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School district's Technology Committee backs pilot to use tablet computers for math, science and literature

The Cedar Grove-Belgium Technology Committee last week recommended the district participate in a pilot "Classroom in a Box" technology program for fifth-graders.

The committee recommended spending $40,000 to purchase two Samsung "Classroom in a Box" kits that would provide 50 Samsung Galaxy note tablets, a cloud management system, warranty, locked storage and recharging cabinets and training for teachers.

The tablets would have apps for literature, science and math and will be used in those classrooms.

Funding would be through a technology grant awarded to the middle school, $14,000 from referendum funds and the remainder, about $15,000, from the technology budget.

"When we started working on this, there was $40,000 in the referendum fund, but since then the gym floor was refinished," said Brad Navis, high school business teacher and a member of the committee.

School Board member Chad Hoopman questioned why the committee selected tablets rather than Samsung Chrome Books, which cost $250 and have a keyboard.

Anthony Summers, technology coordinator, said buying devices for students to use is considerably different than buying a home device. While the package per unit cost is $750 that includes more than the devices.

A crucial benefit is the training that will be provided, he said.

"We're looking for someone to give us management, training an expertise," Summers said.

"It will give us a test of our infrastructure needs and what needs to be modified. It's part of the learning curve."

If the tablets turn out not to be the best device for students, Navis said, they can be used in the library.

The library currently has 30 iPads that are constantly in use, librarian Jackie Navis said.

"The other day we had students doing research on the iPads while all the computers in the labs were being used," she said. "They won't go to waste."

Hoopman also questioned how the devices would be paid for in coming years.

“Are we ready to take this step and replace textbooks with computers?” he asked. “We’re having this expenditure and how can we offset this somewhere else?”

Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger said students who have devices should be encouraged to bring them to school.

Mary Anderson, fifth-grade English teacher, said she encourages students to bring devices to school and shows them how to download free books.

“But I have to know at least seven different ways to download for their devices,” she said. That also takes a lot of time, she said.

Tim Hatfield, who teaches eighth-grade social studies, said he prefers students not use their own devices in his classroom.

“In a computer lab, you can see what’s on the screens. It would be very problematic for me to know what’s on their iPhones,” he said.

Summers said it can also cause problems getting a lot of different devices connected to the wi-fi networks. Several teachers said there are dead spots in the middle school where the Internet is not available.

Board member Gina Sotelo said the board has to find a way to pay for the technology.

“I don’t think there is much chance it (the pilot study) is not going to be successful, whether it’s this device or a different one,” she said. “It’s going to have to be built into the budget year after year.”

Supt. Steve Shaw said there are grants available that the staff will seek out.

“Our goal has always been to put technology in the hands of our kids,” he said. “I think there are opportunities out there, and we’ll have to start writing for more grants.”

Navis said the committee would like to purchase the tablets soon so they can be used this year.

The board decided Hoopman should meet with the committee to discuss other device options and future funding, with a recommendation to be brought to the board at its Feb. 13 meeting.

In other matters, the board on a 4-2 vote decided to increase the hours for the supported study hall coordinator from 28 to 30 hours. High School Principal Larry Theiss said Ben Koepsell has been doing an excellent job and students are doing better in their classes. The 30-hour position makes him eligible for insurance.

Lautenschlaeger and Hoopman voted against the motion because of the insurance issue, preferring that a second part-time person be hired.