

Beaufort County, South Carolina

Foundation Model to Subsidize Purchases

That strong, rich ocean breeze you can feel hitting your face as it blows across South Carolina's Hilton Head Island and Beaufort County may just be the weather, or it may be the winds of change. Certainly, a sea change of sorts is well underway in the largely rural, rapidly growing 15,000-student district, with its broad mixture of rich and poor, white and black.

Local citizens are quick to admit that "beautiful Beaufort" has traditionally been known for its agriculture and its resort and retirement communities, but not for its educational system.

"We've never been on the cutting edge of education," says parent and community leader Rusty Simpson wryly, "except when it's been the bottom edge."

Now, that's changed. Take a look at Greg DiOrio's sixth grade mathematics class at Robert Smalls Middle School, where children are using Toshiba notebook computers and Microsoft® Office Professional software in their geometry class. Or Claire McKay's social studies class next door, where Jeremy Cole delivers his homework on "Alexander the Great" using an original multimedia Microsoft PowerPoint presentation displayed over a large-screen monitor and complete with voice-over narration, sound effects and animation. Or Jackie Gottfried's language arts class at McCracken Middle School, where Microsoft Word and those ubiquitous laptops are integral to discovering the joys of poetry. This is not your father's sixth grade. Or, for that matter, yours. Kids, parents and teachers in Beaufort, SC are on the cutting edge of education, and this time, they're on the top.

Notebook computers? For sixth graders? When half the district is receiving free or reduced price school lunches? An unlikely image, perhaps, but a highly successful one for 306 students in the Beaufort County School District. The district's goal: to give students the tools they need to boost motivation, burst barriers to learning, turn them into active rather than passive learners, and prepare for an information age that's no longer the stuff of science fiction.

"Laptop learning represents the transition from traditional learning to an approach that can carry students and teachers well into the next century," says Beaufort Superintendent Herman Gaither. "It takes students beyond the classroom, beyond the library, beyond anyplace the teachers have taken them before."

Embracing a Vision

For Beaufort, the amazingly rapid road to laptop learning began exactly one year earlier when Gaither and Anne Carver, co-director of Educational Technology embraced the vision of a connected learning community. Their strategy was to incorporate laptops into

the learning process, providing exponentially increased access at school and home. Their commitment was to overcome the obstacles and turn their vision into reality.

"People talk about making changes in the education system, but learning with laptops seemed to be one thing that really changed the way kids learned, and we realized this was what we needed in our public education system," recalls Carver. "We saw this as a way to create greater motivation, rigor and participation in the middle schools."

"We decided to begin a program for the sixth graders," says Gaither, a 36-year veteran of public education. "We felt that, for our students, this was the grade by which they'd already have acquired critical and basic skills. Also, we could limit ourselves to three middle schools and the training and coordination of three principals and 25 teachers; a manageable prospect."

The goal of a manageable process was built into Beaufort County's thinking from the beginning, and it served the district well throughout the planning and implementation of what blossomed into a 306-student pilot program eight months later.

"A small initial implementation is crucial," says Anne Carver. "It gives you the chance to find out what works, and where the pitfalls are."

Taking the First Step

The district's first step was a meeting with middle school principals and staffs.

"They were excited but apprehensive," says Gaither. "I was emphatic about gaining their support or quashing the idea, and they were supportive, so we moved ahead."

Moving ahead meant assessing parent interest. A survey went out to parents in May, asking if they'd be willing to participate in the program. At this point, the district didn't know what the computers would cost or how much of that cost would be borne by parents.

Rather than wait until all details were nailed down, it continued to build momentum and support while it refined the pilot program's specifics. That dual-track tactic would characterize its overall approach to their learning with laptops program.

"When I first heard about the program, I thought it was great," says Lucelia Baker, the mother of sixth grader Charles. "I saw a story about the program in the newspaper, and I went to several school meetings to learn more. I want my son to participate successfully in the computer age."

The Thorniest Problem of All

Nearly half of the parents of the '96-'97 school year's sixth graders responded favorably to the initial survey. With principals, teachers and parents interested in the program, the school district had to solve the thorniest problem of all: how to give all students, including many from poorer families, equal access to laptops.

Beaufort has a history of support for education funding, and had passed a \$122 million bond issue just one year before, including \$10 million for a district-wide WAN, Internet access and related technology. But having done so, Gaither and his team realized that local voters were unlikely just then to approve hundreds of thousands of dollars more for laptops. Another source of funding would have to be found.

