

## **Snohomish County, Washington**

### **Public and Private Funding**

The 8,500-student Snohomish, Washington school district had never been big on the use of instructional technology. A couple of its newer schools were minimally networked and upper-level schools had computer labs. But computers in the classroom were a novelty, the Internet was something students only talked about, and the community had recently shot down a school technology bond issue. The school board, teachers and administration knew that things had to start changing.

Now, they are. Some 270 fifth and sixth graders in seven schools are using powerful laptop computers that are enhancing enthusiasm for education and boosting academic achievement throughout the district. In its first year, the program was so successful that more than twice as many students and parents have signed up for the fall of 1997, when the program will expand to include seventh graders as well. Students are using Toshiba laptops to calculate and graph the trajectories of rockets, then share the information in multimedia presentations to classmates. Students who shied away from the burden of writing, editing and rewriting compositions are now crafting creative poems of self-discovery. Students are teaching younger children, teachers and even their parents how to use the machines. In Snohomish, learning now can take place anytime, anywhere.

"The kids light up when they use the laptops to learn," says teacher Kimberlee Spaetig. "The laptops make learning relevant and the students know it. I only want to teach laptop classrooms in the future."

"My math and science students beg me to teach them 'just one more thing' at the end of each day," says Spaetig's colleague, Mike Hyland.

"We see things that make us tremendously excited," sums up Kathy Klock, executive director of curriculum, instruction and assessment for the district.

"Students are engaged in ways they weren't before. The laptops are unlocking doors to learning, so that students who weren't doing well now are succeeding. Parents are much more involved in their children's education. And our community business partners are commenting on the tremendous collaboration now taking place among students, because that's exactly the way they want them to act in the workplace."

### **Part of a Revolution**

Snohomish's exploration of laptop computers began more than a year before the 1996-97 school year. The district's once sleepy, once rural setting was changing as high-tech workers from nearby Everett and Seattle increasingly turned the area into a suburb of the growing high-tech community. Parents who designed computers, let alone used them daily, were among those who wanted their children to be a part of that revolution. The private, non-profit Snohomish School District Foundation, established to accept donations

on behalf of the schools and to award scholarships and teaching grants, began asking what the district was doing to prepare students for a world of technology. So did others.

The district was preparing a strategic plan, and there was broad consensus that the increased use of instructional technology had to play a part. Then Snohomish officials heard about a pioneering laptop learning program in Australia. They sent a delegation including principals and teachers, those closest to the students, to learn more.

"When we saw the possibilities, we were really psyched," recalls Emerson Elementary principal Maureen Cornwell, who went on the fact-finding trip. "We immediately saw two advantages to laptop learning. Students could learn any time, anywhere, and it created important partnerships with parents and business-and that made it easier to get support for the schools. But big question was, could it work in our school?"

### **Teacher Training**

In addition to the approximately 270 computers the district bought for students, it purchased another 100 laptops for faculty and administrators. Putting laptops in the hands of the teachers, not something that every district has done, has been an important step in Snohomish's success, according to administrators and faculty there. But it was only the first step. Next came training.

For their introduction to Windows and Office Professional, the teachers received half-day and evening in-service training from a local Microsoft Authorized Training and Education Center. To encourage their exploration and development of ways to use laptops in class, teachers who volunteered for the program have received a half-day of in-service per month to work together as a team, sharing ideas and techniques. In addition to developing a body of successful examples, this once-a-month group has developed an enthusiasm that's bubbled over into evangelism for Anytime Anywhere Learning. These teachers are now helping to train the larger corps of faculty who'll participate in the program next year. Teachers have already undergone 20 hours of training this spring, and another 30 hours of training is scheduled for the summer.

### **Providing Equal Access to Technology**

As a public school district, Snohomish was committed, and required, to provide equal access to education. It wouldn't be possible to set up a two-tiered system with some students locked out of laptop learning. Financial help would have to be found to enable families in tight financial circumstances, about one-in-five district students were on free or reduced lunch support, to participate if they wished. On the other hand, such an innovative concept would have to be tried out on a small scale before it could expand.

"Our first thought was to try this as a pilot in one school, and we chose the school with the highest proportion of students on free and reduced lunch to demonstrate our commitment to fairness," says Klock. "Then we began to publicize the program and we had strong interest throughout the district. We knew that with technology so limited in most of our schools, setting up one school as 'the laptop school' would be a mistake. So we opened the program to every school that was interested."

To make it possible for every interested family to participate, the school district relied on a combination of community donations to the Snohomish School District Foundation, private and public funding and parent support, including a grant from the State of Washington (which supported equipment purchase and infrastructure). It set up a multi-tiered system in which parents could buy the computers outright, rent them from the district over four years or if they qualified, participate in the district's low cost subsidized rental program.

Parents who felt they could afford the computers, nearly half of the total first-year group, paid the district's vendor directly by cash or check. Many families signed-up for the four-year, rent option. They paid a \$30 contract fee, \$70 deposit, and \$58 monthly payments. Forty-two families qualified for and participated in the subsidized "equity rent" program by virtue of their previous qualification for the free/reduced lunch program. They paid the same contract fee, deposit and insurance, but only \$10 month rental.

