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Laptop program extended 4 years
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Maine's pioneering laptop program, which has been copied around the country and lauded by educators for putting technology into the hands of every middle school student, is set for another four years.

The state Department of Education announced Thursday it has signed a \$41 million contract with Apple Computer for new iBook laptops, training and support.

Apple was one of two companies to submit bids to provide roughly 36,000 laptops to Maine's seventh- and eighth-graders and teachers beginning this fall. Its bid was about \$1.5 million less than the bid of CDWG, a Chicago company that sells hardware and service contracts to governments and schools.

Maine's laptop program dates back six years to when former Gov. Angus King announced plans to put a laptop in the hands of every public middle school teacher and student in the state. A year later the Legislature committed \$37 million for a four-year program that has become an international model and enjoys broad support in Maine.

The Legislature appropriated the money for a new contract as part of this year's budget bill.

Although the merits of laptops were widely debated in the Legislature in 2001, this year's authorization included little debate, though educators have never been able to point to data showing that laptops have improved achievement scores or grades.

Anecdotally, teachers report students with laptops are more engaged in learning, and students report they are more motivated and better organized.

Critics of the program say they have yet to be convinced that laptops improve student learning.

Rep. Edward Finch, D-Fairfield, a retired high school history teacher and member of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee, said the millions of dollars used for laptops would be better spent on increased state aid to local school districts, student loans, or on the state's university and community college systems.

He wonders how the program would fare if it were to appear before the Legislature as a stand-alone vote, rather than as part of a total budget package.

"Having laptops is probably a good thing, but the expense outweighs the benefits," Finch said.

Rep. Stephen Bowen, R-Rockport, who works with laptops in his social studies classroom at Camden-Rockport Middle School, said they are a great tool, but he does not expect them to raise state achievement test scores.

Although he supported this year's extension of the program, he said the laptop program is just one of the many steps that schools need to take to improve student achievement.

Jeff Mao, coordinator of educational technology at the Department of Education, said educators and students support the program.

"One of the simple questions we asked was should we go through this again. The schools said: 'Absolutely. If you take these things away from us, we don't know what we are going to do,'" he said.

The 12-inch-square, 5-pound machines are equipped with the latest technology, such as DVD players and CD burners. They are due to arrive at schools in late August.

School districts have until July 7 to join the program, which is optional. During the first four years, virtually every public school in the state participated. A handful of districts signed independent contracts with Apple.

In the first four years, 50 percent to 60 percent of the state's schools allowed students to take the laptops home. Starting in 2007, all schools that participate will be required to send the computers home, Mao said.

He said it is impossible for his department to estimate what percentage of the laptops are lost or damaged. The state distributed 700 to 800 replacements during the program's first four years, he said.

The state bought the used laptops and sold about 33,000 back to school districts at \$48 each. Some districts are using them to extend the program to other grades. Others are making them available for general use throughout schools.

The remaining 4,000 used devices will be sold through the state surplus system, Mao said. They will first be offered to nonprofits and parochial schools and then to the public.

The original plan was to extend the state's program to high schoolers, but the plan was scaled back because of budget worries and other concerns. It is now largely up to local districts to pick up the costs of extending the program into high schools.

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