http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/100412/techLG.png**A pilot program at TJMS in Port has put iPads and netbooks in the hands of teachers and students embracing a new era of personalized education**

Instead of cracking open their textbooks, seventh-grade students at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington turned on their iPads, logged on to the day's lesson and, after instruction from their teacher, went to work during a history class on Tuesday.

Whether this is the wave of the future in Port Washington-Saukville schools — a future in which tablet and laptop computers replace most textbooks and technology is used to usher in an era of individualized learning — depends in part on the middle school, as well as on the district's commitment to creating high-tech classrooms.

"It's important to understand we're not leading the way when it comes to using technology in schools," Principal Arlan Galarowicz said. "We visited 12 school districts last year and a lot of them are ahead of us. We're not that far behind, but we're definitely not leading.

"It's time for us to catch up."

The middle school is piloting a technology program that has put iPads and netbooks — small laptop computers designed to access the Internet —
in the hands of students and a renewed emphasis on individualized teaching.

The nearly $400,000 technology initiative included the installation of wireless Internet service throughout the high school and middle school and the purchase of 120 iPads and 90 netbooks for use at the middle school.

The program focuses on using technology to teach communications and math, but that's not to say that the iPads and netbooks aren't being used in all classes.

"Believe me, the iPads and netbooks never sit idle," Galarowicz said.

Students, he said, are excited about using new technology in their classrooms, and while motivating students is one of the benefits of the initiative, it's not the main one. What iPads and netbooks allow educators to do is individualize teaching in a way not possible with textbooks and standard teaching methods, Galarowicz said.

“The old paradigm is that if kids don’t get it, too bad, we’re moving on,” he said. “That’s not good enough any more.

“My goal is to personalize learning, and that can’t be done in a normal classroom of 30 kids. But it can be accomplished with the technology we’re using now.”

Netbooks and iPads haven’t replaced direct instruction, but rather are being used to complement it.

In math classes, for instance, students who have been taught how to solve a particular type of problem practice it using interactive programs on netbooks. Students who excel are challenged with more difficult problems. For students who struggle, the programs guide them to tutorials that show them different ways to solve a particular problem.

In addition to helping students learn at a pace that is right for them, the technology gives teachers constant and immediate feedback on student performance, Galarowicz said.

“In addition to being based on direct instruction, learning has to be project driven so we can make sure our students can apply what they are taught,” he said. “I’m so tired of kids saying, ‘Why do we have to learn this? We’re never going to use it in real life.’

“We had kids leaving school with homework they didn’t understand. I can’t tell you the number of parents I had call me in tears because their kids didn’t understand how to do math and they couldn’t help them.”

Other classes are using technology in similar ways. Students have been given school e-mail accounts controlled by the district’s servers. While they can’t send e-mails outside the building, they can e-mail their teachers.

“We have a lot of assignments being turned in electronically,” Galarowicz said.

Galarowicz said the pilot project is a good start but the district has a way to go before it is on a par with school systems that have made more significant investments in computer-assisted teaching.

For instance, there are not enough iPads and netbooks for every student at the middle school, and students can’t take the devices home to work on projects.

“We visited other school districts that have e-Backpacks for every one of their students,”

Galarowicz said. “Every kid is assigned an iPad that has their assignment notebook on it and school calendar. They have a e-mail link to every teacher in school. They do everything on their iPads. It’s absolutely seamless.”

In a day and age when publishers are talking about replacing textbooks with electronic books and the Port-Saukville School District is competing on state standardized tests against school systems that have already embraced computer-assisted learning, Galarowicz said, it’s important that the middle school pilot program becomes the standard for educating children.

“We’ll show some gains in test scores because of what we’re doing, but they won’t be as high as some other schools that have been doing it longer,” he said. “That’s not good enough for us. We expect to be the best.”

Image Information: SEVENTH-GRADE STUDENTS Brianna Heinen (front) and Sage Hansen used recently purchased iPads to work on a classroom assignment at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington Tuesday. Photo by Bill Schanen IV