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Since You Asked

School laptops: SAVE or DELETE?

GISELLE GOODMAN Staff Writer

The critics were right and just as predicted, seventh- and eighth-graders in Maine are using their state-issued laptops for games and for entertainment, not just tests and homework assignments.

Here is a sampling of how: During study hall, eighth-grader Sariah Abaroa, 13, of Arundel goes to www.coolmath.com, where she plays numbers games. Last year, Kayla Cogle, then a seventh-grader and first-time laptop carrier, joined a group that followed election results online during lunch. They would also download cartoons that made fun of President George W. Bush.

As for 12-year-old Ella Ross, a seventh-grader at the Middle School of the Kennebunks, she already has plans for her laptop when she has free time in school.

"I like to write stories," she said. "I like to write futuristic stories a lot and stories about different worlds and stuff. They usually involve a dog of some sort."

These tales of laptop use are something to consider as Maine's One-to-One Laptop Program draws to a close. The \$37.2 million program, which started in January 2002 under the wing of then Gov. Angus King, ends in early 2006.

That means the 37,000 iBook laptops in the states' middle schools today (seventh- and eighth-graders have 34,000 of them, their teachers have 3,000) are supposed to go back to Apple Computer Inc. at the end of the school year.

Some cheer the end of this era. Others - including some parents, kids, teachers and policymakers - aren't ready to see them go.

"It will be like being crippled," said Cogle, now 13, now laptop proficient.

Notes will have to be taken by hand again. Instant information will not longer be available to every student at the same time. For many assignments, it will be back to the computer lab, where there are way fewer machines than there are students.

It is hard to tell if this is such a tragedy. There has been no definitive answer to the burning question that haunts the program: Are laptops helping kids learn more? They certainly haven't helped with test performance. The latest round of the Maine Educational Assessment tests showed that middle-schoolers who used laptop computers for two years performed about the same on a standardized test as students before them who never had laptops.

David Silvernail of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, which prepared a report on the first year of the program, says the test results don't speak to the program's success or failure. Stories from the classrooms are where to look, he said, and thanks to the laptops, kids have been more engaged in class, more attentive and more interested in the subjects they are learning.

"Are they learning differently? Are they learning more? We have evidence that that is the case," he said. "When you are in the classrooms, the schools, you can see it. But it is not the type of thing you can put down on paper with pencils to measure with a test every year. I think it is revolutionary but it's hard to capture what that is."

Kelly Fitz-Randolph, a seventh-grade science teacher at King Middle School in Portland, doesn't think it is hard to describe at all.

"They still need to know how to use a microscope, but (the laptop provides) instant learning," she said. "Things you would have had to wait for, things you couldn't get, you can better teach in better time - with hands on and eyes on - than you could without the tool."

What she means, for example, is when she wants to show the students a paramecium, she just has them hop online to find a sample there. No more waiting for microscopes. No more preparing slides.

Fitz-Randolph said teaching the children of today without using computers is like expecting them to count on an abacus at school when they have been using calculators at home.

"They're digital natives. These kids were born with a computer in their hand," she said. "They communicate this way, they hang out with their friends this way. It is part of their lives."

Enough of a part to justify spending another \$37.2 million or more to keep the program going?

Dugan Slovenski, a mother of three boys from Brunswick isn't sure.

"For the amount of money (spent) there should be a definite measurable change," she said. "I'm still uncertain about the need for one-on-one laptop use. Are they there to learn the content or there to help the kids be comfortable with computers?"

Her concern is that the computers only afford kids the opportunity to add more bells and whistles to their projects, and not more content. She is also concerned that students are using the computers inappropriately.

"It's just a high-tech version of passing notes to each other or doing crosswords under the desk or whatever," she said.

The kids who have them say, yes, the laptops are being used for things other than school work.

"Some kids do abuse them," said 13-year-old Donald Bennett, an eighth-grader at King Middle School. "It's just the truth. Some kids just aren't ready. Most kids, though, are ready. It helps more kids than it hurts them."

It certainly helps Abaroa play math games. It has helped Cogle decide who she favors politically. It is also helping Ross write the next great fiction novel about a dog named Ollie, or Jazz, or whatever.

That said, Cogle challenges any critic to give her a good reason why the laptop program should not continue.

"If you had a chance to learn with this (laptop)," she said, "you would change your mind."

Staff Writer Giselle Goodman can be contacted at 791-6330 or at:

ggoodman@pressherald.com