

Personal connection for Ursuline grad

Alum sees company's software in action at school

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Jessie Woolley-Wilson, CEO of Dreambox, watches a second-grade student use her company's software at Ursuline Academy in Wilmington. / Jennifer Saienni/Ursuline Academy

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The building at Ursuline Academy in Wilmington looks much the same as they did a few decades ago when Jessie Woolley-Willson went there.

But, on the inside, the way students are learning looks like something she never would have imagined back then. In a computer lab in Ursuline's "lower school" second-grade students sat wearing headphones, practicing math skills. The program they were using featured vividly colored cartoon pirates seeking gold coins and monkeys seeking bananas.

The program is “Dreambox,” part of the many software choices available to schools seeking to inject technology into teaching.

But for Ursuline, the connection is personal. Woolley-Wilson, Dreambox’s CEO, is a 1981 grad.

“Obviously this is a proud moment for us,” said Lisa Clody, principal of Ursuline’s lower school. “It’s not every day you have the CEO of the company that makes the software you use, but there’s also the fact that one our students made it to the level she did.”

Woolley-Wilson returned Monday to watch her company’s product in use and gather input from teachers. She also spoke to high school students at the school, which is girls-only from the fourth grade up.

As the female CEO of a tech company, Woolley-Wilson can discuss a major issue facing the nation’s education system – too few girls are taking scientific, engineering and math-related jobs.

Nationally, only about a third of degrees in those fields are going to female students, according to a report last year by the U.S. Department of Education.

Woolley-Wilson is one of many who say the way to close the science gap is to help build self-confidence early in school. Because the “girls aren’t good at math” stigma stubbornly persists, she says females are more likely to be discouraged when they struggle.

“If the class moves on and you’re still grappling with something, it makes you feel like you can’t do it,” she said. “That’s where the technology comes in. We help make sure students don’t get that feeling.”

Dreambox is “adaptive,” meaning the exercises it throws at students change based on how quickly they master the material.

“To me, I’ve always seen teaching as an art,” Woolley-Wilson said. “But with high-stakes tests and class sizes and everything they’re facing, they don’t have time to make that art happen. We want to free them to do that.”

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