

SCHOOL TECH

School supplies circa 2013: Computers top the list

Technology changes the classroom and how students learn



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Technology is not only changing the way students learn — it's also changing the list of school supplies.

On Friday, parents visited Redwood Middle School to learn about Chromebooks, which are simplified computers that run Web-based programs. The Napa Valley Unified School District is asking parents to purchase Chromebooks or other district-recommended computers, so that every student has his or her own device for classroom use.

Beginning this school year, 10 schools in the Napa district have been designated as “NexTech Project” schools, and technology will be used as a learning tool in almost every subject. These 10 schools will build a model for the rest of the district over the next three years on how to provide technology-integrated instruction through project-based learning. One of the NexTech schools is Silverado Middle School. Principal Mike Mansuy said the new instruction model will completely transform teaching.

“People are nervous, but they’re also excited by the possibilities,” Mansuy said.

Parent Ross Owen, who attended Friday’s event, said that increasing student technology use is “terrific,” but that one of his concerns is computer theft. Many of the schools lack lockers, and students will be storing devices in backpacks.

“Everybody knows they’re in the backpacks,” Owen said.

At Silverado, Mansuy said devices will be used in all classes except physical education, and gym lockers are available to keep backpacks secure during P.E.

Computer theft has been a “nonissue” at the middle school and high school in American Canyon, where technology-based instruction has already been implemented, Mansuy said. He said he believes the low crime rate is due to the fact that all students have their own device -- so there’s no need to steal one. He also credited project-based learning, which emphasizes collaboration and group work.

“Project-based learning fosters a culture of mutual respect,” Mansuy said.

Chromebooks cost about \$300, but parents have the option to purchase the device through a payment plan, which includes a down payment of \$40 and monthly payments of about \$30 until

the Chromebook is paid off, according to NapaLearns, which offers the purchasing program thanks to a partnership with the Napa Valley Education Foundation.

Chromebooks are a popular option for schools because they offer a “dashboard” for teachers, which allows teachers to monitor the activities of students who are logged in to the district’s network. With the dashboard, teachers can view student work as it’s ongoing, instead of waiting for the final project, said Sergio Villegas, the ed tech coordinator for NapaLearns.

Chromebooks are also lightweight and have a relatively long battery life -- depending on the model. The Samsung model is a lighter device and offers about seven hours of battery life, Villegas said. The Chromebook offered by HP Pavilion is more durable and offers four hours of battery life.

At a school like New Technology High — where electrical outlets are “everywhere” — having a device with a short battery life isn’t an issue, Villegas said. But at an older school — where electrical outlets are few and far between — students may want a device that can last all day, he said.

While Chromebooks seem to be the district’s tool of choice due to their affordability, students can also use devices like tablets, notebook minis or laptops.

Purchasing a digital device is voluntary, and students who do not have their own computer will still be able to use technology in class, said Mark Morrison, director of secondary education. In the district’s middle schools, for example, each classroom will have about nine devices for student use, Morrison said.

According to Mansuy, using technology as a learning tool is critical in preparing students for college and careers in the 21st century.

“It is the way the rest of the world works,” he said. “Education needs to catch up.”

Parent Becky Diel, who attended Friday’s event, said there were pros and cons to growing up with today’s technology. Having a “vast amount of information” at their fingertips allows kids to quickly switch between interests, but it may also lower their ability to focus, Diel said.

“It’s different, but I don’t know if it’s better or worse,” she said.

The NexTech Project

The following schools have been designated as “NexTech Project” schools. These schools will build a model for the rest of the district over the next three years on how to provide technology-integrated instruction through project-based learning:

- Canyon Oaks Elementary School
- Donaldson Way Elementary School
- Napa Junction Elementary School
- Yountville Elementary School

- American Canyon Middle School
- Redwood Middle School
- River Charter
- Silverado Middle School
- American Canyon High School
- New Technology High School