

School districts trying to keep up with technology

By Chris English Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, August 17, 2014 12:00 am

Faster, stronger and better.

That's what people want from their technology these days, and schools — including those in Lower Bucks County — are trying to accommodate without straining their budgets too much.

“Technology has been a key goal in our comprehensive plan, and we are focusing on it strongly,” said Centennial School District Superintendent Joyce Mundy. “The key is to provide students with increased access, agility and variety in using technology to support their learning.”

Technology is constantly advancing and so must the school district's commitment to keeping up with it as much as possible, Mundy added.

“We are creating a technology advisory group that will include staff, students, school board members, administrators and parents,” she said. “This group will give us multiple perspectives to make key decisions. We are seeking innovation in our approach as we integrate technology to provide students more options, choices and venues to optimize their learning experiences.”

Under the guidance of Director of Technology and Information Services Ray Kase, Centennial is implementing a \$1.5 million program to replace 600 laptop and 200 desktop computers throughout the district. A team of technicians overseen by Kase was recently installing the new equipment at the school district's Davis Elementary School in Upper Southampton.

The initiative also includes upgrading 1,200 computers — both laptops and desktops — with more memory and the Microsoft Windows 7 system. In addition, Centennial's planetarium and 21st Century Learning Lab are being improved.

“We're trying to put the best equipment in kids' hands whenever possible,” said Kase. “It's important to make sure kids have the best resources the district can afford to give them access to things on the Internet and also to software packages that enhance instruction. It's a big job to stay ahead of all that, but I think the district has done a great job in making sure that happens.”



Public and private schools throughout the area have adopted a similar approach to keeping up with technology.

Blackboards have given way to whiteboards, and they are in turn rapidly giving way to smartboards and the even more advanced interactive electronic projectors as ways for teachers to visually present their lessons to students.

At Davis Elementary, Kase demonstrated how the interactive device projects a screen about 4 feet square onto the classroom's whiteboard. The teacher or students can then move and manipulate words and images on the screen either through a desktop or laptop or via an electronic pen.

In Pennsbury, spokeswoman Ann Langtry said the school district recently provided new laptops to all teachers to coincide with the rollout of a new student information system. The laptops were leased for \$290,250 to be paid in four annual installments, she said.

Pennsbury has also installed a new wireless network across all schools, installed 90 new desktop computers in its middle school libraries and recently purchased 300 new and 290 year-old laptops for student use at Pennsbury High School, Langtry said.

Bristol Township Superintendent Samuel Lee said the district will soon announce a technology initiative for middle school students made possible by a Digital Promise Grant from the Verizon Foundation. Details will accompany the announcement, he said.

Technology is a high priority in BTSD, Lee added.

“We try to provide a technology-rich environment through instructional support, assessment and organizational efficiencies,” he said. “Like most entities, we have been challenged to grow our technology initiatives in this economy. But, our commitment is strong and we continue to leverage resources to provide a 21st century learning experience for our students. Our (three) new elementary schools will provide tremendous (technology) opportunities.”

In a further effort to keep up with technology in education, Bristol Township middle-schoolers will work on tablets this school year thanks to a federal grant program, Lee said.

Starting next month, 220 high school students in the Morrisville School District will be the first in Lower Bucks County to be taught in what is referred to as mixed, or blended, learning, which integrates cyber and traditional classroom learning.

Under the new platform, a teacher will still be in the classroom but classwork and homework will be done using a computer program tailored to a student's individual level of proficiency, Morrisville School District officials said.

Samantha Galing, who graduated from Council Rock High School North in June and will soon start at Arcadia University in Glenside, said Council Rock makes extensive use of technology in the classroom.

“I would say 99.9 percent of lessons were done using the computer, which included PowerPoint, Prezi, Word documents and things like that,” she said. “The smartboard is such a great tool to help kids learn and I found it really helpful when following along on lessons.”

Galing said she and other students were often allowed to use their cellphones to work on in-class assignments. District officials said a more formal “bring our own device” policy is being incorporated this school year that will allow students to connect into a school’s technology network with their own cellphones, laptops, electronic tablets or other devices.

“Overall, I felt CR used a good amount of technology,” said Galing. “There are some areas that could be improved on though. The laptops were very slow to log onto and by the time everybody would get on, half the class would be over. That is why being able to use our cellphones to do research and stuff was more beneficial because kids using the cellphone would be done in 10 minutes while the kids with the laptops were still waiting to get on and wouldn’t finish until the end of class. I think the bring-your-own-device idea would be smart and would be better for many students.”

The classroom is not the only place Council Rock is using technology. At school board meetings, board members and administrators for the most part now access background information via laptop or desktop rather than leafing through stacks of paper.

Also, the district uses a mass emailing system called ListServ to keep students, parents and residents up to date on events.

Private and parochial schools throughout Lower Bucks are also trying to make extensive use of technology to enhance learning.

At Conwell-Egan Catholic High School in Bristol Township, many students use a computer program called EAST to design green buildings, partner with architects and community organizations to help fix up homes, produce documentary films and many other uses, officials there said.

At St. Andrew Catholic Grade School in Newtown Township, “cutting edge technology enhances learning through a closed-circuit television studio, computer lab, laptop carts, iPad cart and interactive technology in every classroom in the form of smartboards, Epson Bright Links and MondoBoards” a statement from St. Andrew officials said.

Advanced technology was one of the factors that earned St. Andrew a 2013 National Blue Ribbon School award.

Staff writers Anthony DiMattia and Gema Maria Duarte contributed to this article.