

# PRODUCT FEATURE

## Learning together in real life contexts

By Jackie Levin and Mary Sagstetter

Special education students across the country are making news...literally...with The Star Reporter, a new assistive technology-based learning experience created by AbleNet Inc.

The Star Reporter Newspaper Program is the first offering in the Real-Life Learning Programs, a comprehensive solution for building student success and teacher fulfillment through the use of assistive technology.

The Star Reporter Newspaper Program was designed for use by special educators providing educational services to students with severe/profound to moderate disabilities in center-based or inclusive settings to create a school-wide newspaper while learning in context. Since research supports the belief that no prerequisite skills are required for students to use and benefit from assistive technology, any student can be included in the newspaper program.

For most students, real and meaningful learning experiences are the best teaching tools, and for students with disabilities, direct instruction in the context of natural situations is crucial for carryover of learning. Examples of project-based and/or theme-based learning and its effectiveness is pervasive in both the general and



*The Newspaper Project provides students with ongoing opportunities to interact with a variety of individuals in their school community.*

special education literature, but it is geared primarily toward students with mild to moderate disabilities. Although the anecdotal accounts of experienced teachers suggest learning within theme-based and real-life contexts is the most effective medium of instruction for students with all levels of disability, there is little curriculum resource currently available for educators teaching students with the most significant physical and cognitive disabilities.

The Star Reporter is a program that meets that need by providing teachers the opportunity to teach units in the context of real and functional theme-based activities where all students can effectively work on IEP goals and together create a monthly article or school-

wide newspaper. The program provides educators with monthly theme-based units designed using effective teaching elements. Each unit begins with student objectives, an introduction to the theme topic and vocabulary words. During each month, students have the opportunity to work on activities that can increase their background knowledge, phonemic awareness, comprehension and communication skills.

All students can participate in this program, as the structure has been developed to address students' varying ability levels. Simple assistive technology accommodations are provided to assist the educator in making decisions as to how to involve every student in the activity. An example of this

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*The Newspaper Program opportunities for all students to celebrate success!*

is demonstrated in the activity of choosing between two theme-related books. Students can accomplish the skill of choice making through the use of a visual item/symbol display board and eye gazing, pointing, verbally stating and/or using a voice output communication aid. The new Italk2 Communication Aid from AbleNet offers students the opportunity to get involved in learning about and demonstrating choice making skills and it would be one of the recommended voice output communication aids for students at this step of the process. After choosing which book to read, student involvement continues through opportunities to read the story chosen by the student. At this stage, the simple assistive technology accommodation would be the Bookworm, a new literacy tool from AbleNet. This device enables teachers to provide a real-book experience for their

students. Through accessing the Bookworm, via direct key location or switch access, all students would be able to engage in reading the theme-based books each month.

Finally, there is a program that provides educators with supports and accommodations to take the guesswork out of planning for the educator. Educators can feel confident that the program materials will promote effective teaching and the helpful hints to make each lesson flow smoothly. Educators don't have to wish they had more time to spend collecting the best ideas to incorporate in their teaching, because it has been done for them. Now they can put their efforts into doing what they do best: teaching.

Yet, AbleNet knows the lack of instructional resources and technology available for this population is only part of the answer to the question, "What would it take for school districts to support special educators to provide quality instruction for students of all ability levels?" Learning in context in itself requires a greater context. Truly good teaching requires at the very least, educators who are inspired with a clear vision, prepared with the necessary tools, and equipped with the strategies they will need to measure their success and address challenges along the way.

With the goal of supporting this end... AbleNet has included the comprehensive educational program solutions that provide the following key elements school districts would need to empower special educators

to provide effective teaching and learning within real life contexts.

A common vision: developed and supported by the entire school staff to help focus on desired outcomes and to sustain the necessary degree of energy, motivation and commitment the team will need to make their vision a reality.

Staff training on assistive technology: achieved through hands-on opportunities and designed to leave all staff feeling confident and competent they will be able to accommodate the daily lessons to meet individual students' needs.

Integrated lesson plans: step-by-step instruction, including objectives tied to state standards and detailed examples that will allow students of all abilities to actively participate in every part of every activity.

Student evaluation: data-collection protocols and strategies that make it easy for educators to monitor student progress on all program objectives.

Funding support: A step-by-step process for seeking and obtaining the additional resources that sites will need to acquire the assistive technology to effectively carry out the program.

Site support: Personal support for your site. Ongoing contact by e-mail and phone. Information and ideas from other schools involved in the program.

