

Some schools providing laptops

Web Posted: 06/04/2007 11:22 PM CDT

Michelle Koidin Jaffee
Express-News

When school resumes this fall, local educators may take a look at Business Careers High School, where students now are issued their own laptop computers.

Administrators, teachers and students had nothing but praise for the effort when the school year wrapped up recently. After one year of the laptop program, educators said they liked the more technology-savvy way kids were able to learn.

Fifty miles away, however, administrators at Pleasanton High School ended a similar effort at the beginning of the school year, citing misuse of laptops by some students and the refusal of some parents to agree in advance to pay for lost or damaged computers.

Issuing laptops to each student is in vogue these days and some educators hail it as the wave of the future. Others aren't so sure. They say giving kids the lightweight, handy computers too often means dealing with equipment malfunctions, downloaded pornography and cheating. A recent New York Times story chronicled plans in some districts around the country to cancel laptop programs, for those reasons as well as concerns that the laptops have made no discernible difference in how students perform.

In the San Antonio area, four school districts have begun pilot programs to issue laptops in hopes of better preparing students for life after graduation, narrowing the gap between rich and poor, and even spurring another level of thinking. Most local districts, however, have no immediate plans to implement the costly programs that have yet to be proven educationally beneficial. Those that do have the programs issue laptops for the school year and have students return them for the summer.

The jury is still out on whether laptops help improve test scores.

The Texas Center for Educational Research, an Austin-based nonprofit, **Talk Back** is conducting a four-year study involving 42 largely small and rural middle schools, half of which issued laptops to students.

- [What do you think of school-issued laptops?](#)

"Through the second year, we haven't found any effect as of yet on test scores," said Catherine Maloney, the center's director. "As a caveat, it's still early and we wouldn't expect to see changes this fast."

At this point, local educators are basing their opinions on feedback rather than hard data.

"What we are hearing from the students is they're wanting to go to classes, they're feeling more engaged," said Geri Berger, who is principal at Business Careers High School and anticipates that test scores will rise thanks to the laptops. "If we can get them engaged, they're going to learn the content better."

The Northside Independent School District's administrators are surveying teachers, parents and students to determine the value of the \$1.8 million program. That cost included laptops for 550 students, schoolwide wireless connectivity, visits to other districts with



established programs and training for teachers, among other aspects.

"We're asking how much are they using it, what are they using it for, are there technical problems," said Kelly Smith, assistant superintendent for technology services. "The crux of it is: How is it changing teaching and learning?"

Debbie Magnon-Nolting, a social studies teacher at the Randolph High School, is grateful for laptops.

"It's been a godsend," she said, noting that students use their laptops to access data, create PowerPoint presentations and develop brochures and movies. "It takes students to a higher level of critical analysis."

Fewer than 5 percent of the school's 268 students have been reprimanded for misuse, said Bruce Cannon, principal of the high school. And with the incentive of being able to buy their laptops for \$25 at the end of senior year, students have taken good care of their equipment. After four years of providing Gateway laptops to students, Cannon said he's dealt with few problems.

"We track where the kids go," he said, noting that software detects use of inappropriate Web sites.

The software only goes so far, though.

"Nobody has been able to figure out how to crack it this year," said Chad Thomas, a 17-year-old senior. "They got around it last year."

Outside the classroom, some students have used their laptops to watch movies or play games such as Quake, said Brendan Nadeau, an 18-year-old senior.

Such concerns, and others, prompted educators at Pleasanton High to load the Apple iBooks previously issued to students onto carts to be checked out to department heads. After three years of one-to-one computing, administrators felt the disadvantages won out.

Some students didn't have a laptop when needed for lessons because their parents wouldn't agree up front to pay as much as \$250 for a lost or damaged computer, said Janis Schroeder, spokeswoman for the Pleasanton Independent School District.

"Now with the carts, when the teachers want to use them, everyone has a computer," Schroeder said.

What's more, she said, kids found their way around the firewalls blocking certain Web sites.

"It's much easier for us to monitor when we have those computers in our possession," she said. "What they do with them at home we could not control, we could not monitor."

To Kaitlyn Smith, a junior at Business Careers, the problem is not laptops. A student inclined to misbehave will misbehave, she said, noting that she previously had heard of students downloading porn on desktop computers.

Teachers watch closely.

"You can't possibly plug the holes," said Lisa Hahne, campus programs coordinator at the magnet school. "It's got to be in your discipline and training."

(Photos by J. Michael Short/Special to the E-N)

Ashlee Allen (left), 14, and Keisha Abrams (front), 15, take notes on their laptops during a world geography class at Randolph High School, which issues the computers.



Carl Cantin, 15, and Jasmine Uphoff, 15, confer during geography class.

Kaitlyn said kids are attached to the laptops and don't want to do anything to get them taken away.

"The laptop is an extra tool for us to learn," she said. "It's faster to take notes. It's faster to access information. The whole world is sitting there on your desk."

Teachers John Diaz and Carolyn Mullins also have embraced the program. For one thing, laptops allow students to download assignments and use less paper.

"It's not perfect, and we have our technical issues, but we have a system in place," said Diaz, noting that a new service center helps with glitches.

Mullins described incorporating laptops as a "positive challenge" that has required training of both teachers and students.

"This is a tool, not a toy," she tells her students.

"How can you sit here in 2007 and not have it?" she said. "Even if they become veterinarians, they are using a laptop the way you or I or anyone in the work force is."

mkoidin@express-news.net

Online at: http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/stories/MYSA060507.01A..Student_Laptops.356407d.html