

ENHANCING EDUCATION

By Sandra R. Sabo

KINDERGARTNER YOHAN DOES THE ALLIGATOR CRAWL IN NOTRE DAME ACADEMY'S S.M.A.R.T. ROOM. PHOTO BY ROBERT CUNNINGHAM.

A S.M.A.R.T. START

MULTISENSORY ACTIVITIES HELP YOUNG LEARNERS DEVELOP STRONGER, HEALTHIER BRAINS

At many schools, rolling around, jumping up and down, and navigating monkey bars are typically reserved for recess time. But at Notre Dame Academy in Minnetonka, such activities are routinely integrated into the classroom curriculum as part of the school's implementation of S.M.A.R.T. — Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training.

The program — offered through the Minnesota Learning Resource Center — is designed to help children develop their balance, coordination, kinesthetic awareness, and visual and auditory skills.

"S.M.A.R.T. is a multisensory approach to learning that develops the physiological and neurological readiness systems, which help students be successful in the classroom," explained Ginger Vance, Notre Dame Academy's principal. "While the atmosphere is playful, the kids are doing activities that strengthen their core and, through their movements, make meaningful brain connections."

Hallie Keenan, a kindergarten teacher at the school, had never heard of S.M.A.R.T. before attending a seminar on it several years ago. After three days of training, she began incorporating more

brain-stimulating activities into her classroom.

"I started to have my kids do cross-body walking — where they have to touch their right knee with their left hand as they walk — to get the two sides of the brain to work together," Keenan said. "That helps them move from left to right when they start their writing and reading."

Notre Dame Academy has converted one of its classrooms into a S.M.A.R.T. room, a structured environment that each of its pre-K through second-grade classes visits daily for 30 minutes. As music plays, students follow a circuit around the room that might include rolling like a pencil, crawling like an alligator and climbing like a monkey. Prompts along the way present colors to identify, sight words to read or math problems to solve.

"All the movement stimulates their brains, so I like to use the S.M.A.R.T. room before reading instruction, a time when they're sitting down and need to be focused," Keenan said. "Some parents were skeptical at first, but they have seen how much their children's gross motor and fine motor skills have developed."

Parents are equally pleased with their students' test scores, which typically improve after implementation of the S.M.A.R.T. program, according to research conducted by the Minnesota Learning Resource Center.

"S.M.A.R.T. helps all students and is especially effective for those coming from families that are affected by the achievement gap," noted Vance, who added that at their school kindergartners' reading and math scores are in the 90th percentile. †