Every kid a computer: the future of Valley education?

Coventry plans on outfitting every student with a Chromebook; West Warwick is also trying to put laptops into its students' hands
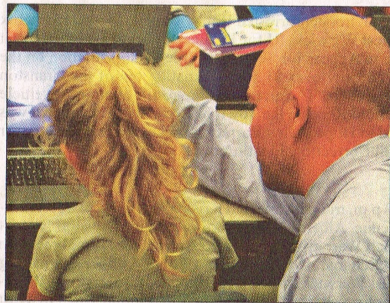
File photo

West Warwick's Wakefield Hills Elementary Principal Keith Remillard works with a student on a Google Chromebook.

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COVENTRY — Educators, parents and school officials compared notes at Tuesday's Coventry School Committee meeting as they discussed the pros and cons of integrating classroom sand supplying students with Chromebooks on a three-year plan.

The goals, in part, are to create an educational culture and learning experience that is characteristic of various models of blended learning; enhance collaboration between teachers, students, and parents; personalize and differentiate instruction; improve student engagement and achievement; and expand teaching and learning outside the classroom.

Some of the plan's objectives include integrating software, application and technology devices into teaching and learning, utilizing technology devices for testing purposes, developing teachers and support staff who will embrace and integrate technology in the curriculum and developing technology-rich classrooms.

Lynne Burke, director of educational technology and information systems, talked about how technology and the common core connect.

"It combines communication, collaboration and creativity," she said. "We want to get our kids at a higher level of skill. We're under a lot of pressure to accomplish this and to get students ready for assessment, which is exciting and scary as hell so we have to work together and support each other and we have amazing teachers who are highly motivated."

Burke said the district has this great opportunity to get technology in everyone's hands.

"We also have the parents in this equation,"

Education now focused on tech

she said. "They'll want to know, 'how does this help my child learn?' We have to re-educate our community about teaching and learning what Kindergarten through 12 school is today."

Jim Monti, technology director for West Warwick Public Schools, has been in education for 24 years and can recall working with boards and needing three different applications to do something on the web.

"The web really wasn't even there yet and for all this time, we've been talking about how technology can impact learning," he said.

His wife, a fourth-grade teacher, now has the ability to help her students during an assignment, all through using a Chromebook.

He did warn that along with all the ways the technology can be used, there must be boundaries set up as well.

"We don't want students reaching out to teachers during late hours and we won't want these kids to be glued to a device constantly," Monti said.

As much as the majority of conversation was positive, some did share valid concerns such as concerns for families who don't have internet access in their homes, how will they be able to conduct schoolwork.

Coventry School Superintendent Mike Almeida explained how students can do assignments when they get into school and there are other steps that can be taken to ensure those students receive the same opportunities.

What School Committee Chairwoman Kathy Patenaude likes so much about the devices is that when a document is shared with someone, there's no need to worry about what version of Word it's being sent in.

"It really is a plug-in and play type of thing. I really think Google has created a great product here," she said.

Fourth-grade teacher Kelly Erinakes' concern was about time management.

"We're competing with everything; daily curriculum, preparing for testing, etc., and my concern is that we have 465 teachers in the district whose technology experience varies greatly. We have technical wizards and those who are still upset they had to throw out their typewriters."

Erinakes said if the training is going to be volunteer, it will be very hard for teachers to cut out even more additional time in their schedules and some may even be embarrassed to show up because they do lack the skills.

She felt the way to go would be to have trainings for the basics before school begins in September so teachers can hit the ground running with some knowledge.

Almeida reminded those at the meeting that this first year is a time of exploration.

"I think students will be leading the teachers," he said. "I think this will transform into something we're not even aware of yet and into something with teachers and students that we don't expect."

One thing the superintendent said he did not want to do is set up a threatening environment where a teacher is uncomfortable with using the device.

"I'm more of the mind that we can use this time for exploration and proceed with caution," he said.

Another valid concern was making sure students at the elementary school level would be exposed to different things on the devices depending on the teacher's ability to use it.

"If you have one teacher at one school who knows technology well and another teacher at a different school who might not be as savvy, what happens to the student?" asked School Committee member David Florio.

Other members of the committee and those in the audience agreed again, that in many cases, the student is going to lead the teacher and everyone will actually be learning together.

Devices will begin to be used in March with a phasing in process beginning with just the teachers, followed by students in September. All students in grades six through 12 will receive one and devices will be shared by the students in grades three through five.