

Taking the next step



Submitted Photo

Dr. Donna Raptakis, the principal, Representative Lisa P. Tomasso, Lou Turchetta and one of his students, Susan Enos and Superintendent Mike Convery. The student and Turchetta are holding an iPad, which the school is using to help its non-verbal students communicate with their teachers.

WASHINGTON OAK COMMUNITY WORKS AS ONE TO BRING iPADS TO NON-VERBAL STUDENTS

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COVENTRY — For many, the iPad is more than the newest fad. Educators at Washington Oak Elementary say that for their non-verbal students, the device is instrumental in motivating the students to learn and progress.

At Washington Oak, students with autism or severe and mul-

tipl disabilities are using electronic devices everyday in the classroom, and with the help of a grant and a little budgeting, the school will soon enjoy the benefits of 10 new iPads.

The school received a \$1,500 legislative grant through the efforts of Principal Donna Raptakis, Representative Lisa P. Tomasso (D-Dist. 29, Coventry, West Greenwich) and Lou Turchetta, a special education teacher for grades K through 2.

The grant funded three iPads and the school budgeted for the purchase of seven more.

"The kids are very responsive to the use of iPads," said Raptakis.

She explained that in the fall, she and Turchetta had been discussing where the school could obtain the funding for the devices and approached the Coventry School Committee in December. Representative Tomasso was in attendance and

afterwards, suggested they pursue a legislative grant.

Shortly thereafter, the school was awarded the funds.

Currently, students at Washington Oak using the iPads are those who already own the device and bring it to school with them. Once the new iPads arrive, they will be available for all of the students at the school, especially those in special education and speech therapy.

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iPads are helping nonverbal students 'talk'

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"They are very visual kids. The problem is that they usually have a language problem so they depend very highly on visual cuing to function," said Janet Conti, a grade-three teacher.

Susan Enos, one of the special education teachers, has been working with non-verbal students since she began teaching 15 years ago. She said that traditionally, educators have used boards to assist with the visual cues.

A student could be presented at snack time with three pictures of snacks, and when asked what they would like to eat, they would point to their choice.

"You would have a snack one, a bathroom one, one for going to grandma's house or an educational activity — anything that we're asking the kids to do or be engaged in," she said.

This practice was effective but can

grow to be cumbersome as the student's vocabulary grows, Enos explained. With each activity a student was presented with, the teacher would need to create a new board with new options.

"The beauty of the iPad is that it's all contained and with the swipe of a finger, it comes up," she said.

Enos uses software on the iPad called Proloquo2Go. It performs the task of showing the student's potential choices on the screen and each time a student points to their selection, the iPad repeats it back in a full sentence. For example, if a student chooses to have chips at snack time, the iPad would then state "I want chips" for the student to hear.

"They love the technology and are really drawn to it. It's very interactive with noises and pops on the screen with colors," she said.

One of Enos's students has their own iPad and together, they use the device to practice communication.

Right now, Enos needs to select the Proloquo2Go app and then the student will maneuver through; however, the goal is for him to eventually work independently.

Turchetta currently has four students with severe and multiple disabilities who also utilize the iPad.

"They are working on their communication needs. They don't speak [so] they are working on identifying their name and numbers, learning routines and learning the difference between yes and no. We address that in different ways," he said.

Rather than using the Proloquo2Go app, Turchetta uses programs such as Word Maker and Word Slap.

Traditionally, he has helped students differentiate between the numbers one and two with flash cards. The student could see it, touch it and then Turchetta would compare it with either one or two objects.

"It's an effective method; however, with my students, they need the visual graphics and auditory. They need

to be excited by it," he said.

With the iPad, the students are introduced to the numbers one or two with a colored background, photos, music, characters and a round of applause when they select the correct choice.

"It brings in the visual, auditory and electronics piece. They are more motivated by it than simply holding up a card," said Turchetta.

The apps also collect data with each exercise to track the student's success. Turchetta has tracked a 30 to 40 percent increase in student response with an iPad rather than a number card.

Allie Baker, a speech pathologist at the school, uses the device to address language and articulation. She works with one of her students during occupation therapy sessions.

"He's really motivated by [the app] Talking Tom Cat. The cat actually imitates what the kids say and they really get a kick out of it," she said.

Baker utilizes a variety of other free

apps to help her students on their communication skills, such as categorizing and identifying particular sounds.

"We will listen to two different sounds and then point to the one that I'm saying," she said.

"They are very motivated by these touch screen computers," Baker added.

According to Raptakis, Washington Oak is focused on staying up-to-date on the technologies for the classroom. Every Monday, Lynn McDonald, the library media specialist, offers information for teachers on integrating technology into the classrooms; and for students information on creating documents such as PowerPoint presentations, sometimes as early as first grade.

"I am fortunate to have a staff that's willing to take [the technology]... they are actually utilizing it in the classroom and conveying the message that it's important," said Raptakis.