

Autoskills providing new hope for dropouts

THE AUTOSKILLS computer software has been improving communication skills in marginalised communities across the island, according to Claire Harrisingh, Jamaica National Building Society (JNBS) Foundation special projects manager.

Working closely with the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA), the JNBS Foundation purchased the software licence for \$1.4 million last year for use in several community centres, where the programme has been gradually empowering young people.

"As a result of the use of Autoskills, many young persons have made significant improvement in their literacy and numeracy skills and increased their self confidence," Harrisingh said.

The computer software provides users with an individualised, highly effective and scalable literacy intervention solution. It is designed to help struggling students of all ages, skills and abilities, to master the fundamental skills of reading. The Autoskills products use a research-based approach that is proven to generate significant and sustainable gains for at-risk students of all ages.

LEARNING CENTRE RESOURCE

The programme is being used in learning centres established by the VPA in inner city communities including Tel Aviv, Jones Town and Rose Town, as well as the JNBS Foundation's network of all-inclusive resource centres, 'The Source', which provides a stimulating learning environment for youngsters in four communities – August Town, Maverley, Treasure Beach and Ocho Rios.

"In Maverley and Treasure Beach, the stigma of illiteracy or difficulty with reading has been removed by providing this private service which simultaneously improves computer literacy," Harrisingh underscored.

"It's about using technology to help to bring harmony to these communities," Dr Elizabeth Ward, chairman of the VPA comments, also noting the continued pressure violence placed on the country's infrastructure and human resources, especially young men.

"Violence continues to be the leading cause of death among males, costing the health sector more than \$2 billion annually, to treat injuries resulting from violence," she said.

The VPA, which has also been collaborating with the Ministry of Health to establish the centres around the country, identifies a host of benefits young people have



CONTRIBUTED

Chad Morgan, administrator of The Source located in Maverley, St Andrew, assists students utilising the Autoskills computer programme. The computer programme is designed to help struggling students of all ages, skills and abilities, to master the fundamentals of reading.

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already reaped from the programme, particularly males, many of whom were only functionally literate before using it.

"Many young people have been empowered by the knowledge they gain, and it impacts positively on their attitudes. Many of them have also been able to find jobs as a result," she added.

In addition to the literacy and computer skills the youngsters gain, the programme provides linkages to entrepreneurial and job placement opportunities, as well as skills training through the HEART Trust/ NTA.

"This centre will certainly complement our community policing strategies, as we seek to target at-risk young males, so we can help to channel their energies into more productive areas," said Linval

Phoenix, police inspector of the South St Andrew Division which received two new centres recently.

"We want to reach as many of our young people as possible."

Given the challenges with literacy in his own constituency, Dr Omar Davies said programmes like these "open many possibilities" for inner city youth.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

He said as many as 10 per cent of students moving on to secondary education were not literate.

"A programme such as this is important to the development of relationships between the police and young people," he added, noting that the facility would also provide a common meeting place for young people from conflicting communities in the constituency.

Harrisingh said the JNBS Foundation was expanding its reach to other communities facing similar challenges across the island in an effort to continue the wave of empowerment youth have been gaining from the facility.

"We look forward to introducing the Autoskills software at 'The Source' in Savanna-la-Mar, when it opens later this year.