More students need a laptop computer for the classroom

Updated 8/23/2010 8:33 PM | Comments 88 | Recommend 11

By Stephanie Steinberg, USA TODAY

Back-to-school supplies for middle school students used to mean pens, notebooks, maybe a new backpack. But for a growing number of families, the list now includes a laptop computer.

"We would never send our own kids to pediatricians that were practicing medicine from the '70s or '80s," says Mark Hess, principal of Sarah Banks Middle School in Wixom, Mich. "Why would we send our kids to schools that are practicing instructional techniques that are decades old? If we did that, it'd be educational malpractice."

A districtwide laptop program in the Walled Lake (Mich.) Consolidated School District starts in the sixth grade and incorporates technology in math, science, English and history lessons. Parents of sixth-graders have the option to buy a $784 laptop and enroll their child in the program; those kids are placed in a classroom where all students have their own laptops. Those not in the program have access to 7,000 district-leased laptops that teachers share on rolling carts.

INSIDE HIGHER ED: Should colleges give students iPads?

The 500 sixth-graders in Walled Lake's laptop classrooms use their computers for most lessons. Parents of sixth-graders have the option to buy a $784 laptop and enroll their child in the program; those kids are placed in a classroom where all students have their own laptops. Those not in the program have access to 7,000 district-leased laptops that teachers share on rolling carts.

Better grades, test scores

"It's just another tool for learning," Hess says. Though they were a novelty a decade ago, "in 2010, laptops should just be commonplace."

Schools across the country have a similar mind-set. In 2000, Maine entered an agreement with Apple to provide all seventh- and eighth-graders in the state with laptops. This year, Maine gave about 70,000 laptops to middle and high school students.

The goal: a laptop for every student in grades 7 through 12 by 2013, says Jeff Mao of Maine's Department of Education. The program costs $242 per student, or about $17 million each year. "Some people will say, 'Wow, that's a lot of money,' but that represents less than 1.5% of the total education budget," Mao says.

School officials say laptops improve grades, boost critical-thinking skills and increase collaboration among students. Since the Walled Lake district implemented its laptop program about a decade ago, the officials say, achievement in all subjects has increased in grades 6-8.

In 1999 and 2000, researchers from Wayne State University and the University of Memphis analyzed student achievement with laptops. Thirteen teachers said students had better research and writing skills, more interest in school and improved self-confidence. Most students said their research and computer skills had improved.

At the Reyburn Intermediate School in Clovis, Calif. — where one-third of the students speak English as a second language — about 350 seventh- and eighth-graders own a laptop for classroom use. Teachers have seen grades and test scores rise among these students, says laptop program coordinator Debbie Allee.

But learning is not just about the technology.

"There's this perception out there that laptops would improve student achievement," Hess says. "It's just like a calculator. Giving a child a calculator does not necessarily raise their math score."

'A top priority,' even in recession

Students without laptops get the same curriculum, says Walled Lake Superintendent William Hamilton. Students in the program, however, benefit from the skills they gain.
"You'd have to be living in a cave to not be aware of the fact that technology is a critical part of a skill set people use in the real world," he says.

Parents, too, see the value of computer skills. Though Michigan was hit hard by the recession and has one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, enrollment in the laptop program has not dropped in the past few years.

"Because of the economy, we wondered if the program would fizzle out, but it just hasn't," Hamilton says. "A significant part of our community thinks this is a top priority, and they've hung in there."

"It's just part of their daily routine," says Kim Wolfe, whose four kids are in grades 2 through 7 in Walled Lake. "In the morning, they grab their backpacks and grab their laptops." She has spent more than $1,300 on laptops for two kids and plans to buy two more for her younger kids.

"This computer program is absolutely a blessing," she says, especially for Jacob, 12, who has a reading disability. "It would take hours and hours to finish homework, but because he has a laptop, he's keeping up with the other kids."

In 1996, Microsoft launched laptop programs at 29 schools in the USA. The company leased laptops to the schools and worked with administrators to develop sustainable laptop programs — teaching educators how to integrate technology into their curriculums.

Over time, the program evolved into a non-profit and grew; more than 10,000 schools across the nation participate.

