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SMS EXPLORES NEW TECHNOLOGY

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By Glenn Rolfe, The Leader & State Register

SEAFORD - Instruction in the Seaford School District is in the midst of an ongoing pioneering approach through ongoing technology advancement at Seaford Middle School.

Counting computer labs, sets of wireless laptops, computer projection systems in every room, digital cameras and upgraded teacher computers, Seaford Middle School is home to more than 200 computers.

Technology advancement is linked to instruction with ties to the Delaware Student Testing Program,

"Every member of the staff has been exposed to (the technology)," said Seaford Middle School Principal David Grantz. "It's something that we are encouraging. Our staff is starting to embrace it. I have not seen a middle school in the state, and maybe not any school in the state, that is where we are with technology."

Funding from a past referendum coupled with grant monies has Seaford Middle School on the cutting edge of instruction - both in and out of the classroom.

Current projects include a media center computer lab (replaced two years ago), two new computer labs (replaced this year), two mobile sets of wireless laptops for classroom use, projection systems for each teaching "team" (but not necessarily each room) and technical education and music computers (replaced in the past two years).

Immediate and future plans include evening technology workshops and open computer labs for the community, installation of a wireless network and the integration of handheld computers into instructional activities.

The possibility of computer keyboarding skills instruction beginning next year is under consideration, pending required approval from the Delaware Department of Education.



Nick Hunt and Chermara Cuffee, seventh graders at Seaford Middle School, utilize laptops for a class project. The Leader & State Register/Glenn Rolfe

Dr. Steve Garner, supervisor of accountability, assessment and technology in the Seaford district, said three technology-driven grants (one private, two state) are in place at the middle school.

"All three (grants) are for three years. We're currently in year two, so we're kind of right in the middle," said Dr. Garner. "All the activities will align with the state standards in effort to increase the reading, writing, and math, science and social studies achievement. We have to create instructional activities for the kids in the classroom (hands-on), linked to state standards to show an increase in test scores."

Grants include the Plan for Social Excellence grant, an Enhancing Education Through Technology grant (technology and library integration activities) and a second Enhancing Education Through Technology grant (creating Web-based activities and resources).

In addition, Seaford Middle School recently received word it is a finalist for the Beaumont Foundation Grant, which will be awarded in May. This grant will focus on implementing handheld computers in science classes.

Middle school technology will create tremendous flexibility, allowing students to enter or access data while in class or outside the classroom.

Todd Fishburn, Seaford School District's technology integration specialist, sees handheld computers as a wave of the future. He noted that through access points throughout the building, a student with a wireless laptop or a handheld could "actually be anywhere in the building or even outside the building, and do the email, research or whatever they want."

Mr. Grantz said he was initially apprehensive about handheld computers.

"But Todd said, 'When the kids we have in the middle school now get out in the workplace, handhelds are what they will be using. Let's start preparing the kids for technology, not today's technology but tomorrow's technology,'" said Mr. Grantz.

At Seaford Middle School, science lab instruction can extend beyond building walls through a state-of-the-art projection screen system. For example, during space exploration instruction, a NASA official could be brought into the classroom and interact with the teacher and students through technology.

"Photographs sent back from Mars, for example," said Mr. Grantz. "You could see him (a NASA official) on one screen and on the other screen would be the Mars pictures that he is looking at."

"It's a great tool for whole group instruction. You typically think of blackboard and chalk board," said Mr. Fishburn. "This kind of takes it to the next level. It keeps the kids more engaged, I think.

"It doesn't fully replace a field trip where a kid can actually go see, touch and smell, but it will allow us to access to places either too far away or too difficult to schedule," said Mr. Grantz. "It doesn't replace field trips but it allows us to expand what we can offer."

This advancement will also be beneficial for professional development, Mr. Grantz said, noting it could eliminate a speaker's travel and lodging expenses.

The new computer lab that opened in the Katie L. Handy Computer Lab for 2003-04 has a different twist in design.

"This we designed in such a way that the students would be facing the front so they can take notes and what demonstration is on the large screen," said Dr. Garner. "Then they swivel around and the laptop is behind them. The teacher can see all the computer screens."

One of the grants was utilized to redesign the middle school Web page into a portal, which will offer resources, homework and test schedule information, and access to links commonly used in class or research.

"It's more dynamic," said Dr. Garner. "And some teachers have created their own Web pages."

Seventh grader Chermara Cuffee is among the Seaford Middle School students very receptive to the new technology. She said it makes learning and classroom much easier in many cases.

"It's really helpful," Chermara said. "We don't have to really write it on term paper anymore. We can just get the laptop and type."

This month, Seaford Middle School will open its technology to the community for use through a series of free evening technology workshops and open computer labs. Both programs are funded jointly by a Delaware Department of Education Enhancing Through Technology grant and a Plan for Social Excellence Foundation grant.

Students, parents and community members are invited to attend these sessions, which will focus on enhancing participants' computer skills through hands-on instruction for various software applications. Participants will have direct access to computers and the Internet.

Technology workshops will be held Thursday evenings from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., starting Feb. 19 and running through April 1. Reservations are required and can be made by calling 629-4587, ext. 286.

Evening open computer labs are scheduled Monday evenings from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., running from Feb. 23 through April 5. Reservations are not required for the open computer lab program.

Mr. Grantz said the keyboarding skills are being proposed in a vocational course vein. It will provide keyboarding skills, basic software and introductions.

"Students are needing good computer skills at younger and younger ages. It used to just be a high school thing," Mr. Grantz said. "We're working with our high school. We're probably in the middle stages of planning. Since its state funded they have to approve the curriculum. If all goes well, it will be a course in our fall school for 2004-05."

Handheld computers will initially be introduced in science.

"You can put all the science probes and all that data is captured and instantly students can graph and analyze it," Dr. Garner said.

Dr. Garner reemphasized that this technology is geared to education and the Delaware Student Testing Program.

"Technology is just a tool, a piece of the puzzle that motivates students," Dr. Garner said.

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