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Where all children learn

Teachers at Village Elementary School might be under the gun from the state's school accountability law, but they aren't wasting time blaming parents and students. They are too busy teaching – using an approach based on the assumption that *all* children can learn and tailoring instruction to ensure they do.

It's tough work – “not for the faint of heart,” according to Jeanne Zehr, assistant superintendent of school management for East Allen County Schools – but far more productive than finger-pointing.

East Allen County Schools shared highlights of its efforts this week in a symposium attended by more than 200 area public and parochial school teachers. The district last year contracted with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education to examine how its Title I schools – those serving primarily students from poverty – are organized and to train and mentor teachers in a new instructional method.

The Alliance uses the Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment curriculum, which was demonstrated during the symposium by Rabbi Rafi Feuerstein of the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning in Jerusalem. His father, Reuven Feuerstein, developed the curriculum based on years of study with renowned educators like Jean Piaget.

“His work is based on the belief that intellect is modifiable even for the most severely challenged,” Zehr said. “It's a matter of challenging and demanding far more of children than we currently do.”

That's a key point for those who want to blame the students themselves for failing. The approach requires students to work hard and take responsibility, but it gives them the time and the tools to succeed.

In the session Monday, Rafi Feuerstein worked with an East Allen fifth-grader to show teachers how to assess what concepts students know and what to do if they don't know. Dynamic assessment, as the process is called, is different from an ISTEP+ test that gives a snapshot of what a student learns.

The Feuerstein approach goes forward from that point to ensure the student learns and masters an idea. Sometimes it involves teaching a new concept – perpendicular lines, for example – before the student can return to the problem and solve it.

At Village Elementary, teachers Julie Smith, Michelle Marchand and Cherise Copeland are seeing impressive results since they stopped lecturing and began “mediating” to ensure students have the information they need to learn.

Their students are not only making progress at their own work, but they're also helping other classmates grasp concepts the classes need to move forward. The teachers call it “connecting the



File
Village Elementary fourth-grader Benito Flotow designs his own bicycle as part of an art program.

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dots" to learn.

"We call them life lessons," Smith said. "It's not lecturing, it's questioning, questioning, questioning."

The approach works in covering the academic standards Indiana schools require, but it goes much further in developing traits children need to be successful: focus, perseverance, self-control, analysis, accuracy, logical thinking and more. It also recognizes creativity and individual strengths.

East Allen already is seeing good results from the work, and Zehr said she believes progress will continue as more teachers master the new approach.

The most encouraging results in education, in fact, are coming from schools that resist the public pressure to focus on basic instruction and instead change instruction from "I taught it, and it's their fault if they didn't get it" to "I need to keep teaching it and supporting students."

Eric J. Cooper, president of the National Urban Alliance, said change will require educators to stop labeling students and to start believing all can succeed. Indiana's emphasis on subject content won't succeed, he said, if teachers aren't trained to recognize students' strengths, their experiences and culture and to connect them to practices that promote learning. East Allen deserves credit for preparing to make that change.

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