

Computers

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Who's teaching whom?

If you ask most diocesan educators, they'll openly admit that many students are ahead of their teachers in computer skills. Hence, the schools, in many ways, are playing a game of catch-up with a large number of students.

"Most of our students have computers at home," said Arlene McDermott, principal of St. Mary's School in Waterloo, which houses a pre-kindergarten-to-grade-eight program. "We want to enhance what they're doing at home."

But Catholic schools must also deal with the reality that funds are limited for a technological tool that is constantly being improved, noted Timothy W. Dwyer, diocesan schools superintendent.

"Things are obsolete almost a year after you have them in place," Dwyer said of computers. "I don't know of any school, public or private, that can keep up with the pace of technological change."

Nonetheless, computers are becoming must-have tools in schools because they have opened up for schoolchildren a number of vistas that were unseen even just a few years ago, teachers and administrators noted.

For example, David G. Mulvey, an eighth-grade teacher at St. Mary's, noted that students in years past who had trouble with the physical act of handwriting were often turned off to the concept of writing in general. However, today's student who has a difficult time with handwriting can turn to a computer and write his or her compositions there, he noted.

"A lot of kids ... find writing extremely difficult," he explained. "Let them do it on a computer and you think 'Did this kid do this?' They don't find the keyboard intimidating."

He added that while children even just a few years ago would have had to research essay questions at a library, they now can use the Net and other resources to help them find answers in minutes as opposed to days.

"I've always sought to have kids seek answers themselves," he said. "The Internet speeds it up a bit."

Tracy Nadler, vice principal at St. Andrew's School in Rochester, said computers will never replace teachers. However, computer use has already changed the way teachers instruct students, she said.

"I don't see a teacher standing up in front of a classroom very much, except to give goals," she said of tomorrow's classroom.



More and more, students will use small group discussion, coupled with computer use and direct instruction, to learn their subjects, she said. Given the wide array of instructional possibilities available through computer technology, she said, instruction can be tailored to fit more individualized needs.

That's a point echoed by John Maxwell who coordinates computer instruction at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester.

"The computer has afforded the opportunity for education to become student-centered," Maxwell said, noting computer use encourages students to become self-motivated researchers.

At the same time, teachers — particularly in Catholic schools, with their moral focus — play a crucial role in helping students choose how they use computers, he said.

"The Internet is 90 percent garbage," he said. "It's the teacher's role to teach the student discernment about the worth, the role of everything."

A sea change

Every diocesan elementary school has either a computer lab or a computer classroom, and most school classrooms now have at least two computers, according to Timothy W. Dwyer, diocesan superintendent of schools. All this has happened only in the past decade, Dwyer noted.

"I think 10 years ago, most schools would not have had a fax machine," he said.

Diocesan schools also generally have a computer technology specialist on staff, or a teacher who is competent in this area, according to Sister Margaret Mancuso, SSJ, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Meanwhile, scores of teachers and administrators have taken computer classes to learn or upgrade their skills, she and other officials noted. For example, this summer, several dozen teachers and administrators are taking computer courses offered by McQuaid. Maxwell noted that many teachers have awoken to the fact that they

need to learn how to use computers if they want to reach their students.

"Whether or not the teacher touches (technology), the student will," he said.

Dwyer added that the majority of current diocesan teachers used computers in college. Computer competence is not a hiring requirement, he said, but it certainly helps an applicant who wants to teach in a diocesan school if she or he has such skills.

A guide for schools

The diocese's, "A Guide For Developing An Educational Technology Plan," was created by a committee of teachers and administrators to give a framework for structuring the use of technology — particularly computer technology — for classroom use.

Although the guide suggests a five-year timeline for schools to develop a their own plans, Sister Mancuso emphasized that each school is being allowed to work at its own pace, especially given the fact that teachers are operating at different levels of technological competence and also because schools employ varied ways to obtain funding for technology.

Some schools are already ahead of the guide in planning how technology can be used in the classroom, whereas others are still working on developing their own plans, she noted.

The guide outlines key steps that a school should take when formulating a technology plan:

- Establish a technology planning committee composed of administrators, teachers and parent representatives,
- Assess how your school is currently using technology.
- Survey the existing resources in your building — for example, how is computer hardware and software being used?
- Establish a long-range goal with an annual plan that allows for yearly reassessment.

For example, a school could set as its goal the obtaining of one computer for every six students and promote the training of teachers and staff in computer use.

A school could also look at obtaining software that can be used in the school's curriculum. A school could also consider purchasing other types of technological equipment — printers, scanners, FAX machine, TVs, VCRS and digital cameras — that can be used for teaching and administrative purposes, the guide said.

Money, money, money

As computers and their attendant technologies — modems, wiring, printers — become necessary to schools, the question arises as to where all the funding for these tools — and the training needed to use

them — will originate.

Dwyer noted that less than 10 percent of diocesan schools' budgets go to technological programs. Hence, Catholic schools rely heavily on donors, grants and government funding, he said.

Several schools in both Monroe County and in the Finger Lakes region have successfully applied for grants from the federal government's Title III program, which enables public and non-public schools to obtain computers and teacher training, according to Dr. Paul J. Helberg, director of instructional technology for the Rochester City School District.

Helberg noted that this year, Rochester public and non-public schools got \$1 million from Title III, and that the program will fund, in part, the training of teachers from the following Rochester Catholic schools: Aquinas Institute, Corpus Christi at Blessed Sacrament, Holy Cross, Holy Family, Holy Rosary, Nazareth Academy, Nazareth Hall, Sacred Heart, St. Andrew's, St. Boniface's, St. John the Evangelist and St. Monica's.

Meanwhile, McDermott noted that the following Finger Lakes schools will receive \$20,000 apiece from Title III: St. Mary's, Waterloo; St. Patrick's, Seneca Falls; St. Francis/St. Stephen's, Geneva; St. Mary's, Canandaigua; and St. Michael's, Newark.

Dwyer added that public and non-public schools are both awaiting implementation of the Education-Rate or E-Rate program by the federal government. Currently held up by political squabbling in Washington, D.C., the program is supposed to provide up to \$2.5 billion yearly to schools seeking to hook up with the Net, as well as to obtain various other telecommunications services.

The new world

Catholic schools are well aware that today's students will be adults in a high-tech world that will leave no room for the technologically ignorant, commented Sister Margaret Mancuso, SSJ, the diocesan schools' assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

"In the world we're living in, it's not a luxury anymore to have computers, it's a necessity ...," she said. "There are a lot of jobs that (don't exist yet) that we don't even know we're preparing the children for."

McDermott also pointed out that computers in Catholic schools make them competitive in the educational marketplace.

At the same time, however, Catholic schools — like their public counterparts — must keep from being overwhelmed by technology, Sister Mancuso said.

"We've never thrown out the core curriculum," Sister Mancuso said. "We've never thrown out what works best."

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