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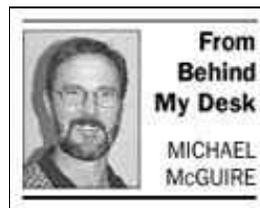
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Editorial

Imagine that - learning made fun

November 22, 2002

Adults have a habit of not listening to children. And I don't mean their own children. Too many adults just don't listen to children - period.



Take the laptop computer program for Maine's seventh-grade students. There's a pile of grownups in Maine who see the laptop initiative as a waste of money. Some of these adults are even teachers. I've heard some say the laptop trust fund millions should be used to "solve" the state budget deficit. What a crock. The state budget crisis is due to one simple economic reality: less money is coming in than is needed to go out. There is really only one simple economic solution to this: cut the amount of money that is needed to go out. Unfortunately, this could mean jobs but state government refuses to believe Economics 101 applies to it, too.

I continue to be a staunch supporter of Maine's trailblazing laptop program. I think it is the most forward-looking education initiative of the last 25 years. It's going to make a huge, positive difference - unlike the so-called Learning Results mandates that I believe are mostly doomed to uselessness.

Last Thursday, I stepped into Laurie Walsh's seventh-grade classroom at Rockland District Middle School to observe students working on their white iBook Macintosh laptops, and to talk with them about the technology. This was not a staged setting. I had only called Principal Tom Mellor the day before in late afternoon. "Come on over," he invited me with enthusiasm.

RDMS seventh-graders do not yet take their laptops home. They are stored, and have their batteries recharged, in individual compartments within a specially designed wood cart. The students are connected to the SAD 5 computer network and to the World Wide Web (Internet) by cutting edge wireless technology that was provided schools by the Apple computer company.

Each iBook laptop is equipped with Appleworks (for writing, spreadsheets and creating data bases), iMovie, iPhoto and every hard drive contains a complete copy of the World Book Encyclopedia. These are state-of-the-art computers.

James Ellis was diligently typing out his class assignment. Crouching down to his desk level, I asked him what he thought about "his" laptop.

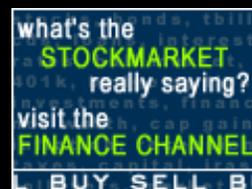
"It's really neat. I can do so much stuff on it."

Not really solid on specifics. Then he stopped typing and asked me if I wanted to see the screen savers he had created. I did.

"I write better, " he said quietly, "and have learned a lot about what the computer can do."

That was not the last time I heard students use the word "learned."

Next to James, Cameron Mazurek declared the laptops are "awesome." "I been



able to use the Internet for research," he told me, the enthusiasm readily heard in his voice.

Laurie Rule, technology director for SAD 5, told me she considers the laptops the high point of her educational career.

"These computers are moving education forward; away from rationing technology," Rule said. However, she added, when today's seventh-graders arrive at Rockland District High School they will be greeted by a distinct technology deficit. At RDHS, students still line up to gain access to computers. "These kids are going to be a totally different type of student when they get to high school," Rule said of the young people seated all around me.

Now there's a challenge waiting to be met and overcome.

Teacher Laurie Walsh said she has seen a significant improvement in student writing in the very few weeks the laptops have been in use. "They are definitely more organized," she said.

Indeed, Misty McAuliffe credits her laptop with teaching her how to be better organized. And she doesn't mind admitting she finds her iBook "fun." Fun learning! Sounds pretty good to me.

Walsh says she has one student who looks forward to coming to school when previously he did not. It's been a "click" so to speak between the laptop and the student's attitude. And the student's parents have noticed it.

E-mail is not currently available and Rule says RDMS plans to initially provide it only in-house.

However, student Dillon Rossiter raised a good point. He said that it would help students if they could work on homework assignments at home on other computers and then simply e-mail their work to their computers at RDMS. Both Walsh and Rule said that would be a plus.

Students can, indeed, surf the Internet but there are strict rules for such use and, as their teacher told them, students "should have no expectation of privacy" with their laptops. In fact, the computers are routinely checked to ensure they are not being used in violation of school policy.

"Technologically savvy" is how Rule describes most of the seventh-graders.

Abby Jones showed me the math slide show she created on her laptop using the AppleWorks program to meld text and graphics. "It's helped me do more in school and in my school work," she said. A student who enjoys writing poetry, Abby said that she types much faster than she can write, neatly anyway.

There was an enthusiasm clearly evident in the voice of every student with whom I spoke. These kids are not playing games on their laptops. They are using them as learning tools. And there is no mistaking that they are enjoying the learning. The enthusiasm is shared by their teachers.

One final observation.

Not once during the time I was with the two classes did I see any student staring off into space out the window. They all were too busy doing classwork on their laptops. Learning.

Michael McGuire is editor of The Courier-Gazette and editor-in-chief of Courier Publications.

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