While the non-profit doesn't donate computers, it helps schools set up systems where families who can't afford laptops can borrow or rent them. In some cases, schools don't charge families, says executive director Susan Einhorn. And as laptop costs continue to decline, the idea of providing all students with computers is "much more feasible."

You might also be interested in:

- 2012 Black Friday Digital Camera Deals (Digital Camera Info)
- Head to Head: Nikon P7700 vs. Canon G15 (Digital Camera Info)
- Panasonic Lumix DMC-GH3 (Digital Camera Info)
- Canon PowerShot SX50 HS (Digital Camera Info)

Selected for you by a sponsor:

- 15 Celebrities Who Don't Have a High School Diploma (Not Like They Need It) (StyleBlazer)

Guidelines: You share in the USA TODAY community, so please keep your comments smart and civil. Don't attack other readers personally, and keep your language decent. Use the "Report Abuse" button to make a difference.

Read more.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. Log in | Register

Submit   Post this comment to Facebook?

Comments: (88)  Showing:  Newest first  New: Most recommended!

888cans (0 friends, send message) wrote: 9/9/2010 8:00:09 AM
I have been teaching technology for six years (K-8th) and the laptop issue comes up all the time. Recently a school here in town has handed all 6th - 8th graders a laptop. The distractions outweigh the benefits at this point, sorry to say. Is it a $400 5 pound word processor for taking notes, probably but that's not what laptops should be used for, period. Do the kids fuss around with FB, yes. Netbooks can be had these days for $225 or so, forget the full size laptop. If your district is not looking at Netbooks shame on them.

Recommend   2 | Report Abuse

mgenna (0 friends, send message) wrote: 9/3/2010 6:24:52 PM


I am the grandmother of 2 graduates of the Walled Lake schools who participated in the lap top program. These students and their classmates were really excited about learning. Their teachers were dedicated and had to spend much more time preparing to use the computers in their lessons because there were so many ways that a student could go to accomplish an assignment. They spent lots of extra time and effort in workshops and classes to learn to integrate the computers as a tool for learning. As for the argument of the “haves and have-nots”, this is not really the way it was; it was those who wanted their children to be in the program and those that wanted them to do their work with pencil and paper. The parents had the opportunity to make the choice.

I taught 6th grade in a western Michigan district for 24 years. We did not have this program and it was difficult to schedule the computer lab for the projects that required the use of the computers and to teach the absolute basics of using the computers. These students definitely did not have the same ease in using technology as those who were fortunate enough to be a program such as Walled Lake’s.

Where would I rather teach or be a student? Walled Lake, definitely!!!!

Just to clarify: Susan Einhorn works for the Anytime Anywhere Learning Foundation (www.aalf.org), an independent, non-profit organization.

A school is not an employer, they are not paying the students to be there. Giving each student a $750 asset PLUS support costs will be a big burden on taxpayers - when not all taxpayers have children in the school.

I say - let the parents buy the computers for the children, the school can work out a deal with a vendor. The kids now own the asset and are responsible for it and can keep it after the year is over.
RidingHigh (70 friends, send message) wrote: 8/25/2010 4:09:48 PM

"Why would we send our kids to schools that are practicing instructional techniques that are decades old?" 

Because they work????

Recommend 2 | Report Abuse

Knap1225 (44 friends, send message) wrote: 8/25/2010 3:35:01 PM

Sophlady (301 friends, send message) wrote: 20h 43m ago

Again, computers used in education block social networking sites and games. They are loaded with educational software, not WoW or MP3 downloads. And, they make up less than two percent of a district's budget.

The use of computers in the classroom is usually supplemental to textbooks, as shown in the photo accompanying this article. Students develop the ability to use both traditional books and electronic sources.

I don't know why some commenters are so invested in denying needed tools to public school students. But, my guess is that it is the same mean-spiritedness that has become the calling card of the far Right. The people complaining are those who do not want most American children to succeed.

==========

Not ALL schools have this stuff blocked. My younger brother who is 17 and a junior posts several times a day to his Facebook...... from the school computers.... when he is supposed to be doing classwork. The teachers do not need MORE distractions than they already have. They have a hard enough time trying to prevent kids from texting test answers and such. Just wait until they have full permitted access to their email accounts too, while in class.

Recommend 1 | Report Abuse

More comments on this story: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Next