

## Extra stimulation a SMART idea

By Tanner Kent  
The Free Press

MANKATO — A countywide grant is destined to make Blue Earth County schools a little SMARTer when school resumes this fall.

SMART is an increasingly popular curriculum based on neurological science that shows that stimulating certain parts of the brain through muscle movement can prepare students to learn, especially those in elementary grades. The curriculum — an acronym for Stimulating Maturity Through Accelerated Readiness Training — has been sweeping schools in this area for several years.

Schools in Le Center, Cleveland, Le Sueur-Henderson, St. Peter and Waseca already have SMART rooms with specialized equipment to accommodate the running, jumping, crawling, marching and moving that accompany SMART sessions (which are often held daily for up to 30 minutes but can also be broken down into shorter segments for younger children).

Kennedy Elementary in Mankato has been training staff in SMART techniques for several years and also has its own room. Several other elementaries in Mankato Area Public Schools are in various stages of implementing the curriculum.

The countywide grant is part of Blue Earth County's Statewide Health Improvement Program, an initiative approved in 2008 by legislators to combat the risk factors, especially obesity and smoking, that lead to chronic disease.

Worth nearly \$40,000, the SHIP grant paid for a four-day training session in July at Dakota Meadows Middle School. Almost 60 private- and public-school teachers attended from schools across the county, including St. Clair and Maple River. The grant also includes about \$1,000 for each school that participated to purchase their own SMART equipment.

Tami Zwaschka, a preschool teacher in Mankato Loyola Catholic Schools, said Loyola is in the initial stages of implementing a SMART curriculum.



Washington Elementary first-grade teacher Gina Danielson practices a visual exercise during a SMART training. Such exercises allow students to develop the foundational movements needed to read and focus on complex problems. John Cross



SMART curriculum is based on movements and exercises that stimulate the brain for learning. Pictured are educators practicing an exercise meant for elementary-age students in which they coordinate the balance needed to maintain a book on their head, as well as walk heel-to-toe. Such movements strengthen the pathways between different parts of the brain. John Cross



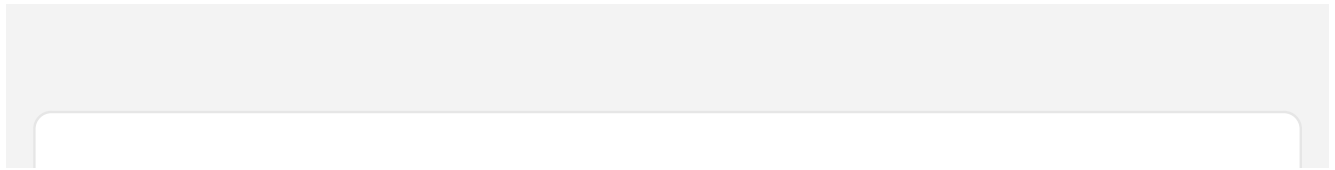
Mankato Loyola preschool teacher Tami Zwaschka was one of nearly 60 Blue Earth County teachers who participated in a recent SMART training. John Cross

“I see a lot of benefit,” Zwaschka said. “I think it’s something we can start small with and expand as we go.”

Washington Elementary in Mankato is also in the initial stages of implementing a SMART room. Even though several teachers in the school already have been trained in the program, the school did not have enough space for a specialized room until the upcoming school year.

Gina Danielson, a first-grade teacher at Washington, said she would spend about 20 to 30 minutes per day engaging her students in SMART activity. She said the results were noticeable and significant with students being less fidgety, more focused and ready to learn.

“I saw growth across the board,” Danielson said. “Reading especially.”



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