

Science curriculum credited for increase in MCAS scores at Lincoln-Thomson

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LYNN — KnowAtom, a science curriculum program that stirred some School Committee debate, is paying off in a big way at the Lincoln-Thomson School, according to school officials.

“Our fifth grade MCAS science scores went up 25 percentage points in the first year and it wasn’t even a full year,” said Lincoln-Thomson Principal Helen Mihos.

Since then, students have performed 11 percentage points above the state average on the MCAS and no student has scored in the “warning” category, she said.

Mihos instituted the Salem-based interactive science curriculum in 2009 after seeing it work in the Tracy School. The Tracy School implemented the program in 2006 and saw its MCAS scores in proficiency increase 12 percentage points.

The program has not been without debate, however. Concerns were raised by some School Committee members last year because the program is expensive and is not offered in all schools.

Superintendent Catherine Latham said Monday the program is in eight schools: Lincoln-Thomson, Tracy, Lynn Woods, Cobbett, Connery, Harrington and Brickett elementary schools, and Marshall Middle School.

“I know it’s expensive, but I know it’s wonderful also,” she said Monday.

KnowAtom CEO Frances Vigeant said the hands-on science curriculum costs communities \$8.60 per student per month.

Multiply that by a 180-day school year and 253 students, and the real cost of the program is closer to \$21,753 for the Lincoln-Thomson School alone.

“But the real cost is doing nothing,” Vigeant said.

Latham said the School Department only pays for three schools to carry the curriculum.

General Electric Volunteer’s Foundation, the Dominion Foundation, Gelfand Family Charitable Trust and the Lynn Business Education Foundation pay the bill for the other five schools. The goal, Latham said, is to eventually implement the curriculum in all elementary and middle schools.

“Because of the emphasis on MCAS science has taken a back seat to ELA (English language arts) and math, but we all know life isn’t just ELA and math,” Latham said. “We have a responsibility to engage, enrich and foster enthusiasm in our students for learning everything they possibly can and science is a big part of that.”

Daniery Berroa, a fifth-grader in Gerald Belliveau’s class, said she loves science $\frac{1}{2}$ now.

“I think it’s fun and it’s easy for me to do,” she said. “I’ve only been here four or five months. We didn’t really do anything like this at my other school.”

Berroa transferred recently from the Ingalls Elementary School, which is one school that does not have the program.

Belliveau's students showed off their knowledge Monday to a group of school and state officials, including representatives for several state lawmakers.

The kids built cranes using six simple machines, a wedge, screw, pulley, wheel and axle, cup and incline plane, and tested them for the first time for the crowd.

Kayla Morrill, who worked with Rachel Mann, Joshua Hunter and Sabrina Davis on the project, explained that the crane had to move 30 centimeters and it had to raise its bucket, or cup, 30 centimeters in the air.

Mann said the four worked as a team with a little trial and error before they launched the project's first full-fledge test run.

"It was frustrating sometimes," she said. "We'd build it and a piece would break off or there was too much weight in the cup and it would break."

But the students cheered when their crane worked on its first test run. Belliveau quickly reminded the kids to record all the details of the test run in their journals before trying it again.

"They have to record everything and keep a log," he said.

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