

PW-S schools roll out \$1 million tech plan

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/050913/techSM.png> **District to buy iPad tablets, Chromebook laptops for every middle and high school student**

The Port Washington-Saukville School District is rolling out plans for a \$1 million technology initiative that will put an Apple iPad or Chromebook laptop computer in the hands of every middle and high school student by the beginning of the 2013-14 school year in September.

In addition to purchasing about 1,600 personal computers for middle and high school students, the district is buying iPads for teachers at its three elementary schools and will create Web-based learning centers for use in the primary grades. These schools will also receive networked mobile computers to be used in a lab setting.

Students in fifth through seventh grades will receive iPad tablets.



Eighth-graders and high school students will receive Chromebooks — laptops that run the Google Chrome operating system and, unlike traditional computers, use applications that reside on the Web.

Each device will come with a protective case that must remain on the computer, according to the agreement that will have to be signed by students and their parents.

Students will treat the computers as their own for the duration of the school year, using them at school and home and anywhere in between, administrators said.

“Students will literally be able to learn 24 hours a day,” Supt. Michael Weber said. “They don’t need to be in the confines of four walls to satisfy their curiosity about a certain subject with these devices.

“We’ve seen how motivated students are by these devices and what they can do with them, and it’s impressive.”

The district is paying for the computers, staff training and technology infrastructure upgrades with what administrators call “one-time” funding. Instead of funding the purchase with state aid and property tax revenue — a virtually impossible scenario given state revenue limits — the district is using money from the federal Education Jobs Fund it received several years ago, as well as money it has saved in its fund equity account.

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The district also has a technology line item in its budget and plans to increase the technology fee from \$10 to \$60 per middle and high school student to maintain technology. That plan has hit a snag because the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction allows districts to charge fees only for “consumables” such as supplies, not classroom equipment, but administrators said some sort of fee increase will be needed.

“We know our student fees are low compared to other districts,” Director of Business Services Jim Froemming said. “We have room to increase fees. We just have to make sure we do it in a way that is palatable for the state.”

More than two years in the planning, the technology initiative promises to significantly change the way educators teach and students learn, although administrators are quick to point out that tablet and laptop computers in the hands of students will not diminish the role of teachers. In fact, they say, it will put a premium on teaching.

“The paradigm for teaching has to change, and while technology will never take the place of a teacher, it is the most impressive teaching tool we’ve had available to us since the textbook was invented,” Thomas Jefferson Middle School Principal Arlan Galarowicz said. “Will this (technology initiative) change classroom instruction? You bet it will, but the key is also retaining the traditional teaching methods that work.”

Administrators see technology as the key to facilitating their emphasis on individualized learning, an approach that allows students and teachers to pinpoint weaknesses and strengths and address those almost instantly through technology.

The proving ground for technology’s application in the classroom has been the middle school, which has tested computer-based learning using iPads and laptops in summer school and in a pilot program this school year.

The results, Galarowicz said, are higher test scores, more engaged students, a learning atmosphere more in tune with the technology-driven 21st century and the development of new teaching strategies.

“We had to prove this technology can make a difference in the education of students, and we did,” Galarowicz said.

One of the strategies that appeals to both teachers and students and has been used at the middle school is “flipping the classroom,” a twist on conventional classroom procedures in which a teacher will videotape a lecture, then assign students to watch it on their computers outside school. Classroom time normally reserved for lectures can then be used to explore the concepts presented in the taped lecture.

The pilot programs, research and visits to districts that have fully integrated technology into education have convinced administrators that now is the time to invest in personal computers for students.

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“There was a time about four or five years ago when the trend was to purchase Netbooks for students,” Weber said. “We decided to wait and see, and we’re very glad we did because Netbooks turned out to be a fad. By waiting, we had time to see what our middle school students can do with iPads, and it’s remarkable. The possibilities are pretty limitless.”

Port Washington High School Principal Eric Burke said the district will be the first in the North Shore Conference to put personal computers in the hands of students.

“This will open up so many possibilities for our students and their families and our teachers,” Burke said.

Technology, he said, is the best way to prepare students for a future that is changing rapidly because of technology.

Providing a computer for every student to use at school as well as at home ensures all students, regardless of their parents’ financial status, have the same access to technology.

“This really levels the playing field,” said Burke, who noted that about 30% of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced-price lunches because of their household income.

“Some districts in the area, Whitefish Bay for instance, probably won’t do something like this because every student already has a computer. That’s not the case here.”

Burke noted that some students may not have access to the Internet at home, but said the high school, which has WiFi service throughout the building, remains open to students late into the evening.

The distribution of computers will coincide with a series of mandatory meetings for parents and students at the beginning of the school year. The rules and responsibilities for computer use and care will be explained, and students and parents will have to sign user agreements.

Administrators noted that the district has filters in place to prevent students from accessing some Internet sites, and those filters remain in place even if the computer is used outside of school.

Image Information: STUDENTS AT Thomas Jefferson Middle School used iPads during class earlier this school year as part of a technology pilot project. Press file photo

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