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CLINTON — With the help of computers, students in East Feliciana Parish needing remedial math instruction are catching up twice as fast.

The computers, which have been used in the parish for remedial instruction since 1979, are proving to be less expensive and more effective than human teachers, said T.W. Prewitt, director of Chapter I programs for the East Feliciana Parish School Board.

Chapter I programs are federally funded and designed to provide remedial teaching to students who are considered educationally deprived — that is, they are one or more grades below their age level.

Achievement test scores for the past three years show that students using the computers have made twice the gains in arithmetic in one year than they would have made with teacher-directed remediation, Prewitt said.

"The computer can provide intensive drill exactly where the student needs it," according to Prewitt. "Instruction is on an individual basis. The computer moves to a higher lesson if the student is answering correctly, or drops to a lower level if necessary."

The computer's per-pupil cost is about $200 per year, Prewitt said, with the initial cost of the system prorated over the expected life of the computer. Teacher-provided remediation costs about $600 per student per year.

Computer lessons take only 10 minutes per day, compared to a 45-minute session needed with a teacher, Prewitt said. The student misses only a part of his regular instruction, instead of having to be pulled from another class, such as physical education, to get the remedial help.

Initially, the computers utilized only mathematics programs for students in the third grade and up.

In 1981, a remedial reading program was added. Gains were so significant,

Prewitt said, that as many additional remedial reading students as the terminals could accommodate were scheduled for 1982.

About 450 students in the parish are now getting remedial instruction through computers, Prewitt said.

"But we're only serving about 50 percent of the students that need remediation," he said. "The program has never been fully funded so we can serve all who need it. But it's the same nationwide," he added. "We serve those that need it the most and can gain the most from the instruction."

Usually the sooner a student that needs remediation gets that instruction, the sooner he can return to regular classes, Prewitt said.

The problem with the computer was that students below the third grade were not able to read instructions on the computer screen.

Now that problem has been solved — the computer can talk.

Wearing headphones, first- and second-grade students listen to instructions and hear the computer voice pronounce letters, words and phrases. The computer will ask the student to repeat the words or phrases and then may ask a comprehension question.

An example: The computer tells the student, "Say these words after me. Large.

Other. Ready." After the student repeats the words, the computer says, "Type the word that means the opposite of small."

If the student gives the correct answer, the computer responds with "correct," and moves on to another exercise.

At the end of each session, the computer lets the student know how well he did that day.

Teachers can listen in on the lessons with their own headphones. Also, teachers get a printed report of the student's progress each week.

Prewitt said that each year between 25 and 30 percent of the students reach their grade level and return to regular instruction.