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Laptops Power Learning to New Dimension at Elementary School

Robin Beck

Student Karl Berger works on his laptop computer creating a web page for the seventh grade's science unit on plant and animal kingdoms.

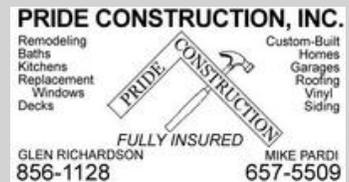
The project, entitled "Kingdom Zoo," will display the many ways students have learned about the biological classifications of plant, animal, protist, fungi and bacteria.

Karl sets up a page with photos and information about the project and prepares to incorporate links to other students' work. This page, with all of its links, will later be part of the Boothbay Region school district's web site.

Abbi Andrews, Liz McIlwain and Emily Jones scroll, click, drag and type their way through the internet to create their own slide show presentations. They research and then write facts about bacteria or fungi, find and import pictures to illustrate their text, and design each page as a colorful "slide" which can be projected onto a screen and presented in a talk. Their illustrations may be pictures from an encyclopedia or scientific journal, or digital photos taken by other students on a field trip.

Julie Higgins compiles a set of plant-related science activities and experiments for students to do which reinforce the major facts they are expected to learn. Her page, too, will become a link on Karl's site, as will that of Stephanie Earle who is writing a creative story on the computer using researched facts about plants and animals.

Other students are eyeing their subjects through a video camera and creating an "iMovie," Apple's video editing program for the iBook



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laptop, to demonstrate their mastery of the plant and animal kingdoms' salient features.

Other additions to the BRES "Kingdom Zoo" cyber-maze will be photos or videos of students' final projects not done on computer, such as original board games, story books, or songs, plus links to relevant news articles.

Welcome to the 21st century schoolroom.

The slates of yesteryear and the mimeograph sheets of yesterday have given way to the keyboards and flat screens of Apple "notebook" laptop computers.

Information now flies imperceptibly and instantly through the ether and bursts from students' fingers as they jet wirelessly around the world without getting on a plane or scan the digital *World Book Encyclopedia* without stepping into a library.

The Laptop Initiative

Boothbay Region Elementary School, one of nine demonstration schools statewide to pilot Governor Angus King's Maine Learning Technology Initiative or "laptop program" last spring, is ahead of the learning curve.

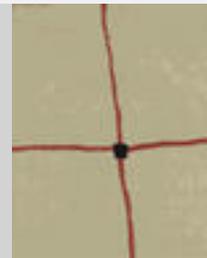
Last year's BRES seventh graders received iBooks in March and in June presented their work, original poems set to music and pictures, at a conference in Portland attended by Gov. King and Apple CEO Steve Jobs.

This fall, 18,000 Apple iBook laptops were delivered to Maine seventh graders. The program (barring state budget revisions) aims to equip all seventh and eighth grade students and teachers with laptops, a total of 36,000 between this year and next. Gov. King has hoped to make Maine the first in the nation to offer personal access to the learning technology and wireless internet to prepare the next generation for the information age.

The laptops come in padded black cases, are labeled with a student's name and are kept locked up overnight at BRES in cabinets, custom-made and donated by Boothbay Home Builders, from which they plug in and recharge each night.

Eighth grade social studies teacher Eric Chamberlin is the school's resident laptop guru and program leader. "They're blowing the roof off this place and it's only November," says Chamberlin about the students' work.

The laptops have "improved the speed, quality and depth of their



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work," he says, and kids aren't just designing web pages, they are creating web sites and composing music on the laptops.

As a techno-mentor, Chamberlin is in regular contact with 25 other schools. "In those schools, there are pockets of [laptop] use," he says, "but here, it's across the board."

Praising the BRES seventh and eighth grade teachers, Chamberlin says, "They've had to stretch themselves" to learn about, apply and stay ahead of the students in this technology. Not only is it being employed in the subjects of English, social studies, math and science for research, graphing and/or reporting - it is also being adapted by teachers of music, art, technology ed. ("shop"), and family and consumer science (formerly home economics) for those subjects as well.

"We're just beginning to understand what we have at our fingertips," says language arts teacher Sherry Dec. "The students and teachers are all learning from each other, it is truly a community of learners."

Mrs. Dec has her students log onto the internet and read articles from the *New York Times* to broaden their horizons and their vocabulary. She also encourages use of the laptops to delve into literary and author backgrounds, such as discovering the era of Victorian England through a unit on Sherlock Holmes mysteries.

At an open house Nov. 14, seventh grade students showed their parents what they had been doing on the laptops since school began, and teachers explained procedures. Asked if the machines will eventually go home with students, Chamberlin said he didn't know when or if they would be allowed to go home. There are considerations of insurance coverage, parents' computer knowledge, and students' after-school activities at the Y or on the fields.

Seventh Grade Projects

For each of her units seventh grade science teacher Sandra Wheeler still has students do independent research, collectively compile fact sheets, take field trips, do experiments, write up lab reports and study for a unit test.

The difference now is that students have more avenues for research and more ways to demonstrate their mastery of a topic - as mentioned above, in multimedia presentations, written reports or stories (on paper), or in original songs or gameboards. They can also access one another's work to study for the unit test.

Other seventh grade laptop projects include: in **math**, collecting

data and making graphs, researching and "buying" stocks in the stock market project; in **social studies**, researching and reporting on native American tribes, reading about current events online, researching different points of view on issues and writing position papers; in **language arts**, writing papers and journaling, researching literary terms and background; in **science**, collecting experimental data, documenting data with graphs, writing lab reports, and creating slide show presentations.

Eighth Grade Projects

The eighth graders, who enjoyed a head start on the laptops last spring, are by now experienced users. In Mr. Chamberlin's class they are each creating their own web pages which include information about themselves or themes centered on their personal interests such as sports or music. These web pages will later be included in the district web site.

Eighth graders are also working on science projects involving, for example, contacting NASA to study scientific laws governing force and motion in rocketry. In social studies students have researched and written papers on comparative government systems.

In English, students will do a high-tech book report on their laptops, designing not a book jacket but a cereal box. This "Book of Champions" is to include information about characters, setting, plot, and author on the side or back panels, a cover picture on the front, a book review and a new ending on the inside.

Doing research on the internet, e-mailing assignment drafts to teachers, and using graphing or graphics capabilities are some of the benefits of having laptops for all students.

"After you get used to the feel of the mouse, it's so easy to use," says eighth grader Meghan Brewer, one of the students who presented her computer work last spring in Portland.

"It's easier to do research, and more convenient," says Jessica Bonham.

As for potential problems with students accessing inappropriate web sites, Chamberlin says the internet service is provided through the Maine State Library network which has a federally mandated filtering system. He also has software allowing him to get a report of which sites a student has visited online if he is concerned. Moreover, teachers say students are forthcoming when they think they may have stumbled onto an inappropriate web site, closing their notebooks and having the teacher check it out for a possible report filing.

The laptop program has put greater demands on teachers who now, instead of repeating the same lesson to class after class and then reading dozens of similar student papers, are presenting information on a big screen from their own computer and following up with individual mentoring and a wide variety of computer-based student projects.

"There's more one-on-one," says teacher Sandy Wheeler, "so at the end of the day I'm exhausted. But it's so exciting."

She adds that it's the first time she's seen kids get into the *World Book Encyclopedia*, whose online edition features music and animation as well as text, and yell, "Cool!"

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[MaineStreet](http://boothbayregister.maine.com/2002-11-21/laptop_program.html) http://boothbayregister.maine.com/2002-11-21/laptop_program.html rev 2002-11-22