

UF website, app help ninth-graders conquer Algebra 1

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TAMPA – When Samantha Baker was preparing for the Algebra 1 end-of-course exam as a Coleman Middle School seventh-grader two years ago, she went over notes she took in class and worked through a study guide provided by the teacher.

But having an interactive program including a cell phone app with videos and practice tests as an extra resource would have been beneficial to her and her classmates, she said.

“I know I would be a lot more motivated to study if it was on my phone,” she said.

It turns out Baker was just fine studying the traditional way – now a freshman at Robinson High School, she ended up earning a 5, the highest possible score. But many students do struggle on passing the exam, which is required for graduation, and could use a little extra help.

Last spring, nearly half of Florida’s ninth-graders who took the exam failed.

Locally, those numbers were even higher, with 68 percent in Hillsborough County and 66 percent in Pinellas County failing the exam in the spring. In Pasco County, 46 percent failed.

Their ninth-grade peers the previous year performed even worse on the exam, prompting a team from the University of Florida’s Lastinger Center of Learning to create a free online resource called [Algebra Nation](#), which is full of interactive tools to help students prepare for the test.

Algebra Nation was developed over six months with the help of math teachers across the state, according to its UF project manager, Boaz Dvir.

“We built it initially for students to prepare for the end-of-course exam,” Dvir said. “So many failed, we wanted to help them.”

Launched in January, Algebra Nation originally required students and teachers to sign in using a Facebook login and password. Once on the site, they could watch instructional videos and take practice tests.

On Nov. 1, UF unveiled Algebra Nation 2.0, a newer version of the program that students and teachers may access with their school district log-in information, which makes it much easier to use on many school campuses, where Facebook is banned.

There is also a smart phone application and free work books teachers can order, as well as a professional development piece in the works that is funded by a \$250,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and is slated to kick off this summer.

“It’s much more than an app,” Dvir said. “It’s become a movement.”

The site also includes an “algebra wall,” where kids can post questions, suggestions or problems for their fellow students across the state to see.

“What’s cool about it is it’s primarily a peer-tutoring zone,” Dvir said. “It’s almost entirely students helping students. At its peak, he added, “we had between 800 and 1,000 posts a day by students.”

In Hillsborough high schools, Algebra Nation supplements the curriculum of all math courses that involve algebra, including remedial courses that are required for students who fail the end-of-course test, commonly called EOC.

“It’s a nice fit,” said Michael Smith, Hillsborough’s secondary math supervisor. “Our students have full access. They can go home and get online to study for algebra.”

More than 200 Hillsborough teachers use Algebra Nation in their classes in some way, said Donna De Sena, a district math resource teacher.

“This year, students and teachers like it much better because there are actual work books,” De Sena said. “A

lot of students like logging in from home, where they can go through their Facebook app.”

Algebra Nation is funded by the state Legislature and aligned to the state’s academic standards. The Florida Department of Education and Gov. Rick Scott’s office are also on board, as well as nearly 4,000 teachers in 1,000 schools in districts across the state.

The EOC exam is looming for Hillsborough students currently taking algebra. It will be offered Dec. 2 through 22. The school district’s [secondary math website](#) has additional resources for teachers, parents and students.

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