

School district seeks missing laptops

Written by Mark Jaeger
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The value of unaccounted for computers loaned to students in virtual program estimated at \$65,000

Misplaced car keys seems like a trivial annoyance compared to the challenge Northern Ozaukee School District officials are facing — accounting for more than 130 missing computers.

As a condition of the district turning over the management of its virtual school program to the National Network of Digital Schools (NNDS), the district has to account for all of the equipment distributed to students enrolled in the on-line charter school.

The problem, according to district officials, is that the record-keeping up until this year was shoddy.

The School Board learned last week that 137 laptop computers loaned to students enrolled in Wisconsin Virtual Learning have not been returned to the district.

Although the number represents about 19% of the computers distributed to virtual students, it is an improvement from the more than 200 computers that were originally reported missing. Officials estimated the missing inventory is valued at more than \$65,000.

“Tracking down all of these computers has turned out to be a lot more work than we thought it would be because no process had been put in place,” Business Manager Walter Clarke said.

“They didn’t keep very good records, or any records.”

Students enrolled in the virtual school are issued district-owned computers, printers, wireless hubs and other materials, but Clarke said the district had been lax in tracking whether the equipment was returned at the end of the school year.

Record-keeping has been more stringent since the district’s technology department was eliminated earlier this year as a cost-cutting measure. The equipment is now being tracked by the business department.

The district bought used laptops when it took over the operation of the virtual program from K12, spending about \$750 per student.

The district borrowed \$1.5 million over four years to pay for those computers, equipment and software licenses when it assumed management of the virtual program. About \$1 million of that loan is outstanding.

“Our agreement says NNDS will assume the balance of that loan so they expect to take ownership of the equipment. That is the problem,” said School Board President Paul Krause.

“To me, this is a question of theft. People accepted equipment and apparently failed to return it. We have assets like that floating around and someone needs to be held accountable.”

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Krause said he wanted to stress “the business department is not responsible for this mess.”

Clarke said the board will be provided a running tabulation of the recovered equipment as it comes in.

He also said tracking down the missing equipment does not seem to be a crucial issue for NNDS.

“They have problems, too,” Clarke said of the company which operates the largest virtual program in Pennsylvania.

The board also learned that administrators are in the preliminary stages of investigating a new program with Verizon that would provide students who attend brick-and-mortar schools with inexpensive netbooks — small, laptop computers — to have high-speed broadband access anywhere in the school.

Although it is too late to implement the program for the coming school year, officials said, it could be appealing to parents considering whether to open-enroll their children into the high school in the future.

A preliminary estimate noted that up to 250 netbooks could be obtained by the district at no cost if monthly broadband access is provided. That program would cost \$54,000 a year.