

THE MACOMB JOURNAL



Serving McDonough County since 1855

Sunday, August 21, 2005

\$1.25

www.macombjournal.com

Vol. CL Issue 55

Training helps Macomb educators improve curriculum

By Tom Radz

Assistant News Editor

MACOMB - Administrators with the Macomb School District have begun preparation on how to improve their students' academic achievement, which they feel can be done by training their teachers to merely navigate three Web sites.

More than 30 administrators and faculty from the Macomb district gathered Thursday at the Regional Office of Education in Macomb, to be trained to use Web sites that will help them identify how to improve their curriculum to

facilitate more learning. The training was part of a joint project of the Illinois Business RoundTable, Illinois State University and the Illinois Principals Association. All three of these organizations work in collaboration with the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA), Just for the Kids (JFTK), School Data 4 All (SD4A) and the Interactive Illinois Report Card (IIRC).

The teachers were trained to use the Web sites www.just4kids.org, www.schooldata4all.org and <http://iirc.niu.edu>. All three allow the public

and educators to manipulate data from schools across the state and compare them with high performance schools with similar demographics. The data is taken from students' scores on the Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT) for elementary students, and the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) for high school students.

The IBRT, which specializes in education, economic growth and civil justice reform, began a similar Web site in 1999 although it never gained popularity.

"It was a great site, but

nobody knew about it and nobody knew how to use it," said Jeffrey Mays, president of the IBRT. "So that's why we decided this year, aside from the thousands that we are putting into the Best Practices study, we are spending a great deal of money paying for school districts to get their data, ship it up to Northern Illinois University and disaggregate it down to the classroom and school level. And then we are also paying big money to come out and train targeted school districts where members have said, 'We have a superintendent

See MACOMB, page 3A

MACOMB

From page 1A

that understands it, we've got the capacity to really roll this out in this school district."

The IBRT works with the National Center for Educational Accountability, which began the Just for the Kids site in Texas in 1995. Increased donations allowed the NCEA to eventually expand their data to include the states of Washington and Tennessee. Currently, the Just for the Kids Web site covers 23 states in which they partner with organizations like the IBRT and local universities to provide the data for the sites.

The educators present at the training in Macomb will take their knowledge of the Web sites back to their respective schools and lead training sessions on September 26 for those who did not attend Thursday's session. This follows a similar model Mays used for his previous training sessions in Quincy, Decatur, Urbana, Danville and the Springfield and Peoria areas.

Lessons from the training session, which were led by Jennifer Ross, president of School Data 4 all, informed the educators how to use the Web sites to identify specific categories in which their school or a specific student was behind when compared with similar high schools which are considered high performance.

Through the Just for the Kids Web site, educators were shown how to isolate specific grade levels and their performances on standardized testing in certain areas, such as mathematics, science, reading and writing. The site allowed them to view a chart that shows what percentage of students in that grade met and exceeded the state's standards and compare them with comparable schools.

The criteria for selecting comparable schools consisted of: The comparable school would not be a magnet school if the school researched was not; the percentage of economically disadvantaged students was comparable; they have similar numbers of English language learners; a similar percentage of students were tested; and at least 10 students were tested.

The Web sites also allowed educators to view trends in test performance, sometimes over the course of several years.

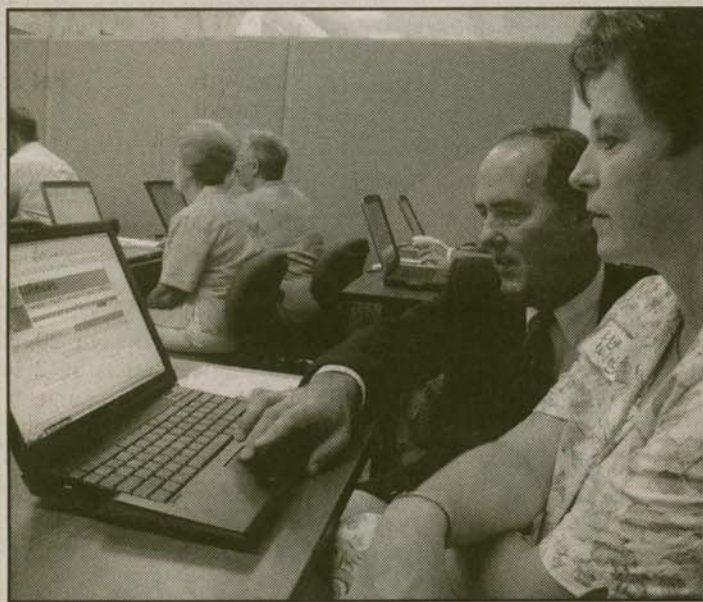
Those present were also shown how to manipulate the data to be even more specific through the Illinois Interactive Report Card site. Here, educators were able to break down the data by gender, race and total disabilities, to name a few. Individual student scores could also be shown, although this option is not offered to the public.

Once the educator has identified a specific target area which he or she wants to improve, they can go back into the Just for the Kids site and manipulate the data even further. The site allows for comparisons to be done with high performance districts, schools or classrooms in a number of areas, which includes Curriculum and Academic Goals, Staff Selection and Leadership, and Capacity Building.

The data found on this portion of the site is derived from observational research done by Illinois State University. When a district, school or classroom is considered to be high performance, a team of researchers from ISU travel to that district to document exactly what they are doing that makes them successful. That info is then placed on the Web site.

The information also allows educators to locate similar schools or classrooms that would be willing to allow a site visit for educators to observe, which, according to Macomb Superintendent Dr. Fran Karanovich, is going to be encouraged in her district.

"I never dreamed when I was in the classroom that we would have these kinds of resources available to us," Karanovich said. "Technology has certainly given us tools that we only dreamed possible."



TOM RADZ/Journal Photo

President of the Illinois Business RoundTable, Jeffrey Mays (left), helps MacArthur Early Childhood Learning Center Principal and Director of Special Ed., Leyona Wiley, navigate a Web site during a training session held Thursday at the Regional Office of Education in Macomb.