

Cracking the netbooks: Arlington, Pownal students newly equipped

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ARLINGTON -- The holidays are over, but you wouldn't know it sitting in the Fisher Elementary fourth and fifth grade classrooms Monday.

As part of the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project, the students received new netbook computers and printers to use for the remainder of the school year. Pownal Elementary four and fifth graders received the same.

Thanks to competitive grants applied for by each town, the computers belong to the school districts. But the students will be able to take them home in coming weeks after familiarizing themselves with the netbooks.

At Fisher Monday afternoon, students sat anxiously as they were cautioned about caring for the netbooks. The computers were then handed out one at a time.

E-Vermont, a project of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, aims to help rural communities take full advantage of the Internet. The goals include economic development, school innovation, access to social services and increased civic involvement.

Principal Deanne Lacoste said she expects the netbooks will be used in class daily. They'll also

benefit students at home.

Fifth grade teacher Jeremy Pratico said he has never used one-on-one technology in his classes. But thanks to the grant, he and other teachers have been trained to incorporate the netbooks into the curriculum.

For example, Pratico said each year he does a month-long unit on the Alaskan Iditarod dog sled race, which

includes assignments in every subject. Pratico said students enjoy picking a musher whose progress they track online daily.

"I usually have to go down to the computer lab and put it up on the overhead down there and they all have to just watch, but now they'll be able to do their own thing. They'll get to research their own musher in class instead of having to go down to the lab," Pratico said. "Up until now, because some of them don't have Internet at home, they come in in the morning and are like 'Where's my musher, where's my musher, how far is my musher?' So every morning and every afternoon I'd print out a big long list of where the musher is."

The fourth and fifth grade wing of Fisher has just been equipped with wireless Internet service, so students will be able to check the status of their mushers from their desks when there is any free time in class.

Another benefit of the netbooks, for both the environment and district budget, is the amount of paper and ink that will be saved.

"For the Iditarod unit, I photocopy tons of stuff, and it's all stuff that's online. So now I can just have everyone open their netbook and go straight online right to the site," Pratico said.

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The most important benefit of incorporating computers into the curriculum may be the interest it generates among the children, according to Pratico.

"The fifth grade as a whole seems pretty excited to come to school as it is now anyway, but hopefully this will just put them right up over the top. They love computer class, so anytime they can do something with computers is great," Pratico said.

The towns of Arlington, Sunderland and Sandgate were jointly selected as a recipient of the e-Vermont grant. Pownal is another of the 12 communities chosen in 2010. Twelve more Vermont communities were selected as 2011 recipients, although none are in Bennington County.

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