

PLATO makes STARs out of students lacking credits

CFISD's implementation of the PLATO Learning program has proven to be successful in less than a year of full operation.

The need for such a program was solidified in 2007, when research conducted by CFISD's Office of Curriculum & Instruction showed that many high school freshmen were lacking sufficient credits.

This at-risk group included students who had spent two or more years in the same grade while their peers continued to advance through high school. Despite numerous efforts at tackling Algebra I, English I or other freshman-level subjects, many lacked the five credits necessary to be promoted.

One campus that was reviewed by Mary Jadloski, CFISD director of curriculum and instruction for high school, had 350 freshmen out of approximately 1,000 who were credit-deficient—57 of whom had been freshmen for two or more years.

With student confidence levels sinking and the number of potential dropouts rising, CFISD leadership could not afford to delay its response. The administrative team met in the spring to formulate a plan and the idea arose to use PLATO Learning software in lab-based classroom instruction.

PLATO operates under the notion that some hard-working students are unable to pass courses in a traditional classroom setting because they miss a key concept and become lost, while some learn better one-on-one. Plato's credit recovery solution puts students in control and provides personalized learning experiences.

After looking further into PLATO's success at credit recovery in other school districts, superintendent Dr. David Anthony was ready to implement in CFISD.

"He told us, 'I want [PLATO] in place for next school year, and it must succeed.' He said those words," recalls Jadloski. "At that point we didn't have a complete sense of everything we would need to implement it. It was a little intimidating there for a while."

The district factored in the number of students and teachers from each campus that would be needed for the program, whether satellite campuses would be needed and what type of students would be targeted.

"The PLATO courses are quite rigorous, so we thought if an ESL student was to be included, we needed to make sure the student's English reading and writing levels are aligned with the rigor of the English coursework in PLATO," Jadloski said. "We didn't want to put the students in a situation that would put them in further credit deficiency."

In October of 2007 the district had a pilot PLATO program up and running at Windfern High School. By the time the program wrapped up on July 31, 2008, 92 Windfern students had recovered 200 half-credits—giving CFISD its first success story in what were previously uncharted waters.

It was reinforcement enough to

fully implement the program in 2008-2009, using the acronym STAR (Success Through Academic Recovery).

Students with the most need for credit recovery are bused from their home campus to either Windfern or Cypress Ranch high schools, two campuses with space for STAR labs. Cypress Ranch has the largest model, with four labs, 60 students and a cadre of four teachers who specialize in Social Studies, English, Science and Math and also teach classes for original credit—enabling students to accumulate anywhere from 2-5 credits in the PLATO lab while taking other classes for original credit.

The simultaneous coursework has not hampered those students—they are passing approximately 80 percent of the original credit courses.

"It's working very, very well," Jadloski said. "The students are benefiting from the small environment and the focused attention of four teachers who are all specialists in their content area."

Each of the other seven high schools features one STAR lab manager, selected by the campus principal, who is a certified teacher in one of the four core content areas. The students in these labs enter the PLATO program with less need—typically making up one or two half-credits apiece.

Sarah Campbell, the STAR lab manager at Cy-Fair High School, came to the district over the summer specifically to tackle this unique curriculum. In a short period of time since beginning the program (it began in mid-October after a delay caused by Hurricane Ike), she has seen PLATO transform her students' attitudes and minds.

"The nice thing about this program is it eliminates all the drama. Everything is very structured and very up front. There are no hidden bonuses. It's between you and getting your credits," Campbell said. "All of a sudden now the students don't look at the books, the lesson plans or overhead projector as their little program for learning. They look to themselves. I told them at the very beginning of class that the best thing you're going to get out of this is actually not your credits – it's going to be skills for how to get what you want in life. And that's what this program does. It is a fabulous program."

In that first hurricane-shortened semester, Campbell's students earned about 15 half-credits, and she's expecting even more this spring.



Cypress Ranch High School teacher Shelby Touchy spends some one-on-one time with a student in the school's STAR lab. Touchy is one of four teachers in the cadre that instructs 60 students.

