

For-profit company teaches to test

Education | About 16,000 children in Oregon practice for state exams by using Study Island's material

By **MAYA BLACKMUN**
THE OREGONIAN

Students across Oregon are busy taking state assessment tests, and 40 schools are using a Texas company's program to boost their students' scores.

For an average annual fee of about \$1,500, the schools have signed with Study Island, a Dallas for-profit venture that promises its online test preparation

program is based on Oregon standards and will boost test scores.

Teachers and principals at a number of schools in the state say they are excited about using the Study Island program, but the spread of the company to Oregon has raised some eyebrows at the state Department of Education.

Ed Dennis, deputy superintendent of Oregon schools, says some state education officials worry that confusion might arise that they have endorsed the program when they have not. He says that, as with any kind of student or professional development help, "Our caution is: Buyer beware."

Study Island has offered state

standards-based learning programs since 2000, starting in two states and doubling in size each year to serve about 13,000 schools, 380,000 teachers and 5.7 million students, says J.W. Marshall, the company's marketing manager. He estimated that includes about 400 teachers and 16,000 students in Oregon.

He says schools use general funds, federal grants and private donations to pay for the program.

Every year, Oregon's public school students take tests to see how they fare compared with state-set benchmarks

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for math, reading and writing. State and federal education officials judge schools based on those test results.

Kathy Malone, math coach at Conestoga Middle School in Beaverton, wishes the Study Island program could spread to more students in the school and district.

She says Conestoga has used Study Island for about a year, mostly as an intervention with struggling students. About 100 students spent about 55 minutes every other day using the program for about six weeks last spring, she says, and they gained an average of three points in reading and math on state tests in 2007 — considered a significant gain among educators.

"As a math teacher," she says, "I know the standards and I can read the question. I had no doubt they match."

Because the program is online, students can practice at home or at school, and those without Internet access can use computers at local libraries. She says the students find the practice tests — with games mixed in — fun.

Cathy Caldwell, the company's math and science content manager, and Heather Harper, the language arts and social studies content manager, say they rely mostly on the Web sites of state education departments in developing the questions.

Kim Vogel is principal of Park-

Study Island in Oregon

In the state, 40 schools are using Study Island, a Dallas, Texas, company's Web-based state test preparation program. The schools are in 16 counties, from Washington to Wallowa and Jefferson to Malheur. They include:

Clackamas County: Eagle Creek Elementary, Estacada; Rowe Middle, Milwaukie; Sunrise Middle, North Clackamas; Park Place Elementary, Oregon City

Deschutes County: Three Rivers Elementary and La Pine Middle, Bend-La Pine School District

Hood River County: Mid Valley, Parkdale and Pine Grove elementaries

Lane County: Spencer Butte Middle, Eugene; Child's Way Charter School, South Lane School District; Thurston Middle, Springfield

Multnomah County: Peninsula Elementary, Portland; Glenfair and Sweetbriar elementaries, Reynolds School District

Washington County: Tom McCall Upper Elementary, Forest Grove; McKay Elementary and Cedar Park, Conestoga, Stoller and Whitford middle schools, Beaverton School District

Source: Study Island

To learn more about Oregon's standards and state assessments, visit the Oregon Department of Education's Web site at www.ode.state.or.us. To learn more about Study Island, visit www.studyisland.com.

dale Elementary School in the Hood River School District. Her school is in its third year of using Study Island, mostly in the after-school program but also in classrooms as an enrichment activity.

She knows some may question giving children test practice rather than additional instruction. But kids need help to gain comfort and confidence with

tests, she says, and schools are being assessed as well "with a high-stakes test."

"Like it or not, we have to spend some time, not a lot, to teach kids, 'What information do I need to do this successfully so I can show what I know?'"

Schools can provide test preparation themselves, but the companies make it easier and more convenient, says David Conley, director of the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon.

"There's no bad knowledge," Conley says. "The question is, 'Do students understand the concepts underlying what's being tested and can they use the knowledge to do interesting and complex things?'"

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