

Pilot program to provide Netbooks to 7th-graders in Riverside

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Each seventh-grader at Central Middle School in Riverside soon will receive a free Netbook computer connecting school to home, a boon for those whose families can't afford them.

Central is one of two schools in California to get the School2Home program, Riverside Unified School District Superintendent [Rick Miller](#) said.

Netbooks are laptop computers slightly smaller than students' three-ring notebooks.



Kurt Miller / The Press-Enterprise

Kimberly Menera, 12, left, and Dr. David Haglund help Elena Bautista fill out a questionnaire on a new Netbook at Central Middle School in Riverside. All seventh-graders will receive free computers.

School2Home is a nonprofit program formed in 2009 working with the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund corporation and The Children's Partnership in a public-private project to bridge the digital divide between poor and middle-class students.

School2Home selected Central as a pilot partly because of its high percentage of English learners and low-income families, district officials said.

Students are excited about the Netbooks for homework and class work. Parents will be able to use them to e-mail teachers, check their children's grades online and surf the Internet.

Teachers hope to save time. Administrators hope to raise test scores by involving parents and increasing student motivation with an exciting new learning tool, Principal Pablo Sanchez said.

Students will carry them in their backpacks to and from school every day, using Netbooks for homework, class work, online textbooks, digital tests and research.

They may also save money.

"Next year, we're not even handing out textbooks," science teacher [John Robertson](#) said. Students will use online versions of all texts, Sanchez said. The 360 seventh-graders will use them again when they become eighth-graders next August and incoming students will get Netbooks instead of textbooks.

Instead of each student using \$500 of books, they will use \$300 Netbooks, and the cost will keep going down as technology improves, said John Goldman, a Central administrator assigned to the Netbook project with Riverside schools.

Results of previous programs in Romoland and across the nation issuing laptop computers to each student are mixed, said Jay McPhail, director of instructional technology for Riverside schools. But lots of research shows that when parents get more involved, students perform better and test scores go up, he said. That parent involvement is the focus of School2Home.

The first parents will get the small laptop computers Thursday when they start a six-hour class to learn how to connect to the Internet through Riverside's Wi-Fi network or order free or low-cost home Internet. Classes, offered over the next couple of weeks, also will teach parents to set up and use e-mail accounts, check their children's grades and standardized test scores online, and get technical support for the Netbooks, along with educational and online safety tools.

"I think it's good," said Ruben Morales, the father of a seventh-grade daughter who used computers at her previous school. He and his wife, Cecelia, said they had never used a computer before they took a survey Monday in the school gym but seemed excited about learning.

McPhail said about a quarter of parents acknowledged they had never or rarely used a computer. Many of them stared intently at the screens while their children and school staff guided them through the steps to survey parents' computer knowledge and plan their classes.

Parents Irasema and Juan Solorzano also said they hadn't used computers before and thought it would benefit their children. Their son Andrew is a seventh-grader at Central and said he would use the Netbook to do all his homework. Andrew said he would rather type homework on a computer than write in longhand.

"He's been going on about it every day," Irasema Solorzano said. " 'Computer, computer, computer. We're going to get a computer.' He's happy about this."

Families can use the Netbooks not only to help with their children's schoolwork, but for personal research, such as finding new jobs, said Wendy Lazarus, founder and co-president of The Children's Partnership, one of the program sponsors.

Using computers motivates students, Goldman said. He cited students' interest in other computer learning projects.

In addition to Central, Stevenson Middle School in Los Angeles will also pilot the program. SmartRiverside, the city's technology initiative, also is assisting Central. School2Home plans to connect 500 middle schools and 400,000 students statewide eventually.

Robertson said he plans to use the Netbooks for "bell work," or warm-ups and quick reviews the first 10 minutes of each class. For example, students may be asked to write paragraphs summarizing what they learned in science the day before, he said. The writing assignments help students personalize what they learned as well as strengthening writing skills, he said.

Robertson said he will replace a lot of paper with computerized learning. He and students will get almost instant feedback on digital tests, and scores will be recorded for him. "It's going to be huge time saver," Robertson said.

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