The first class her students attempted took them an average of 14 weeks to complete, but in two weeks many of them are already through the first two units of the second class—which previously took them 4-6 weeks.

In the first semester at Cypress Ranch, 51 students in STAR labs gained 63 PLATO half-credits and 69 original credit half-credits. At Cypress Lakes, 63 students reclaimed 75 half-credits.

CFISD's most impressive PLATO success story thus far was a female student who earned six half-credits in the short period between Oct. 1 and Jan. 16.

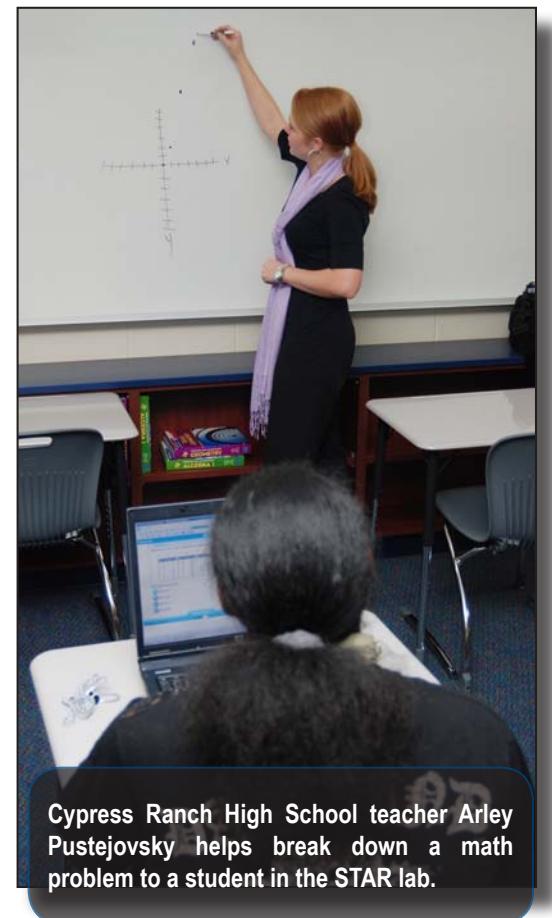
"Now they're twice as fast, because they know the program and they know how it works," Campbell said. "They got their first credit and now they're hungry for more. It's good old American greed being useful for us."

Campbell holds a little ceremony in class every time a student earns a half-credit, during which everyone applauds and sings a cheesy jingle that inevitably causes the credit-earner to turn red. After that, the student moves on to the next half-credit.

"Usually I want to give them a little bit of a break after they've passed their exam, but my kids will say 'Isn't my next class in there?'" she said. "They don't want to take the rest of the period off. That's been the most impressive thing to me."

Cypress Ridge High School STAR lab manager Lisa Barcelona has a similar celebratory ceremony, where students receive a "Hooray!" before earning a certificate and a brick on the classroom wall, a metaphor for the foundation of their future lives.

Jadloski said that she believes one reason the program is successful is because of the way it relates to the digital generation. The PLATO software's presentation and updated



Cypress Ranch High School teacher Arley Pustejovsky helps break down a math problem to a student in the STAR lab.

content on the Internet, provides a more user-friendly interface than most textbooks and worksheets—as well as the comfortable dependence on a mouse over a No. 2 pencil.

"Dr. Anthony always says this, and I wholeheartedly agree, that we have to capitalize on technology in any way shape and form," she said. "That's not to say that technology teaches the content, but it's great to use as a motivator and a tool. These students of ours have had technology in their hands since they were tiny, whether it be phones, computers, the Wii, etc. Kids learn that way, they're so multimodal."

This aspect further reinforces CFISD administration's belief that the PLATO program and STAR labs will remain a permanent fixture within the district—keeping at least one group of freshmen students from falling behind.

"We'll continue to tweak and adjust, I'm sure, but this has absolutely been very successful," Jadloski said. "These kids are earning a lot of credits."