

Loving the laptops

While some states are scrapping their programs, Maine's initiative enjoys broad support.

Portland Press Herald

By BETH QUIMBY, Staff Writer May 21, 2007

LAPTOP PROGRAMS

SCHOOLS WHERE one-on-one laptop programs have been extended beyond middle school:

Mount Abram High School

Hall-Dale High School

Wiscasset High School

Piscataquis Community High School

Yarmouth High School

Madawaska High School

Van Buren District Secondary School

Casco Bay High School

Lubec Consolidated School

Katahdin Middle-High School

Upper Kennebec Valley Junior Senior High School

Searsport District High School

Mountain Valley High School

Mount Desert Island High School



Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

Mckenzie Loeser and Fred Randall, eighth-graders at Saco Middle School, edit rough drafts of English compositions from longhand writing and type their finished work on their laptops. Maine is still enthusiastic about its laptop program, which provides a laptop for every seventh- and eighth-grader.

Peter Scontras readily admits that at first he viewed the state's laptop program as just another quick fix dreamed up by misguided technophiles.

After 30 years of teaching eighth-grade English, the Saco Middle School teacher said he had seen too many educational fads come and go to put much faith in the latest gadget.

"I thought it was pie in the sky," Scontras said, "but, wow, what a bombshell."

Five years after Maine became the first state to provide all seventh- and eighth-graders with their own laptops for schoolwork, Scontras and other middle school educators say they never want to go back to the pre-laptop days.

While some school districts in other parts of the country are scrapping laptop programs, citing high costs and few tangible benefits, Mainers remain high on the machines. A soon-to-be completed study at the University of Southern Maine will give laptop advocates some scientific evidence to back up their claims that the devices can bolster learning.

The lack of scientific evidence continues to fuel the debate about the value of putting a computer into the hands of every student. In recent years, a handful of school districts gained national media attention for backing away from the technology. Liverpool Central School District in New York announced it is phasing out laptops next year because of students' misuse and abuse of the devices. Broward County, Fla., abandoned its plan to give laptops to its 260,000 students, citing the high cost of computer repairs in a pilot program.

Advocates of laptop programs say those failures are the exceptions to the rule, however. Districts adopting laptop programs outnumber the districts that have shelved them, said Matt Hoover, program manager for the Anytime Anywhere Learning Foundation, a nonprofit group that advocates for laptop learning in Bellevue, Wash. He estimates that a half-million laptops are being used in one-on-one programs around the world.

The Maine laptop program was the brainchild of former Gov. Angus King, who seven years ago announced his plans to equip every public middle school student and teacher in the state with a laptop. The next year, the Legislature approved a budget that contained \$37 million for a four-year program that has gone on to become an international model.

Last year, the Legislature approved with little debate a budget that contained \$41 million for another four years of the laptop program. The Department of Education renewed its contract with Apple Computer for 38,000 new iBook laptops, training and technical support.

Although failed laptop programs have gained national media attention, Maine's laptop program enjoys broad support. Proponents note that every middle school in the state elected to continue the program for another four years. Fourteen school districts have extended the program to their high schools at their own expense.

Jim Chasse, principal of Piscataquis Community High School in Guilford, said the laptop program has been extended to grades five through 12 and is partly responsible for the high school being among only 48 high schools out of the state's 118 where students met Maine's achievement standards.

"We are up here in the hills of Piscataquis County, and for some kids a trip to Boston would be a huge deal; but through technology, they are connected and have a global sense," Chasse said.

While student and teacher surveys show the laptops motivate students to learn and boost student attendance, there has been little hard evidence that the laptops improve student achievement. After four years, students' reading and mathematics scores on the state's achievement test -- the Maine Educational Assessment -- remained flat, mirroring the results of other laptop programs across the country.

However, a new study due out this summer by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at USM shows that the machines can improve student performance, said David Silvernail, institute director.

Funded by a U.S. Department of Education grant, the study looked at 240 mathematics classrooms in 45 middle schools across the state. In half of the classrooms, the teachers were given two years of training to help them adapt the laptops to their teaching. The students in those classrooms tested up to four

months ahead in mathematics skills compared to students with teachers who had no professional training.

Silvernail said an analysis of last year's MEA writing scores showed a similar improvement when teachers know how to use the laptops as a tool for editing and revising, and not just as a typewriter.

He said the reason only writing scores have shown improvement is that writing is the only portion of the MEA in which students are called upon to use the problem-solving skills that benefit from effective laptop learning. He said the reading and mathematics sections of the MEA test basic knowledge and do not measure a student's ability to analyze and synthesize information.

"When teachers use the laptop as an instructional tool around writing, the kids score significantly higher," said Silvernail, who is scheduled to report the mathematics study results to federal education officials next week.

Maine educators also attribute the success of Maine's program to the professional training provided to teachers.

Bette Manchester, head of Maine's laptop program at the Department of Education, said when laptop programs fail, it is because of a lack of good training in how to incorporate laptops effectively into classroom instruction. Keeping a close eye on student use also leads to success, she said.

Maine's repair costs have been relatively low. Jeff Mao, coordinator of educational technology at the Department of Education, estimated that no more than 2 percent of the computers were lost or damaged during the first four years, and this year less than 1 percent have been damaged or lost.

Middle school staffers also say they see little damage.

"We have never had a loss yet," said Paula Doe, who is in charge of the 600 laptops at Scarborough Middle School.

Rick Talbot, principal at Saco Middle School, said there is little misuse of the computers, which are equipped with filters to block access to certain Internet sites and other controls. Teachers at his school frequently check their students' laptop histories.

While some Saco Middle School eighth-graders complain that the 5-pound iBooks are a pain to haul around all day, most said they will miss their laptops next year at high school.

"We are going to be lost if we have to do projects," said Morgan Paradis, 14. Erin Kany, 14, said her parents will miss it too, because it frees up the family computer, which she otherwise would have to share with her two siblings during peak homework hours.

Heather Cook, 14, said the laptop actually lightens her load because she can download her mathematics textbook from a compact disc onto the laptop and leave the heavy book at home.

"I will feel empty without it," she said.