



## Kurzweil 3000-*firefly* Helps ALL Students at St. John's High School

In many high schools, students who need extra help due to disabilities and those who are considered gifted receive a lot of attention, either with accommodations or advanced placement coursework. The average student, though, sometimes gets lost because the school may not have the right support system in place for this student population. Learning Specialist Michele Nixon found a solution that not only prevents the average student from falling through the cracks but has the added benefit of helping ALL students in her high school.

### Background

Ten years ago, Michele Nixon was asked by St. John's Jesuit High School & Academy in Toledo, OH to develop a program to ensure that their average student was kept on track. Michele had been exposed to the success of learning centers in higher education, so she used that model to create a learning center at St. John's, a private all-boys college preparatory school that serves grades 6 through 12. Michele's goal in creating the learning center was to provide resources to any student who wanted better grades, and especially to mainstream students. She aimed to eliminate any obstacle that might be in the way for a student to succeed.

Called Academics Plus and nicknamed A+ by the students, the learning center is open early in the morning, after school, and during lunch and study halls. Students are free to drop in to participate in a variety of services that include review, practice, tutoring in all subjects, student study groups, and technical resources. Volunteer adults, college tutors, peer tutors, and paid tutors staff the learning center.



*Students at St. John's High School take advantage of the availability of the Academics Plus program, where technology such as Kurzweil 3000-**firefly** is available to enhance academic skills.*

### Technology is Essential

In order to service the large numbers of students asking for help, Michele knew early on that technology had to be the cornerstone of A+. She started with Kurzweil 3000®, text-to-speech software that uses a multisensory approach to provide access to text. Michele first became aware of Kurzweil 3000 ten years ago when the mother of a son who needed accommodations purchased and donated the school's first copy. Now all computers in the learning center are equipped with Kurzweil 3000 and are accessible to any student.

"At St. John's," says Michele, "every student is responsible for their own learning. Kurzweil 3000 creates independent and responsible learners because students don't have to rely on someone else to help with reading, writing, or note taking. And with **firefly**, the web-based option to Kurzweil 3000, students can extend their learning anywhere they have an Internet connection."



According to Michele, there is no stigma attached to using the learning center and Kurzweil 3000-**firefly** because everyone goes to A+. "Students with Individualized Education Plans don't stand out as being 'different' and are just as 'cool' as their peers." Students on the school's sports teams benefit, too, as Kurzweil 3000 files have been converted to MP3 files. The athletes can listen to content on their iPods, leveling the academic playing field.

## The Results

Michele has many success stories related to A+ and Kurzweil 3000-**firefly**. "Intelligent students with dyslexia were hiding their disability but they struggled to make the grade in Advanced Placement classes. Kurzweil 3000-**firefly** allows these students to stay in their AP classes and succeed," relates Michele.

She remembers another student who was a slow reader who would find ways to get out of heavy reading assignments. When told he had to read *War and Peace*, the student was encouraged to tackle the book using Kurzweil 3000-**firefly**. "He became addicted to the software, finding he could read faster and comprehend more. It changed his life because he no longer avoided his reading assignments. In fact, he took Kurzweil 3000-**firefly** to college with him."

Another student whose twin brother was going to attend St. John's was worried he wouldn't be able to attend because he had cystic fibrosis, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. "I interviewed the boy and realized he was very smart. He said his favorite thing to do was read but to do that his mother had to read to him," said Michele. She showed him Kurzweil 3000-**firefly**, which the boy described as "magic software," and "he lit up and started to cry because he realized he

could read any book he wanted without help." The student is still in school and does very well.

## The Future

A+ started out small and focused on serving the average student. By the second year, the number of students served doubled. Now, ten years later, nearly 80 percent of the students at St. John's, no matter their learning styles or abilities, voluntarily find their way to A+ during the school year. "The learning center changed the whole school culture and it all started with Kurzweil 3000," says Michele. "Students have been introduced to the powerful reading and writing tools in Kurzweil 3000 and to the convenience of **firefly**. Those who require a multisensory platform, who have a physical or learning disability, or need help increasing their vocabulary, taking notes, or improving their writing, benefit from Kurzweil 3000-**firefly**."

A+ will be expanded to include school library staff who will teach research and media skills. "As we grow our program, we look forward to working closely with parents and teachers to find solutions for any student who is struggling. Kurzweil 3000-**firefly** is an integral piece of this future," says Michele.



*Michele Nixon (right), creator of the highly successful Academics Plus program at St. John's High School, stands with Marcia Chambers who tutors at Academics Plus.*