### **The Challenges**

Although it worked out all right in the end, arranging the financing proved to be one of the toughest parts of the program, according to district business manager Mike Schroeder. Originally, Snohomish was prepared to participate in a seven-district consortium to lease the computers through a private corporation. Then, the consortium fell apart and the district spent considerable time and money to set up a program in which it would lease the computers itself.

Coming up with a program that met the requirements of state law was a challenge. So was working with a leasing company inexperienced in public sector education. Ultimately, the district switched to the low-interest bank loan, bought the computers outright, and rented them out to parents.

"It was a very complex problem because there are strict state requirements on district financing and this had never been done before," said Schroeder. "What kept us going was our commitment to the vision of Anytime Anywhere Learning and our certainty that we could find a solution. Now that we've been through the process, it will be much easier in the future. And we hope to let other districts in the state take advantage of what we've done, we have a full model of the required documents, lease structure and programs that a district needs."

Parents received a series of updates and communications from the district about the anytime anywhere learning program over a six-month period from March 1996 into the early fall, including meetings, newsletters, open houses at each school and the opportunity to return a letter of preliminary interest. In October 1996, interested parents were asked to sign a formal commitment to participate, and to provide a \$100 deposit on the computers. The computers arrived in January 1997, with an Open-the-Box event held at each school to hand over the computers and brief students and parents on their use and on the principles of the school program.

## **Getting Ready for Laptops**

The district chose to work with fifth and sixth graders because, says Klock, "the students have the basics down, so they're ready for laptops, but their ways of learning aren't yet set."

With the pilot grades narrowed down, the district next had to face the question of how to organize the use of laptops. One of the district's key decisions was to group the participating students into laptop-only classes, rather than including them randomly with non-laptop students.

"It's tremendously limiting to teachers if they have to care for the needs of students with laptops and students without laptops in the same classroom," observed principal Cornwell. "It would require double planning on the part of the teacher and would slow things down to have two separate approaches to learning in the same class. That's because we don't just teach application software at the beginning of the year and move on- we use the software to teach the curriculum all year long." That software is Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office Professional.

"From the onset, we decided to furnish the laptops with open-ended software, not closed, instructional software, because we wanted the laptops to be a blank slates for the students' creativity," says teacher Kelly Starr. She participated in the fact-finding mission to Australia and the subsequent Snohomish committee to implement anytime anywhere learning.

"Microsoft Office may have been designed for adults, but our students have no trouble with it at all," agrees Klock, the curriculum executive director. "It's amazing to see how quickly the students take to it."

On the hardware side, the district set Toshiba laptops as their standard. Inevitably, some parents wanted to buy less expensive laptops for their children and felt that the students might not need as much power as a workplace machine. Snohomish School District disagreed. It maintained that students needed the most power, to explore their creativity, make multimedia presentations, navigate the Internet and complete other tasks. They also believed that by purchasing a standard machine, parents and students would get the most out of their investment for the longest period of time.

## **Increasing Parent Interest**

"Whenever a parent spends money on a child's education, the parent's going to be interested in knowing what's going on in the classroom," observes Klock. "We know that parental involvement affects student achievement."

Indeed, administrators and faculty are delighted with the active interest in the program shown by Snohomish parents. Where the laptop is the first computer in the home, everyone in the family wants to use it. Parents and students are sitting down together, learning together, working together. Students are teaching their parents how to use the computer. And the parents are volunteering to help implement the program. The district's

Parent Advisory Committee helped get the machines ready for delivery on Open-the-Box night, and they've already agreed to help implement the next major software upgrade. It's a far cry from the days when parents did little more than stuff envelopes for their kids' schools.

### **"It's Amazing"**

Snohomish is already excited about the changes evident in its students. "On the writing side, it's amazing," says Klock.

"The ability to easily write, edit and rewrite without having to start over each time means that students have much more time to think about what they're trying to say. Written assignments are much more thoughtful."

"On the math side, Microsoft Excel makes it easy for students to create sophisticated charts and graphs, and to do it easily. So that they're not just reading someone else's chart. That means they can spend more time on analysis. Our students will do better on standardized tests because of this."

"The ownership issue is really important," says principal Cornwell, emphasizing the distinctive advantages of anytime anywhere learning over more traditional computer labs or classroom desktop machines. "Having students share computers is just not the same. With a laptop, the computer becomes a personal computer really fast. Students can store their diaries, do their homework, record thoughts for later use. None of that is possible with any other type of technology."

"At the beginning of every school year, I ask students what they want to learn because I want to motivate them by matching their desires to the curriculum," says teacher Gary Evans. "The laptop program, with its individual access to technology, makes that match fully possible. My classroom is now truly student-centered."

And everyone in Snohomish, students, teachers, parents and administrators, appreciates the difference.

### **1999 Update**

Even though the District has placed official expansion of the program on a temporary hold due to reorganization, teachers, students and parents have independently continued to support its growth. District officials expect to expand anytime, anywhere learning in the 1999-00 school year.