

### Technology Policy at Wes-Del Community Schools

Wes-Del Community Schools is a small rural school district located near Muncie. The single elementary is located in Gaston and the Junior High-High School campus is located approximately five miles away from the elementary, near the intersection of two major highways about twenty miles from the county seat. The school corporation was formerly known as Harrison-Washington Community Schools until 2004 when Harrison Elementary combined with Washington Elementary. The Harrison Elementary building was torn down and the Washington Elementary building was remodeled and expanded then renamed Wes-Del Elementary.

The school corporation averages an enrollment in kindergarten through twelfth grade of about eight hundred and seventy students. The student population is mostly white with very few students of other races. About thirty percent of students are on either free or reduced lunches (see Figure 1). Many of the students come from families where

Figure 1: Ethnicity and Free Lunch 2004-2005



technology is prominent in their lives while other students come from families of a lower socio-economic status. The average teacher salary is relatively low for most of the teachers in the school based upon the number of years that they have been teaching. The

average expenditure per student in 2003-2004 was \$8,000. The school tends to expend \$800 less per student than the state average.

Wes-Del Elementary has been recently remodeled and expanded. As part of the expansion, the school installed a number of new technologies including internet and cable access in every room, a new student management system, a new phone system and wireless network. In addition to these new technologies, the district upgraded many of the existing technologies including. Each classroom has at least one teacher computer and two computers dedicated to student use. There are also two computer labs with twenty-five computers in each. Students have access to the lab at all times. The school's student management system keeps records of lunch accounts, attendance, daily announcements, gradebooks, and teacher comments about grades. All classrooms now have internet access on all computers so that students are able to access a larger wealth of information more easily. The school does have software that protects against inappropriate material. Students, teachers, and parents are all required to sign an Acceptable Use Policy before they are allowed access to the technology in the schools. The school is ~~also~~ networked within the building as well as being linked through fiber optics to the high school campus. All rooms also have the wiring for cable access but the school does not currently have the money to purchase televisions for each room.

Along with the new technologies that were installed at the time of the renovation, the school also upgraded many of its existing technologies. One of the upgraded technologies was the phone system. Prior to this upgrade, only offices and select personnel had phones. The new system allows each teacher to have a telephone within their classroom and includes a voicemail messaging system—that parents can call the

school and leave messages for individual teachers. The phone system is also used to set off emergency drills. The school also implemented a new student management system. The new student management system is completely computerized and manages lunch account balances, attendance, check in and check out of books in the library, records keeping, and grade keeping. Also, the gymnasium was upgraded to include a projection screen, new sound system, wireless mics, and hearing-impaired devices so that it could function as a general assembly room as well as a gymnasium (T. Shafer, personal communication, Jun 8, 2005).

Many teachers have access to laptops that they use on a regular basis that were either purchased with their own or grant monies. According to Tracy Shafer, principal of Wes-Del Elementary, in addition to the laptops and desktop computers in each room, teachers use learning reinforcement tools with their students to enhance learning. This software is both web-based and CD-ROM. The network allows teachers to use web-

Figure 2: AlphaSmart 3000



based learning tools in both classroom and the labs. The school also has two carts that contain thirty AlphaSmart machines each. These machines contain small applications (Applets) that include word processing, calculator functions, keyboarding instruction, classroom quizzing, and word prediction (see Figure 2)

(AlphaSmart, 2005). Each AlphaSmart is primarily used for word processing and brainstorming activities with *Inspiration* software. First and second grades also use the machines for math skills. These machines allow students to write and send information to

the teacher via infrared wireless technology. The teacher can also send information back to the students and students can print their documents via infrared

Teachers also use WebQuests to help in teaching the curriculum. Students may read stories on the selected WebQuest and then use PowerPoint to give a presentation on the story. For example, sixth graders read the book *Holes* and then they work through modules on a WebQuest. These students work through this book more independently because they are required to complete the modules without help. The teacher who teaches this curriculum feels that using WebQuests has expanded the depth of understanding that might not otherwise occur with simply reading the book because it brings more issues to the student's attention. The teacher commented, "The modules in the WebQuest brings forth topics and issues that are related to the story that I have never thought about being related" (S. West, personal communication, Jun 8, 2005). The topics in the WebQuest may not be directly related to the book at first glance, but once the students work through the modules, they learn much more about the covered topics and expand their knowledge of the content. The students are also better able to create connections and relationships among the different topics and issues raised in the book.

Many teachers at Wes Del Elementary view technology as a very important part of their teaching. Most teachers use technology in some way in their classroom at least once a week. Sheila West, a reading skills and computer applications teacher at Wes-Del Elementary, believes that technology has diversified instruction because of its ability to connect multiple topics and ideas together in a relatively short period of time (The Wall Street Journal, 1997). Another key factor in the use of computers in instruction is the idea that the technology is new enough to students that they are interested in doing things

with the computer. With computers, students appear more focused. One of the biggest changes that technology has brought about for students is the way that they find information. The way that students do research today is completely different from the way their parents did research in school. Mrs. West has noticed many advances in student learning since she has begun integrating technology into her teaching. She believes that the students' knowledge tends to be more accurate because they are able to judge credibility and other criteria much more easily and quickly than before.

The use of technology is strongly encouraged and supported in this school. Steve McColley, Superintendent of Wes-Del Community Schools, encourages teachers to use technology in their instruction. The school has a technology plan that covers three years at a time. In this technology plan there is a system for replacing all the computers every five years. The school corporation dedicates one-third of its budget to the enhancement of technology. Half of that money is used towards the purchase of hardware each year and the other half is used towards staffing and offering support services for teachers. When new teachers are hired they are required to attend a half-day training session that teaches them how to use the student management system, gradebook, and other essential software they will be required to use on a regular basis. The technology coordinator of the corporation offers workshops or courses for teachers. In some cases, the teachers have the option of paying some fees and they can receive college credit for participating in those courses. Many times teachers will also receive a stipend for attending the workshops. Teachers also have opportunities to attend district and state level conferences that will help them to better understand and use technology in their instruction. Also, there are in-service days where the teachers are required to attend workshops or training

sessions that will help them enhance their technology skills. The administration believes that in order for a teacher to be able to successfully use technology that they must learn the basics at the beginning. However, the administration is now discovering that most people who are coming out of college already know how to use the technology. And they see this as an asset because these new teachers also help other teachers when they need assistance. At the elementary there are three support technicians that are on call all day. These support staff are classroom teachers who volunteer their time to helping other teachers if it is necessary.

Technology is an important piece of Wes-Del Community Schools. The administration wants to encourage teachers to expand their technology skills and use of technology in the classroom (S. McColley, personal communication, Jun 9, 2005). Teachers also rely on each other to help them with problems. The technology coordinator or his assistant are available every day and are usually able to solve problems in a timely fashion. Even though the student body consists of mostly lower class socio-economic students, the school has been fortunate enough to afford to purchase the technology and support it.