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Sunday Times (London)

November 3, 2002, Sunday

Edinburgh will give laptop to every pupil

BY: Joanne Robertson

EVERY state school child in Edinburgh over the age of eight will be given their own laptop computer within two years in a radical new initiative to be unveiled next month.

Plans to begin phasing individual access to wireless notebook computers for the capital's pupils are being drawn up by Edinburgh city council and will be discussed by council leaders at the beginning of December.

The initiative has been pioneered in Maine, in the United States, where the results have produced a marked improvement in achievement and a corresponding decline in discipline problems and absenteeism.

The Rev Ewan Aitken, Edinburgh council's executive member for education, said: "We're looking at opening up the internet and getting to a stage where children have individual access."

Although details of the proposal are still being finalised and will be dependent on financial and political approval, the aim is to provide every pupil with his or her own computer notebook from primary four onwards. The number of children in state schools in Edinburgh this year is 27,800 in primary schools and 20,200 in the secondary sector. The costs are expected to run into tens of millions of pounds, although the council is also examining the possibility of private sector sponsorship to help to deliver the scheme.

The radical move will be viewed as part of the council's campaign to woo parents in the capital away from the independent school sector and to boost the standards and reputation of the city's comprehensives.

Last month a group of councillors and officials travelled to Maine, on America's east coast, to assess the benefits of the scheme. As well as visiting schools and the state's education department, they also met Angus King, the state governor, who introduced the plan into Maine's middle schools after discovering a budget surplus.

King, a 58-year-old former businessman and journalist, explained: "We want our kids to be the most well educated and the most technologically capable in the world. We had a system of computer labs which they visited once a week for an hour. We wanted to integrate computers into our daily teaching and learning approach, and now we have 239 middle schools in which every kid has their own wireless computer notebook.

"The results have been fantastic, much better than we expected. The

children are engaged and that is the key word. The teachers are just as excited. What these kids are doing is just phenomenal. Instead of the teacher being the sage on the stage, they're now the guide on the side.

"We've seen a dramatic decline in discipline problems and attendance is better. For us, this whole project is about equity. It's about giving every one of those kids a chance."

The state signed a deal with Apple computers for just over \$ 9m a year for 36,000 Apple iBook laptops, 239 wireless networks, servers, text support, warranty and batteries. The scheme, which the governor hopes to expand throughout the entire school system, has already attracted interest from France, Canada and a number of other American states. Maine also received a \$ 1m gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Despite Maine's small population - 1.25m - and rural economy, the state had one of the best education records in America and was always in the country's top 10 in terms of national test results.