

Report gives high grades for laptop program

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By Glenn Adams, Associated Press, 2/11/2004

AUGUSTA, Maine -- Students who use laptops are more engaged in learning and produce better-quality work, according to a report released Wednesday that gives high grades to Maine's 2-year-old program.

Based on thousands of responses from students and teachers, the report says most of Maine's middle schools have successfully implemented the program which started with seventh graders in 2002 and later expanded to include eighth graders.

The report is based on 26,000 responses by students and 1,700 by teachers to online surveys last spring and fall, said David Silvernail of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, who presented the findings to the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.

Teachers reported using the laptops most often in developing instructional materials, and students said they used laptops most frequently to find information, and less frequently to organize information and take class notes.

"More than four out of five teachers surveyed reported that students are more engaged in their learning, more actively involved in their own learning, and produce better quality work," says the report.

It quotes one teacher as saying, "It has freed me up to be more individualized with the kids. I can't imagine going back."

While the overall thrust of the report was positive, some members of the committee had pointed questions about its contents and findings.

Rep. Glenn Cummings, the committee co-chairman, said the teacher response rate, 23 percent, brought into question the validity of the findings.

"Are we getting a fair and accurate view of the teachers?" asked Cummings, D-Portland.

Silvernail said he's convinced that the survey was extensive enough it would have flagged any serious glitches in the laptop program.

"I'm confident the findings will stand," he said.

Not all of the report was positive, though. Some teachers, students and principals said there are continuing problems with the technology, although the problems have been diminishing. Superintendents cited increasing costs associated with their laptop programs.

Some lawmakers expressed concern that there is no statewide policy addressing lost or broken computers. Rep. Thomas Murphy Jr., R-Kennebunk, cited a case in which a family was shocked to get a criminal citation after a machine was damaged.

Silvernail noted that the Legislature adopted a local-control policy over issues such as damaged and lost laptops.

A separate report last month by the Mitchell Institute, which tracked the progress of students at Piscataquis Community High School, said laptops made a significant and positive impact when used by high school students for their schoolwork.

Piscataquis Community was the first and only Maine high school to equip all students and teachers with laptops beginning in the fall of 2002.

Gov. John Baldacci proposed in his State of the State address in January extending the laptop program into all Maine high schools beginning with next year's ninth graders.

But funding is uncertain after the program ends in 2005. Maine now provides its 34,000 seventh- and eighth-grade students and 3,000 middle school teachers with laptops under a \$37.2 million four-year contract.

On the Net:

Maine Learning Technology Initiative:
<http://www.state.me.us/mlte/index.html>

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