

The Delaware News Journal

June 13, 2004

Warner gets grant for laptop computers

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Staff reporter

Athena Fullerton saw firsthand this year just how valuable a laptop computer can be to fifth-graders.

Fullerton, who teaches at Warner Elementary School in Wilmington, was able to give laptops to her students as part of a pilot project in the Red Clay Consolidated School District.

The results, she said, were mind-boggling. Her students improved 26 percentage points on the state reading exam from the beginning of the school year, when they took a pre-test, to the end of the year when they took it for real. In mathematics, her students went up 23 percent. In writing, they improved 30 percent.

Red Clay fifth-graders who didn't have laptops improved, but not nearly as much.

Now, thanks to an \$86,550 grant from the Beaumont Foundation of America, every Warner fifth-grader will have a laptop when school reopens in September. Warner is one of only 120 schools in the country to receive one of the highly competitive Beaumont grants.

"We're going to have laptops across the fifth grade, and we're very excited about it," Warner Principal Irene Hills said. "Our pilot program showed that you can use technology effectively to close the achievement gap."

The "achievement gap" is the term educators use to define the difference in academic performance between middle- and upper-middle class white students and those from lower-income minority families.

Getting the grant was a time-consuming process, Hills said. Teacher Meg Hofer did much of the work putting together the application. She and Hills then underwent an extensive telephone interview with a foundation staff member. The foundation's board made the final decision, Hills said.

"The foundation said it found our project to be compelling, substantive, as well as collaborative," Red Clay spokeswoman Pati Nash said. "We're very proud to receive this grant."

Hoefer said once the computers arrive, students and their parents will be offered classes in everything from word processing and ways to conduct Internet searches for information to classes on Internet safety.

The classes are necessary, Hoefer said, because "most of our students don't have computers in their homes."

Once they become familiar with them, the computers open up whole new worlds for students and parents, she said.

For example, she said, computers enable students at Warner to take animated field trips around the world.

"They get to see things that they wouldn't have been able to see before," Hoefer said.

The parents of students in Fullerton's fifth grade also became more involved with their children's education, Hills said.

"The more parent participation in the process, the higher the rise in achievement," Hoefer said.

"Words just can't describe how great it was and how well it worked," Fullerton said.

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