To begin to address this concern, the district convened a meeting with business and community leaders, and encouraged them to form a laptop foundation for Beaufort County.

"We were committed to the idea that no family would be kept out of the program because of its financial limits," says Jane Jude, the Foundation's chairwoman and a local business executive. "And we're fortunate in having a community very committed to public education. That was key to our plan to raise funds privately from the community."

"It was absolutely crucial that we did not separate children by economic status, that we did not create a new class of have's and have not's," says Gaither. "You can't get test scores up without addressing the needs of all students. By providing equal access, the playing field is leveled for everyone."

Providing a Subsidy

Providing equal access to laptops would mean providing subsidy and the private Foundation could take the lead in raising private money, applying for grants, and working with local groups in "adopt a student" programs to make this possible. Beaufort's challenge was to raise the necessary funds, without the support of a major, local corporation to make a significant, up-front commitment.

To do so, it relied on the business leaders in its Foundation to launch grass roots fundraising. Local businesses, community groups, churches and individuals were all solicited. Repeated coverage in the local newspapers helped drum up additional interest and financial support. A Web page describing the program also invited contributions. Dollar by dollar, the war chest was amassed.

There's no single best way for a school district to finance and acquire computers. For Beaufort, the plan called for the Foundation to purchase the laptops from a financing organization that would retain title until the three-year leases and buy-outs were paid off. The Foundation, in turn, would lease the laptops to parents who chose to participate in the program - vastly reducing the investment that parents or the school district would have to have made for outright purchase of computers.

The Foundation negotiated a lease price of \$57 per computer per month. Foundation leaders then chose to underwrite part, but not all, of that lease price. Their rationale: parents and students would feel most invested in the program if they made at least a partial contribution toward the cost of the computers.

How Much is Enough?

But how much of a parental contribution was enough? Gaither and the Foundation members jointly set sliding scales based on ability to pay. The basic \$35 target for the monthly lease payment by parents would require a \$22 subsidy from the Foundation. Students receiving discount lunches would qualify for an additional \$10 subsidy, bringing the family cost to \$25 per month. Students receiving free lunches would receive an additional \$25 subsidy, bringing the family's cost to \$10 per month.

"For some of our families, even \$10 per month is significant but it's not impossible if the family is interested in the child's education," says Gaither.

With the financial model in place and momentum growing among parents, business and civic leaders, the Foundation formally solicited registrations for the program in September. Toshiba notebooks fully loaded with Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office Professional were purchased and the program began.

Choosing Teachers, Providing Training

The next key step in the pilot process was choosing the teachers and providing them with training. The district uses a team approach to teaching, and selected teachers in teams, so that students could use their laptops as much as possible throughout their classes. Teachers were encouraged to submit creative proposals for how they might use the computers, and the educators, 25 in all, were selected. Teachers were trained on hardware, software and instructional integration.

"The trainer demonstrated model lessons using the laptops, but one of the key points we stressed was that we shouldn't lose sight of our academic objectives," says Anne Carver. "We are still teaching academic subjects, not technology. The technology is just there as another tool to enhance and extend education."

In December 1996, each school set its own "Open the Box" event to deliver the laptops to students and their parents. Paperwork was completed. Instructions were given. Boxes were handed out.

"When we said 'open the box,' you could feel the electricity through the room," said Gaither. "It was like Christmas, a magic moment."

Students began using the computers right away, with many teachers giving the students a chance to experiment and get used to the laptops before employing them in lessons. The imminent Christmas break also provided ample opportunity for students to try out the laptops on their own time. By the start of the New Year, Beaufort students and teachers were off and running, learning with laptops.

Easy Familiarity

Just a few months after the laptop pilot program began, sixth graders were using the machines with the easy familiarity that accompanies their use of composition books and three-ring binders. The students take full ownership and responsibility for their

computers, decorating them like traditional notebooks. Administrators and teachers credit the family's financial contributions, which help students feel more responsible for the laptops. They also credit rules and procedures especially designed to minimize theft and damage.

Most of the concerns that parents and teachers expressed about security and damage haven't come to pass. Except for the occasional missing power cord, the laptops haven't been stolen, lost or broken. The 11-year-old students have shown a remarkable sense of responsibility for their new tools.

1999 Update:

Beaufort County now uses nearly 3,000 Toshiba notebooks in its AAL implementation, and the program has grown to include 6th, 7th and 8th grade students and teachers.