

Wiggins: Boundaries disappear as technology opens up

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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District 20 makes upgrades a priority.

Technology at Gothenburg Public Schools travels beyond the walls of the building.

Just ask technology coordinator Jo Wiggins who points to the school's ability to video conference anywhere in the world.

For example, Dudley Elementary youngsters visit Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo while sitting in padded seats in the school's performing arts center.

High school students watch real-life autopsies—and interact with forensic specialists—seated in a biology classroom.

"It's the wave of the future," Wiggins said while unpacking 50 new lap top computers in her office. "And I see us expanding even more in that area."

Video conferencing—or distance learning—is not solely for students.

Wiggins said teachers and administrators also use the technology for meetings and workshops which saves travel time especially in rural Nebraska.

Video conferencing is just one facet of District 20's goal to prepare students to be successful in the 21st century.

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With the hire of technology integration specialist Lori Long in 2007, Wiggins said the district placed technology more directly into the hands of teachers who—in turn—use it in the classroom.

“Our goal is to enhance student learning but also to focus on staff development to give them the tools that will enable them to reach every student,” Wiggins explained. “It’s about using technology to make learning exciting for the students—in their language.”



Many schools have adopted what is called the One-to-One Initiative where laptops, with grant assistance for poverty students, are given to every student.

District 20 is not yet a part of the initiative, she explained, because the high school and renovated elementary were built with enough lab space to accommodate students and computer workstations.

Smaller schools, in particular, have had to rely on mobile carts stocked with laptops that roll into each classroom.

District 20 uses mobile carts in addition to computer workstations—a trend Wiggins said she expects to continue as technological mobility increases.

“Our labs are filled all of time as teachers are using them more in their classes,” Wiggins said. “As we try to close the gap on how students live at home and school, we’re moving toward more mobility.”

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Whether or not to participate in the One-on-One Initiative is under consideration, she said.

“Since staff is still being trained how to use technology, it makes sense that they know how to use it first,” Wiggins said.

iPods, or hand-held devices, are also becoming firmly entrenched in the technological future.

“The trend is going more towards iPod Touches versus laptops,” she said.

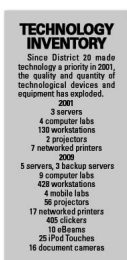
Eight years ago, Wiggins took on the job as technology coordinator for the district.

Although her duties have not changed dramatically, she didn't have many resources or the equipment to help teachers boost technological skills.

“So we started with the basics like using electronic mail,” Wiggins said.

The next year, the focus was on entering and saving grades on the school's computer server.

Servers store computer-generated information in a single location which can be shared with other computers.



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Parents have had the ability since 2003 to view their children's grades, assignments and other information through a program called PowerSchool.

Demographic information, assessments and more can also be accessed from the online resource at hs132.gothenburg.k12.ne.us/public/home.html.

Since the district prioritized technology in 2001, Wiggins said technological hardware has increased five times in quantity what it was.

"I now spend my time on day-to-day issues dealing with hardware, software, server maintenance and backups," she said.

When Long came on board two years ago, Wiggins said technology was in place but someone else was needed to teach staff how to use it.

Even though many districts have two technology specialists who share duties, she said District 20 has a different approach—Wiggins who deals with hardware issues and Long who coordinates technological curriculum.

The system seems to work.

For the past couple of years teachers have projects ready for students in the lab the first day of school whereas "it used to be two to three weeks before students walked into the lab."

Wiggins said the district's laptop lease program, which pays a portion of the teachers' cost for computers over three years, has made a big difference in finding new ways to implement technology in classes.

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Nearly all of the teachers in the district have bought laptops through the program, she said.

As the district develops its five-year technological plan, Wiggins said interactive learning classrooms with curriculum enrichment remain in the budget.

Classrooms will be equipped with more assistive technology devices like document cameras, clickers, interactive boards and iPods.

Fewer workstations will be replaced and more money spent on replacement of laptops and iPods, she said.

Wiggins said infrastructure costs will increase as technology specialists work to secure networks that don't require wires like laptop computers.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636