EagleEyes: Technology ‘opens so many doors' for Northville’s disabled students

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Northville School District Speech Pathologist Janice Nagle assists Hillside student Demarco Williams, 9, in using the EagleEyes device on March 8. EagleEyes allows handicapped students, who might not be able to control a mouse, to control a cursor on a computer screen by moving their head. Sensors, seen on the side of Williams’ face, monitor which direction he’s looking at and relay that information to the computer. The school district recently received a grant for the system, which is only one of two in all of Michigan’s schools. / JOHN HEIDER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Northville Public Schools student Demarco Williams was pretty excited about the EagleEyes computer-human interface system.

Williams was among special needs students trying out the technology recently in a classroom at Hillside Middle School.

“It's incredible the opportunities it's opening,” Cooke School classroom teacher Lorie Farrow said of EagleEyes. “It opens so many doors and gives them opportunities they never had before. When we find something that works for our kids, we're so grateful.”

EagleEyes will help Northville students ages 3-26 with cognitive and physical challenges. Farrow wrote the grant for it through Old Village School, with the Northville Education Foundation grant used to purchase technology.

The EagleEyes’ controller box that is wired to the sensors attached to students’ faces.

“It's so they have access to a computer,” said Susan Oleson, a speech and language pathologist at Cooke and Old Village Schools for special needs students. EagleEyes will be based at Old Village classrooms at Cooke, and was also supported locally by the Jane Frances Abler Memorial Fund, named for a former student.

Students who can't use a mouse, lacking those motor skills, can with EagleEyes use eye movement for learning, communication and entertainment. It turns electric impulses of muscles around the eye into mouse “clicks,” Oleson said.
Farrow described another student who began to access the computer via EagleEyes: “She could play with a computer program by herself for the first time in her life.”

It was developed in the early 1990s by James Gips at Boston College. Ron Williams, director of education and training for the Salt Lake City-based Opportunity Foundation of America came to Northville to help set up the technology.

“Basically their communication is yes-no command,” said Williams, whose foundation took over the technology in 2003. Students acquire greater freedom to communicate, and one young man in Boston with high intelligence was able to graduate from high school with EagleEyes help.

There are fewer than 100 in the world, Williams said, and the NPS one's only the second in Michigan. Northville educators hope to share it with other districts when possible.

“The Cooke School has really embraced it and seen the potential,” Williams said, noting the technology is easy for educators to use “and see really defined success. It provides them (students) that opportunity they wouldn't have had otherwise.”

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