

Coventry teachers learn about technology

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Coventry teachers took a RITTI program.

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In order to stay current, teachers across the state have learned through the Rhode Island Teachers of Technology Institute (RITTI) course how to integrate technology into their classroom, according to Michael Sexton, one of the RITTI program coordinators.

The nine-day, 60-hour course was held at the Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School for the teachers in Coventry.

Participating in the event were 13 Coventry teachers for grades one to five and three principles from the elementary schools, according to Linda Middleton, one of the RITTI trainers.

“RITTI was awarded the grant and they say whether it’s high school teachers, middle school or what,” said Sexton. “It is about getting technology in the hands of students.”

He explained that every year the grant may change its focus and this year, RITTI decided that elementary and special education teachers should be offered the course.

Sexton estimated that RITTI was established in 1997.

“Back in ’97, I was one of the folks being trained and that year, all the teachers were given their own laptop,” he said. “It was so brand new that they were teaching us how to use Microsoft Word or Excel—it was more about training teachers about technology.”

“Now, students come in with familiarity, never knowing a time without computers,” said Sexton. The program now focuses on “teaching the best practices for effective technology.”

This year’s course taught educators about Web 2.0 and other presentation devices including ELMO, a projection camera, and SMART board, an interactive whiteboard that allows teachers to touch the screen for links.

According to Middleton, teachers also learned about “cloud computing” which is a term used for a multiple server network available on the internet, such as Google Docs or Google Maps.

“It’s out there in the clouds where everyone has accessibility to it, even the students and parents,” said Middleton. “There is no worry about having the right version of the software.”

She explained that with these tools, the teachers are not only saving paper and ink, they are providing students with additional assistance beyond the classroom.

“If it is 9:30 at night and a student is working on [Google Docs], the teacher can give feedback as

they are writing,” said Middleton. “It saves time in class and gives support after the school day.” She also explained that students can invite classmates to collaborate with them and give feedback online from home.

For students without access to a computer or internet at home, they can have access to computer labs during assigned times in the school day, according to Middleton.

The teachers who participate in the RITTI course are able to select whatever technology that best suits their classroom environment, said Sexton.

The course finished on Friday, July 15, and each teacher showcased what new technology they would be integrating into the teaching methods.

“One teacher created her own website to inform parents and put links up, such as resources to reinforce the [lesson],” said Middleton. “It’s up to the teacher.”

The teachers consider the different levels of sophistication based on their body of students, said Sexton.

“They are exposed to a wide variety of tools and based on what they teach, they decide if this will be the best for their students,” said Sexton.

Sexton said that throughout the course, he and other trainers had used Skype, an internet program that allows users to chat via video, to show teachers its benefits in the classroom.

“We skyped with another director and it got people around here thinking,” said Sexton. “For example, a firefighter could skype via wireless equipment and show students the actual fire station and equipment. It’s something you couldn’t do without the technology.”

He said that the goal of the course was not to give students easy access to information they could find elsewhere, for example in the library, but rather to provide them with a learning experience that only the technology offers.

“It provides a richer learning environment,” he said.

According to Middleton, this summer may be RITTI’s last, due to funding. While no decisions have been made, she stated that they hope they continue to receive funding because the program is beneficial to both the students and educators.

“A lot of our evaluation is tied into how we integrate technology, and without resources and training, how do we do that?” she said.

Sexton said that if funding was based on merit and professional development, they would certainly plan on funding next year.

“But because of the economy and cuts from both federal and state, there is always a question,” he said.

However, as for this summer, RITTI courses are being run in North Kingstown, West Warwick, Cranston and in other locations across Rhode Island.