Cloud computing: Expanding the classroom to the 'Net

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12:34 a.m. EDT June 17, 2014

(Photo: Mark Vergari/The Journal News)

TUCKAHOE – From his desk screen, teacher James R. Moore opened Hailey Pagnotta's just-begun essay on India, sending her a quick "Good job!" message after watching her type a comma after an introductory clause.

Hailey, 12, lifted her head from the middle of a row of students with a startled look toward her sixth-grade social studies teacher. A quick "thanks!!!" popped up on his screen.

Tuckahoe schools this year piloted a technology initiative that could be an education game-changer. The district gave a half-dozen teachers laptops and asked them to work in a "cloud," a district-contracted Internet site accessible 24/7 to student, parent and teacher on phone, computer or digital pad.

"We are absolutely beginning a transformation," said schools Superintendent Barbara Nuzzi. "Look at the kids: just concentration and utter engagement."

For years, schools have used computers as "glass textbooks," upgraded overhead projectors and filmstrip replacements. While kids have been sharing pictures of their cheeseburgers or watching movie trailers on their phones, the classroom has remained in technology flat line.

About a decade ago, Putnam Valley schools, Nuzzi's former district, agreed to be a test district for an Apple computers education project, giving students their own MacBooks and creating cloud-based lessons, said Ed Hallisey, Putnam Valley Middle School principal. Now the district has almost an entire generation of students accessing the cloud (/story/news/education/2014/06/16/byod-chromebooks-finding-cloud-cheaply/10651425/) for classroom work.

"The students we're educating, they engage differently from students of 10, 15 years ago," he said. "We're trying to meet them on their home ground, meet their learning needs by giving them the electronics they're accomplished on. If you can capitalize on that, it governs everything."

Suzanne D'Arco, a 10th grade English teacher at Tuckahoe High School, reads "Twelve Angry Men" with her class.*(Photo: Mark Vergari/The Journal News)*

An informal survey of the area's 53 public school superintendents showed that 19 districts are moving to or have moved to cloud-based programs, either giving out computers or allowing students to use their own devices. In nearly all cases, the districts have signed up with Google for Education to provide the cloud, applications and document space for free. Each district's cloud presence is sequestered and each has its own security protocols and filters.

This year, about 9,000 New Rochelle students used a variety of devices to access the cloud. New Rochelle was one of 25 districts nationwide to qualify for the FCC's "Mobile on the Go" project several years ago, which provided money for broadband Internet access 24/7, devices and training.

One reason to start the program was to put New Rochelle in position to offer online testing (http://education.lohudblogs.com/2013/07/30/nys-slated-to-do-

field-testing-for-national-parcc-tests/)when the state's requirement kicks in in the next few years. Students have taken to the cloud without a stumble, said Christine Coleman, New Rochelle's director of technology.

"What we found was the students read more and wrote more ... and did their homework more; and students who never had a voice now had one," she said.

Lisa Weber, assistant superintendent for instruction for Ramapo Central schools, said the teachers trained in using the cloud keep finding new ways to teach. Being able to share documents between other educators or students is only one advantage, she said.

The cloud keeps track of every essay revision so data can't be lost. Teachers can watch students work in real time and make corrections, suggest ideas or give encouragement without any other student knowing it's happening. Students can make quizzes for their peers and add video or animation to their work.

Byram Hills signed up for Google's cloud over the summer, using MacBooks to begin uploading documents before school began.

"Everybody is starting to move in that direction because everybody is buying in," said James Yap, Byram Hills' director of technology. "Even when a kid is sick, their documents are up in the cloud. They can work on whatever they want."

Tuckahoe's pilot program gave Chromebook laptops to Alicia Conte, who teaches middle and high school Spanish. Earlier this month, her students were creating conversations using the subjunctive tense they animated and played back for credit.

"I had to go through my (older) lesson plans and update them in a really visually stimulating way for the kids," Conte said. " Before, ... we'd show a video about festivals in Spain. Now I'll go, 'Here's a list, go out and find the festivals in Spain and do a presentation on one of those.' It gets them right into the learning process."

Classroom tech

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