Officials tell of spending priorities for modern educational tools.

Mike Teahon isn't into crossword puzzles but he can build computerized databases.

While at home and away from Gothenburg Public Schools where he's the school superintendent, Teahon often pulls out his laptop where he stores, manipulates and analyzes data.

His understanding of technology in general, finance and knowledge about building projects helped him land the job as District 20 school superintendent.

That was in 2001.

Officials plan for future

At the time, school board member Bruce Clark said he and other board members knew technology was important.

"But we weren't sure we were keeping pace with the way we saw it changing in public education," Clark explained. "There was a desire to see where we were at and try to initiate a plan to build on to be technologically adequate."

An $11.4 million bond issue had been approved in March of 2001 to build a new junior-senior high school and renovate the Community Building and Dudley Elementary.

Technology consisted of several computers scattered throughout the high school and elementary.

Tech needs assessed

It was then school officials decided the district was substantially behind in hardware, software and staffing, Teahon said.

Computer labs became an even more integral part of the new school building plan and a technology committee was added to the school board.

District officials also hired Jo Wiggins as technology coordinator.

The shift toward expanded technology in the classroom continued when officials consulted the Nebraska Department of Education to find out which schools were on the cutting edge of technology in the state.

Wiggins, Teahon, Clark, other board members and four teachers then traveled to Omaha where they visited Omaha South High School, King Science Middle School, Beadle Middle School, the Peter Kiewit Institute and Millard West High School.

“The biggest thing for us was looking at all of the technology, seeing if we were going to use it and whether or not we had adequate staff for it,” Teahon explained.

Clark remembers viewing how each school seemed to specialize in a specific technology.

For example, the group saw Smartboards at one school and small laptops used for keyboarding at another school.

“Each place seemed to concentrate on one technology. We never saw the different types of technology all used in each school,” he said.

More technologies sought

As a result, Clark said different technologies were incorporated into Gothenburg’s school system.

Through the years, he said technologies have been utilized based on what teachers and the technology group felt local students needed.

For a few years after the visit to Omaha, Teahon said they felt Wiggins was sufficient to handle the district’s technology needs.

However in 2007, the district hired English teacher Lori Long as a technology integration specialist.

“We had to work up to the point to hire an integration specialist,” Teahon explained. “It was always part of our long-range technology plan but we had to have the technology in place before we added a specialist.”

Integration stressed

Long instructs teachers and staff on how to implement technology in their classrooms.

“If students don’t have access to technology in their classrooms and labs, it would be wasted,” Teahon said.

Gothenburg Public Schools is different than most schools who use staff technicians instead of technology integration specialists, Teahon noted.

Financial resources illustrate how the district began prioritizing technology.

In 2001, $10,000 was budgeted for technology. The next year, $30,000 was spent followed by $50,000 for the past few years.

Teahon said in 2009, the district received an additional $30,000 in federal stimulus funds for technology.

The lion’s share of the district’s technology funds, he said, are spent on replacement costs—mostly on computers.

Funds budgeted for technology have not increased much the past several years because computers and software are replaced with new equipment, he said. Older equipment is rotated to classrooms where it’s used less vigorously such as students using those computers to take reading tests.

Wiggins said new workstations or stationary computers cost about $1,150 compared to mobile laptops that carry a $900 price tag.

“Apple has discontinued the iMac model geared towards the educational market,” she

explained. “Therefore, the price of a workstation has gone up about $150 whereas laptop costs are going down.”

District buys iPod Touches

As far as recent technological purchases, the district ordered 25 iPod Touches this year which have similar applications to laptop computers.

With laptop computers outdated five years after purchase and the mobility of iPods, Teahon said the latter may be a technological tool the district continues to consider.

“We’re always thinking three to five years out because by the time you react, it’s often too late,” Teahon said. “That’s why it’s good to have people who are futuristic to keep us on the cutting edge.”

Given the growth in technology and its importance, Clark said the district may also consider hiring a third technology staff person.

“It takes time to keep technology in use,” he said. “It also takes a lot of effort.”

To Teahon, technology is important as schools prepare students to compete in a global economy.

“Our students need to be prepared to compete with students from other schools,” he said, noting that half the classes his college-student daughter takes are online. “We want to be able to put some of our senior classes online so students can do their work in a college-style environment.”

Technology not the answer

Still, technology is not a replacement for teachers.

“It’s a tool teachers use to be more effective in their teaching,” Teahon said.

Whether technology is good or bad, Clark said today’s students have grown up with it.

“You have to be able to teach with it so you can capture their imagination and attention. It helps them keep engaged in learning,” he explained. “Kids love technology. It’s a toy for them.”

Technology also helps students keep pace with the world around them, Clark said.

These days he said he thinks District 20 stacks up “pretty well” technology-wise compared to other schools.

“Our plan covers all the bases and we’re doing a good and competitive job in comparison to other schools,” he said.

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