

Back to the Books (and Laptops)

Technology Plays Growing Role as Va. Schools Open

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French teacher Normandie Lee stood in front of her class yesterday, face to face with the electronic whiteboard she had just learned how to use, and confessed, "Okay, I'm scared."

"You'll be fine," Cathy Ba, instructional technology coordinator for Gunston Middle School in Arlington County, said. Lee could control the computer-synced modern-day version of the blackboard with a touch of the screen, Ba reminded her.

"Push the X in the middle," one eighth-grade boy said.

"Slower," another encouraged.

"See, I knew you guys were smarter than me," Lee said, finally pulling up their homework assignments from the Internet. "This thing is so cool."

Across Northern Virginia, students and teachers returned to school, punctuating what was a two-week rolling start for the academic year in the Washington region. Like their peers who came back to District and Maryland public schools last month, these Virginia students are growing comfortable with classes where pod-



Fitzgerald second-grader Brianna R. Evaige closes her laptop. At many area schools, computer technology is playing a growing role as an instruction tool.

casting is routine, paper use is dwindling and whiteboards are increasingly interactive.

In one sign of the growing momentum for technological advances in education, **SMART Technologies** announced last month that it had produced its 1 millionth interactive SMARTboard. Company officials say they have sold 70,000 in the

Washington region.

"I think what we've seen happening is there is a little less argument about whether technology has a role to play in education and more of a desire to know exactly what to do with it to optimize the benefit for students," said Don Knezek,



chief executive of the International Society for Technology in Education, which has an office in the District. "It's less of a whether and whole lot more of how."

The society has joined with other groups to launch public service announcements calling on the presidential candidates to make "access to education technology and modern learning environments a top national priority."

Studies, Knezek said, show that school systems that have yet to invest in technology are hurting more than their students' employment potential.

"Before, we looked at a digital divide as an earning divide," Knezek said. "Now we look at a digital divide as a learning divide."

Three years ago, Gunston had two SMARTboards. Now, it has 17. As technology coordinator, Ba has to make sure they all work. As of 9 a.m. yesterday, only the one in Steven Brown's history and geography classroom showed a "no signal" stubbornly clinging to the screen.

If the end of the year is exam time for students, the first day is test time for school technology staff members. All summer long they plug in, boot up and log on, but yesterday, the keyboards were no longer in just their hands.

At Rachel Carson Middle School near Herndon, with 1,200 students and more than 600 computers, the scramble for technology specialists Steve Holmlund and Robert Maffett began when the doors opened.

When the first students arrived, Holmlund was there, digital camera in hand. Later, he would be standing behind the TelePrompTer as the principal declared, "Welcome back, Carson Panthers!" on the morning in-school TV show. And then it was off to address one call after another: a printer jam in the physical education department, wireless network problems across the school, a newly married teacher needing a user name change for a dozen different accounts.

Maffett, meanwhile, was checking the backup files on the school's server, replacing software on recently repaired laptops and helping a half-dozen students in the library get set up for Algebra II, an advanced offering available only online.

"In the course of the day, I get a good bit of exercise," Maffett said.

A decade ago, a single technology specialist would handle all the training and support for up to 10 schools in Fairfax County. Now, every school employs a full-time specialist tasked with bringing technology into classrooms, and each school has at least a part-time troubleshooter.

Christopher Dede, a Harvard University professor of learning technology, said the digital revolution in schools is not about teach-

ing students to use technology, it's about "teaching students how to do everything using technology." It's not enough for them to know how to collaborate across a table anymore; they have to know how to work virtually with someone who might be in another country, he said. They can't know only how to work a computer. They need to understand how to weed through a million possible sources of information, he said, and figure out quickly which five are useful.

"In a sense, the last bastion of not using technology was the classroom, and finally that is changing," said Dede, who has studied the subject for more than three decades. "People are recognizing to prepare students for life, it's important to have technology there."

At Fannie W. Fitzgerald Elementary School in Woodbridge, one of a handful in Prince William County outfitted entirely for wireless Internet access, the second-graders in Lilian Armstrong's class started with a seemingly simple task.

They had to turn on their laptops and find the appropriate Web site. For at least some, it was a first experience in what will become a common task when they grow up.

First, Minelly Dinarte, 7, got a password prompt.

"I don't know how to spell 'student,'" Minelly said, looking at the window to type in her user name and password.

She figured it out, then waited and waited.

"It's almost happening! Come on!" she said. A window on the screen said "NovellZENworks 7 Desktop Management." Minelly said she didn't know what Zen meant. "I know what 'seven' means," she said.

When Armstrong turned to the interactive whiteboard, flipping between computer windows with a touch of the screen, Minelly was awestruck.

"Look! She just touched it!" she said.

Knowing that some teachers at Gunston were not quite ready to jump into the technology's interactive features, Ba encouraged them to at least use the board as a projector the first day. As a result, the word "welcome" hovered on screens throughout the school.

Lee tried to venture further.

"Now, who can help me close out of this?" she asked the class before uttering what would become a mantra of the day. "I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid."

Staff writers Michael Alison Chandler and Ian Shapira contributed to this report.



BY DOMINIC BRACCO II — THE WASHINGTON POST

Lilian Armstrong assists Fitzgerald second-graders with their laptops. To prepare students for life, they need to learn how to use technology, a professor says.



PHOTOS BY GERALD MARTINEAU — THE WASHINGTON POST

Instructional technology coordinator Cathy Ba, left, tries to connect a laptop to a digital projector and make it work on the first day of class at Gunston Middle School. Above, French teacher Normandie Lee was a little nervous about using a SMARTboard, but her students and Ba helped allay her concerns.



PHOTOS BY DOMINIC BRACCO II — THE WASHINGTON POST

Second-graders Rodney O. Okyere, left, and Da'ion M. Ferrell play games on their laptop computers at Fannie W. Fitzgerald Elementary School in Woodbridge, one of a handful of Prince William County schools that is outfitted entirely for wireless Internet access.