short for Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training.

It is a multi-censory approach to learning, based on brain research. The program develops physiological and neurological readiness skills essential to classroom success.

The S.M.A.R.T. program emphasizes stimulating the brain and body to promote richer connections among the neurons. This stimulation helps increase capabilities for readiness skill development. Once readiness skills are in place, children have the foundation necessary to succeed in school.

The curriculum consists of activities for developing and enhancing large and fine motor skills, visual perception and eye-hand coordination.

If students do not develop these skills, they are likely to struggle in the classroom and may become frustrated and fail in school.

Jefferson staff members got "fired up" about the program after hearing about it from other schools and watching a news segment about it on KARE 11 news, said Principal Pam Kirsch.

Kirsch herself first heard of it from her own grandchildren in St. Peter.

Several staff members (seven in all) volunteered to attend training last summer, and are now implementing the program with their classes.

As a state learning site, Jefferson Elementary School will receive special mentoring and monitoring from the Minnesota Learning Resource Center, which promotes the program, as the school implements the program's initial phase.

The motor room at Jefferson is doubling up as a S.M.A.R.T. room, but perhaps a single-purpose room might be set up at some time in the future.

### Activities

S.M.A.R.T. activities include: an obstacle course of crawling, rolling, spinning, bouncing and jumping; vision tasks; eye-hand coordination tasks; and a balance beam. The activities are fun for the students, making participation play rather than work.

### Article Photos



Photos by Steve Muscatello  
Students in Holly Syverson's kindergarten class at Jefferson Elementary in New Ulm participate in activities in the S.M.A.R.T. program such as reading a word or letter written on each monkey bar, walking on a balance beam, reading letters or numbers while tossing a bean bag and walking on a wobbler.

S.M.A.R.T. activities also encourage and improve a child's physical fitness and body strength. The repetition and frequency of these activities create new opportunities for the body and brain to learn in additional ways.

The S.M.A.R.T. room segments run 20-30 minutes each, daily.

Syverson's students alternated among several stations. As they did the movements, they also worked on reading and math charts. Letters and words were incorporated into the physical activities (e.g. monkey bar exercises).

The students "cross-walked" in hallway on the way there and back.

There are more components to S.M.A.R.T. than the physical activities observed as Syverson worked with the kindergartners.

In addition to the kindergartners in Syverson's class, photographer Steve Muscatello and I observed Patricia Newman's first-grade class, for example.

Newman incorporated elements of S.M.A.R.T. in the regular classroom.

With the room lights off at one point, she used a flashlight and words and numbers written in fluorescent and red colors for "light therapy" - doing activities designed to stimulate vision, such as eye focusing and eye teaming.

At one point the students did some twirling - which was timed, with the teacher watching for specific elements of being able to balance.

The S.M.A.R.T. program integrates activities into the classroom, gymnasium and playground, and is compatible with any curriculum, explained the teachers. The S.M.A.R.T. program is related to the areas of language development, reading, math, writing, physiological readiness, coordination and attention.

Students are continuously challenged and stimulated by the activities that are incorporated into their daily academic routine, say the proponents. S.M.A.R.T. sites report high levels of academic achievement. Schools who have implemented this program for some time have reported a strong positive correlation with academic scores, said Kirsch. She added that these schools observe that students have increased flexibility, stamina and upper body strength - "these are physical and academic gains."

The S.M.A.R.T. program is designed so each child progresses at his or her own rate, enhancing the child's abilities in a positive and playful environment, say proponents. S.M.A.R.T. provides children with a proven approach to reach their potential and to become successful learners.

## Fact Box

How parents can be S.M.A.R.T. at home:

The following information is provided by the Minnesota Learning Resource Center:

The body movement of a newborn baby starts with random movement of large muscles and by the time he or she enters school, a very complex communication system between the brain and muscles must be developed. Each progressive step requires a series of developmental experiences. A child must first stand, then step, walk, and then run. Each milestone is an indicator of previous successes in movement. Children who are deprived of a wide variety of movement experiences, especially through natural play opportunities, run the risk of perceptual and motor delays. The child who climbs, rides a bike, skates, teeters on a balance board, tumbles and jumps has a better chance for good coordination than a child who sits quietly on a chair, watches TV or plays computer and video games. Movement experiences are therefore a very important part of normal development for children.

Activities to do at home include:

Balance activities: balance beam walking, walking on stilts, pogo stick, roller skating, riding a bike, tumbling stunts, climbing.

Eye-hand coordination: ball bouncing and catching, rope jumping, tapping balloons in the air, marbles, jacks, pick up sticks, ring toss, bean bag activities, coloring, painting, drawing, cutting with scissors, puzzles, stringing beads, sewing cards, working with clay.

Eye-foot coordination: jumping rope, kicking balls, climbing stairs, ladders, hopscotch, jumping and hopping.

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