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SPOTLIGHT

Educators from over 20 counties come to Owatonna for three-day S.M.A.R.T. workshop

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On Thursday, the final day of a three-day S.M.A.R.T. workshop, educators engaged in various S.M.A.R.T. activities they'll use with their young students, like the pencil roll. The pencil roll develops body awareness, "stimulating our vestibular system," said Jessica McFarland, who led the week's training. "It helps us know where we are in space." (Ryan Anderson/People's Press)



OWATONNA — Educators from more than 20 counties came to Owatonna this week for a S.M.A.R.T. workshop, where they learned new ways to stimulate the minds and bodies of their students.

S.M.A.R.T. (Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training) is already utilized in roughly 250 pre-K, kindergarten and elementary classrooms across Minnesota, as well as in 12 other states, said Jessica McFarland, who led this week's training.

The S.M.A.R.T. program — created by the Minnesota Learning Resource Center (MLRC), a nationally recognized teacher-training institute affiliated with a Minnesota-based non-profit organization called A Chance To Grow (ACTG), which offers comprehensive brain-centered programs and services — was established nearly 20 years ago, and workshops like the one this week in Owatonna have trained more than 6,000 teachers since 2000.

This was the Owatonna school's district's first year with A Chance to Grow curriculum, said Renee Compton, early childhood family education and school readiness educator. S.M.A.R.T "gets students ready to learn through movement."

Compton and several other Owatonna educators underwent training last year, and as a bonus for hosting this workshop, McFarland came to Owatonna a half-dozen times throughout the year to act as a personal mentor, Compton said Thursday.

"Kids learn best when they're moving," she said.

In most cases, "the kids struggling with motor movements were also struggling cognitively," she added. "I feel like (S.M.A.R.T.) has made a difference in the first year, and I think it will make more of a difference as we continue to build on it."

After seeing "the great things S.M.A.R.T. was doing for kids" this year, Jenni Henslin, who has been teaching early childhood special education for nearly a decade in Owatonna, attended this week's workshop, and it's been "phenomenal," she said Thursday morning. "There's so much great information I'm excited to take back to the kids in the fall, and everyone here is so enthusiastic about everything that it makes you excited."

"Seeing them grow is fun, and I enjoy it," she added. "They grow so quickly as this age."

This workshop is devoted to helping teachers understand the connection between how the brain works and their method of instruction.

"It integrates brain stimulation into what they're already teaching," McFarland said.

S.M.A.R.T. is eye-opening for teachers because it allows them to discover where students are deficient in terms of motor skills, Compton said. Because young children spend so much time in "containers," from car seats to papooses, they can miss out on developing certain motor skills.

Some S.M.A.R.T. activities develop vision and tracking, which are crucial attributes for reading readiness, she added. S.M.A.R.T. "just makes sense."

The three-day workshop at the Owatonna Arts Center began Tuesday and concluded Thursday. The workshop was presented with support from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, an organization that invests more than \$1.5 million annually to support a variety of early childhood development projects and programs.

Classrooms that participate in S.M.A.R.T. have students with higher attention and participation levels, according to data from the MLRC. In addition, students are more motivated to learn and have higher academic achievement.

"I've seen the results," said Lexy Clemetson, who teaches children as young as 1 year old and as old as 5 in Fairmont. "Their brains and bodies are ready to learn."

On the final day of the workshop Thursday, teachers actually went through various exercises they will utilize with their students, from the alligator crawl to the balance beam to the pencil roll.

The alligator crawl "is one of our gross motor activities," McFarland said. "When children do this, they are going back to a lower level developmental skill, like a baby crawling."

Children must possess those skills in order to find success in school, she added. "S.M.A.R.T. was developed to build a foundation for academic success."

“Everything here is mimicking early development, and it’s all based on natural, normal motor movements,” she added. The alligator crawl, for example, “promotes smooth, efficient movement.”

Children need “a good sense of self, and the balance beam encourages body awareness,” she said. “It helps kids to stay upright and pay attention in a chair.”

The pencil roll also develops body awareness, “stimulating our vestibular system,” she said. “It helps us know where we are in space.”

“The biggest takeaway from this is the reminder how essential input is for children,” said Clemetson, who was first trained in S.M.A.R.T. four years ago and has used it ever since in her classes. “Children need multiple inputs before you can expect an output from them.”

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