

South schools making grades and schoolwork available online

By Doug Hunt

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NEW MARKET — Parents can be connected at home with their students' school work and grades at a click of the computer mouse through a new online system in South Montgomery schools.

The system is known as PowerSchool and it gives parents and students access to real-time information, such as grades, assignments and attendance information.

"It's been helpful in terms of the parents," Southmont Junior High principal Mike Sowers told school board members Monday night during the meeting in the high school's large group instruction room.

PowerSchool was piloted at Southmont in 2006-07. The elementaries were connected during the current school year.

Parents were given a pin number access code to their student's file at registration. Parents can go online and access secure information about their children in terms of grades, detailed assignment descriptions, school bulletins, lunch menus and personal messages from teachers.

"PowerSchool is the SIS (student information system) market leader and has been for quite some time," Southmont School Corporation technology coordinator Blake Zachary said. "We felt very comfortable in choosing it over other products. We still have to make a lot of customizations and configuration changes to work out bugs and to make it fully suit our needs, but it has already proven to be quite beneficial for parents and teachers alike."

Parents can periodically check on their children's grades or if homework assignments are being done, curriculum coordinator Cathy Rowe said.

"It gives the parents a little more input as far as how their kids are doing," Rowe said. "So far, we have received very positive feedback from parents."

The system takes much guesswork of the equation, for example, if there is a question whether a child did a homework assignment or not, Rowe said.

"A parent can go online and check," Rowe said. "There is no more playing the teacher against the parents. Parents can see what the teacher assigned and there is no question."

Southmont High School principal Kevin Stewart has not heard anything negative about the new system.

"Everything is current when it is posted and parents can see that information right away," Stewart said. "I have had parents tell me they check that on a regular basis. When their child comes home, (the information) helps with the conversation time between parents

and their children — (the system) helps for parents of teen-agers.”

Students’ academic strengths can be seen or where extra work is needed to bring up grades or if more focused courses are needed for continued academic success, Stewart said.

If a student is performing very well in science classes, for example, this may be an indication to parents to investigate additional science classes next time at registration, Stewart said.

A computer screen is not going to allow a direct communication between parents and teachers, Zachary said.

Since this is a relatively new system for South Montgomery, there is still going to be a period of transition for teachers and administrators, which means additional training, Zachary said.

“A lot of teachers at the elementary level didn’t even use an electronic gradebook at all,” Zachary said. “They were still using a paper gradebook. We’re helping them to learn about the system and are encouraging them to use the electronic gradebook to it’s full potential.”

The initial startup fee for the systems was between \$50,000 to \$60,000. There is about a \$7,000 to \$8,000 annual maintenance and support renewal fee.

The system is helpful for students who have to stay home because of illness or if a student forgets what a teacher assigned in one class, Zachary said.

North Montgomery schools has used a similar system for about three years, called K12 Planet.

“This is a powerful tool and we have only scratched the surface for its potential use,” Stewart said.