**How it began**

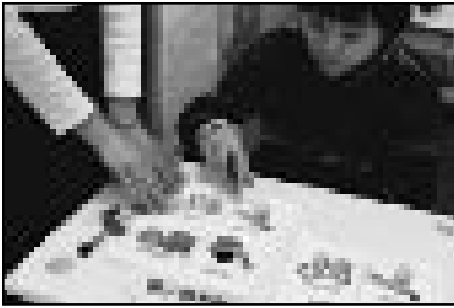
The idea for The Star Reporter Newspaper Program originated in Hillcrest School in Ocala, Florida. Marisol O'Neill, lead special education teacher, discovered the benefits that creating a school wide newspaper had for her students. Marisol states, "My students were very motivated to interact with others in the school to obtain information



*The iTalk2 Communicator from AbleNet provides opportunities for students to experience the advantage of two message communication.*



*The Bookworm, a new literacy tool from AbleNet, provides all students with the opportunity to "read" the same books and participate in a variety of literacy experiences.*



*Students participate in a variety of learning activities related to the monthly newspaper themes.*

and they were having fun learning in the engaging activities that creating a newspaper provided.”

AbleNet took the newspaper theme and embedded it into the greater program solution to include the key elements that districts need to fully support educators with effective teaching and students with successful learning. The prototype of the program was further developed during the 2001-02 school year within Bridge View School, a center-based special education school in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Star Reporter Newspaper Program was introduced to 20 additional sites nationwide in 2002.

#### **Reported success**

Reactions to The Star Reporter have been positive and encouraging. Educators and students at Wingate Oaks School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida are experiencing success and having fun as they participate in the program. The speech therapist at Wingate Oaks, Lawrence Bisceglia, states, “My data collection shows increased communication, sentence length and skill with my highest students and better attention with my more challenged students.” In terms of creating a better sense of community, he says, “The real gains I have seen have been the kids getting out and communicating in a variety of situations. Language and comprehension skills really go up from the interview process. Interviewing their teachers, staff members and peers is an important and ongoing process of the Star Reporter. The program creates community, and in that community students learn.”

Another Florida school in the program, Royal Palm School, located in West Palm Beach has also experienced success. One of the most successful aspects of the program for them was the ability to align the program with the Florida Sunshine State Standards for student achievement. Bob Snook and Liz

Cruise, speech therapist team at Royal Palm School, feel that there is more camaraderie and joint focus on educating all students than ever before. They have observed unity among staff and students come into place and are enjoying the interaction, cooperation and genuine involvement from everyone involved in the program. Bob Snook offers, “It has been very exciting for our school and gives our students so many more opportunities to learn, participate and communicate.”

#### **Key benefits and outcomes**

The Star Reporter represents a detailed and comprehensive plan that empowers any educator to implement a school newspaper, but more importantly, it provides the teaching opportunities that are so important to students with severe and profound to moderate disabilities. There are six key benefits and outcomes that can be expected when involved in this program.

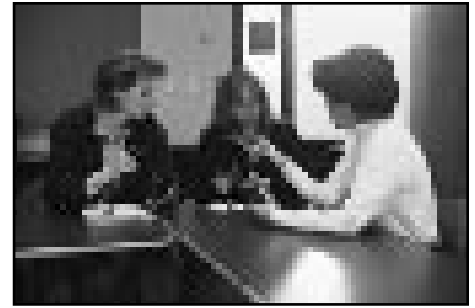
1. Daily learning activities that are engaging, motivating and fun
2. Increases opportunities for students to work on a wide range of functional goals
3. Builds staff competence with assistive technology that supports the program
4. Daily lesson plans that are detailed enough to meet a wide range of individual student needs
5. Links daily newspaper activity to standards and student Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals
6. Measures student progress easily and effectively

#### **Links to standards**

The Star Reporter provides curricular integration through alignment with general education standards and functional areas as defined in the students’ IEPs. The objectives provided at the beginning of each section are linked to the standards that are common across most states. Although alternative assessment requirements and practices vary from state the matrix provided makes it easy to align specific IEP goals with the standards for each step of the process.

#### **Summary**

The Star Report Newspaper Program is a new, innovative comprehensive program that incorporates assistive technology training, assessment and a step-by-step funding process. It includes ready-to-implement thematic units that provide educators with what



*Teachers participate in assistive technology training and planning sessions to ensure that all students are actively engaged in meaningful learning activities.*

they need for quality teaching and what ALL students require for effective learning.

For more information about The Star Reporter Newspaper Program and the products mentioned in the article, contact the authors at AbleNet Inc., 1081 Tenth Avenue SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414; Phone 612-379-0956 or 800-322-0956; E-mail <customerservice@ablenetinc.com>; Web site <www.ablenetinc.com>.