



Atlanta's NPR® Station



Home

News ▾

Radio ▾

TV ▾

Education ▾

Community ▾

Support ▾

About ▾

Contact Us

Google™ Custom Search



More Intelligent Radio On WABE
25 new hours of new local programming



Preserving History
Cyclorama Secrets: The Hidden Details In The Battle Of Atlanta Painting



WABE Is Social
Join the WABE Community on our Facebook Page

Quick Links:

[Weather »](#)

[Traffic »](#)

[AtlantaPlanit.com »](#)

[Community Events Calendar »](#)

[American Graduate »](#)

Features

5:44 PM MON JUNE 25, 2012

Has Clayton County's "Virtual" Alternative School Failed Troubled Students?

[Share](#) [Tweet](#) [+1](#) [E-mail](#) [8 Comments](#) [Print](#)

By [JIM BURRESS](#) & [CHANDRA THOMAS-WHITFIELD](#)



Clayton County spent all school year trying an experiment. They issued their most challenged students a laptop. Sent them home. And hoped the children would learn.

Monday evening, administrators are scheduled to update the school board on how the



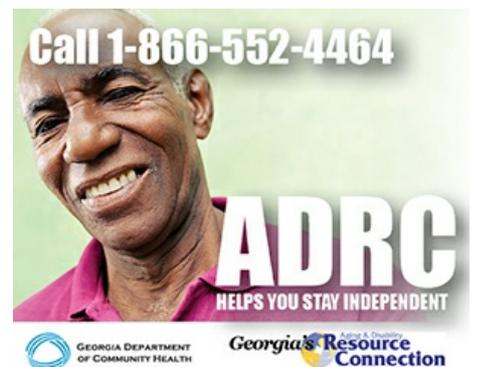
Connect with Us



Find us on Facebook



Follow us on Twitter



Radio

Television

program worked.

But some parents, teachers, students and outside experts are convinced that the “alternative virtual academy” came at a high cost to low-performing students.

Chandra Thomas-Whitfield reports.

(verbatim of script is below. To hear this story's audio, click "Listen" above)

It's orientation day at the Perry Learning Center in Jonesboro. This is where students who've been kicked out of traditional schools end up.

For the first time the students will use a computer program called OdysseyWare. Teachers are explaining how it works.

Middle school students use the program on site four hours a day with teacher help.

But not high school students. They work from home on laptops. Once a week they go to Perry for tutoring and to take tests.

In August, before the program started, principal Melvin Blocker said OdysseyWare was a way to meet students where they are.

“If we give them an opportunity like OdysseyWare, which is a beautiful program, it motivates them to want to continue to work and not dropout. So that's our goal.”

Superintendent Ed Heatley said the program also addresses discipline problems.

“What we see is that the discipline issues will go down. So if you're not dealing with discipline then you can deal with instruction.”

That was the plan at the start of the school year.

Now that school's out, critics inside and outside of the school system say it didn't work.

“You're basically taking the kids that need the most help and the most guidance and you're taking away that help and that guidance.”

That's a teacher who works at Perry who agreed to talk on condition of anonymity.

“If you um cut the amount of administrators in half, you no longer have to pay to turn the electricity on in the building, keep the lights on -- you've eliminated the amount of staff members you have to pay. In terms of saving money this was a great move, but in terms of helping kids this was a horrible move.”

Clayton County faced a \$40 million budget deficit. Teachers say the virtual academy cut costs. But did students end up paying?

“There are kids that have essentially lost a whole year in educational opportunity. Someone was looking at the books saying, you know, we need to save money. You know what we can take the kids that are the screw-ups in the first place, let's throw some laptops at them, you know, we've got this cool program it looks good on paper it sounds really really good.”

Another teacher says some students did learn. But the majority didn't. They learned to guess well.

“But as far as retaining or learning the actual information is was quite obvious when it came to tests and quizzes that they lacked, really, the foundational knowledge in each of their subject areas, for the most part.”

Both teachers say they received one day of OdysseyWare training. They felt unprepared.

So did some students, including eighth grader Zakia Murphy.

He says he got suspended so many times the school eventually sent him home with a laptop.

 Listen Live

WABE 90.1 FM

On air **A Closer Look with Rose Scott and Denis O'Hayer**

2:00PM BBC Outlook

[Full Schedule](#)

[HD Stream 2:WABE Classics](#)

[HD Stream 3:WABE NEWS](#)

Podcasts & RSS Feeds

All Content

 Podcast

 RSS

[View all podcasts & RSS feeds](#)

Most Active Stories

[Senate Says Cities Can't Ban Pit Bulls, Other Dog Breeds](#)

[Atlanta Might Remove DeKalb Avenue's Reversible Lane](#)

[Dolphin Trainer Death Shakes Georgia Aquarium](#)

[Georgia Senate Passes Resolution Challenging AP US History Exam](#)

[Kids Are Learning To Be 'Kind,' 'Respectful' In Ga. Schools' Behavior Intervention Program](#)

"I mean don't get me wrong, we were doing work and all but, it wasn't enough to where we learn and it wasn't enough for it to stick to us. I know I don't like school but I do want my education."

He doesn't think laptops provide that.

"I be wanting to do work but I don't have no textbooks or none of that to do my work with. My momma is only able to help me out on certain stuff."

Deidre Murphy is Zakiya's mother.

"I'm computer illiterate and so is he. And it's frustrating. I mean who learns anything on the computer?"

Clayton County School leaders declined our request for a follow-up interview.

While school leaders have been tight-lipped, community critics have plenty to say. Clayton County NAACP Chapter President C. Synamon Baldwin says the laptop program should be illegal.

"Statistics show that here in the state of Georgia alone 66% of those who are in prison have not graduated from high school. So, I think it's incumbent upon the community and for us not to put all the pressure on our children. -- For us to educate them and not expect them to educate themselves."

Jennifer Falk co-founded the Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline. She has researched alternative schools in Georgia for more than 10 years.

"Anywhere between 30-40% of these kids have been diagnosed with special education needs. So how does sitting at home with your laptop with unsupervised instruction help any of those issues? I'm not sure it does."

Clayton County has not said whether it plans to continue the laptop program next year.

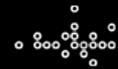
That was Soros Justice Media Fellow Chandra Thomas-Whitfield reporting.

WABE's Jim's Burress produced this story.

WABE 90.1 FM



PBS



AMERICAN PUBLIC MEDIA



LISTEN LIVE

- WABE Mobile
- WABE Livestream
- WABE Classics
- WABE News

RADIO PROGRAMMING

- Full Radio Schedule
- Programs A-Z

OUR SITES

- PBA30
- Atlanta PlanIt

SUPPORT

- Support WABE 90.1
- Volunteer
- Cornerstone Society
- Underwriting

COMMUNITY

- Facebook

GOVERNANCE

- AETC Board of Directors
- Community Advisory Support Teams
- Public Meetings