

A SYFR PARTNER:
I CAN Learn Middle School Mathematics
by Richard Erdmann, CEO and Founder, Syfr Corporation

Math education, unlike reading, is largely the purview of the schools. Reading is heavily influenced by first language, reading in the home, language acquisition in pre-school years and many other factors that are outside the control of school. Math, however, has relatively little influence from non-school factors. Either it is learned in school or it is simply not learned at all. In mathematics, good programs can make a profound difference.

Math does bear some similarities to reading in that students seem to hold their own through about the fourth grade and then begin their inexorable slide and eventual collapse in middle grades. In reading, the lynch pin seems to be the shift from reading skills such as phonics to comprehension. In math, the slide seems to begin with fractions and reach its complete collapse with algebra. Syfr does not have a collaborative relationship with an elementary math publisher and there seem to be many good programs available. The same is not true for middle school. Few programs appear to achieve consistent and sustainable results with high stakes, middle school math tests. I CAN Learn does. While it has demonstrated success with students at all levels of performance, it seems to be the most consistent with the most immediate impact and highest gains relative to other approaches with the lowest achieving students. We have worked with this publisher for the last seven years and accumulated a substantial library of results using many different assessments and several different research approaches.

This is not a program that will satisfy all math educators. There are debates in mathematics (as in reading) about how the subject should be approached. Should the teaching and learning methods be constructivist or direct instruction? Should the curriculum be integrated or strictly mathematics? I CAN Learn uses a direct instruction approach. Alternative approaches can supplement I CAN Learn but I CAN Learn itself is a well-designed, direct instruction program. It is a pre-algebra/algebra program, not an integrated math program – it does not include much geometry or statistics. It does cover a range of skills from fourth grade-level fractions into a comprehensive math program from the sixth grade well into second year algebra.

Why do we think that it works? The student is self-paced and the teacher supplements the program, as the student needs help. Low achieving students typically have the highest absentee rates, so teacher led programs move at the class pace. If the student misses school, the class keeps moving. In this program the teacher is never ahead of the student. All text is read to the student, which means that the program accommodates a much wider range of students than most programs. The software has an excellent lesson design in which a teacher teaches from the computer screen. In this fashion all students are guaranteed access to an excellent presentation of the math concepts and algorithms. In classrooms in which furniture is purchased with the software, students look down at the desktop rather than up at a computer screen making distractions less likely.

The program can be licensed as a software only program at a very modest cost or purchased as an integrated system with hardware, furniture, maintenance and support at a considerably higher cost. There are reasons for each depending on the circumstances of the school and district. Most districts do not have the technology infrastructure to maintain a technology product used as the core program so the comprehensive product with services is the most popular.

I CAN Learn is the only middle school math software product whose research has received the double checkmark status from the Department of Education. They have substantive, measurable results from grades 6 through 10 in many different states, with many different tests. Their impact is almost immediate. The program listed with the Department of Education made an impact in 12 weeks. They also have program results in districts that extend over several years. It is a consistent performer making a significant difference in achievement in schools across the country.

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