



MCPSS schools show off how they're using Algebra Nation tutoring tool

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Stephanie Maddox's Algebra I students at Causey Middle School got a surprise visit last week. They didn't know his full name, but they recognized Darnell Boursiquot as soon as he walked into the classroom.

He is, after all, their algebra tutor.

Boursiquot is one of the tutors at Algebra Nation, an online resource that is available to Mobile County Public Schools Algebra I teachers and students this year. Representatives from Algebra Nation and the Alabama Department of Education visited several schools last week to see how the program is being used in Mobile County.

MCPSS is using Algebra Nation at no charge this year as a pilot program. The state would have to purchase it for it to be available to other systems statewide.

Developed by the University of Florida and an educational technology company called Study Edge, Algebra Nation combines video lessons accessible by website or a smartphone app with a workbook as a complement to a student's Algebra I lessons at school. The video lessons are led by a virtual tutor who can augment each day's lesson and reinforce it at home.

There are several tutors from which to choose in the Algebra Nation program. Maddox chose Boursiquot, she said, because his teaching style most closely mirrors her own. He entered her classroom last week to gasps of recognition from her students, who then went through a video lesson with his on-screen image while he and the other visitors looked on.

"It's always something to get used to, to be able to see yourself on the video and listen yourself, but it's always exciting to be in a classroom where you see the students are using it and they're enjoying using it, and it really helps them," Boursiquot said. "To me, that's the whole mission of my job – to make it as easy as possible for them, and to make sure they're learning and that they're having a good time doing it as well."

The website also includes a feature where students can help tutor their classmates on the Algebra Nation "wall." During their stop at Causey Middle, Algebra Nation representatives presented Baker High student Versailles Boykin with an iPad last week for his volunteer work tutoring on the wall.

"Our teacher inspired us to do it. I'm already good at algebra, so it was something I'd probably like," Boykin said. "It's helped me a lot. When I'm stuck on a problem, I just watch a video, or we watch them in class."

In addition to Causey, the Algebra Nation and Alabama Department of Education officials also visited Calloway-Smith Middle School and Theodore, B.C. Rain and Vigor high schools.

Helen Miles, middle school coordinator and secondary math supervisor for MCPSS, said Algebra I is a pivotal point in a student's development of mathematics skills, and the program is a particular help to students who are having trouble picking it up.

"Algebra I is the gate-keeper, most people would say. We need more help with that," Miles said. "So for a student to be able to go online and click a video and watch that as many times as they want to, and they can go to another person and watch them present that same material, I think that's a great help for our students."

That – and the enthusiastic response he got from the students last week – was music to Boursiquot's ears.

"The most important thing I've seen is that it engages them in a different way. It makes them eager to learn," he said. "The kids kind of take ownership of what they're learning and they get excited about it, and I think that's the best way to encourage them to be able to learn."