



DOWNERS GROVE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 99

Students in Downers Grove District 99 use Chromebooks to help learn. District officials are calling the implementation of the 1:1 learning program that began in August a success.

District 99 calls Chromebook learning a success at high schools

BY ANNEMARIE MANNION
Chicago Tribune

Giving every student in Downers Grove Community High School District 99 a computer to take home with them was a massive undertaking. It didn't come off without challenges. But district officials are calling the implementation that began in August a success.

There are nearly 5,000 students at Downers Grove North and Downers Grove South, and each has a district-issued Chromebook to ensure 24/7 access to a computer, as well as equal access to instruction and digital content.

The district is reviewing how the 1:1 learning program has been working, and has plans in the future to improve it by surveying students, teachers and parents and continuing technology learning for teachers.

Gina Ziccardi, assistant superintendent for student learning, said the district is looking at how Chromebooks are helping students become more collaborative, empowered and help them learn in ways that were previously unattainable without the devices.

Joann Purcell, a math teacher and technology coach at Downers Grove North, and Nader Najjar, a special services teacher, said that teachers have spent the initial months of the program seeking and trying tools that will help support student learning.

"There are a lot of tools out there," Purcell said. "The harder part of what we're doing is figuring out if a tool will work to supplement or support our students in a way we couldn't before."

Some of the tools that teachers are using include Google Classroom, a suite of tools to improve collaboration, and Braingenie, a math and science practice site.

Najjar said Google Classroom lets a large group of students collaborate on work at the same time, and see what others are doing. Braingenie enables teachers to individualize instruction, so they can give more challenging assignments to students who've mastered the work, and dial it down and give other problems to students who are having a harder time. It also lets teachers see how much time a student spends on answering a question or problem.

District officials said the first months of the school year have been a learning process. The district has various ways in which it is promoting professional development for teachers, including technology coaches for teachers, online tutorials and an online website for teachers to share information or advice on what is working in their classrooms.

For students who don't have Internet access at home, the district is leasing Kajeet Smartspots that provides Wi-Fi to students in their homes. The district has leased 50, and 32 are currently in use by students who qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Rod Russeau, director of technology, said implementing the program has been a massive undertaking for his department. The district had to double its bandwidth, and early in the school year experienced problems with connectivity. The problem was linked to a content filtering tool, and the district has switched to a different tool, which seems to be working.

"The change was instant, and it was good," he said.

The district also has technolo-

gy centers in each of the schools where students can take their Chromebooks if they need repairs. The centers are supervised by staff, but students do the work of diagnosing and fixing the devices, which officials said provides those students with a hands-on learning experience.

Mathew LaRue, a sophomore at Downers Grove South, said the 1:1 learning program helped him stay on track with his classroom work even when he was sick. He said he also likes the feedback from teachers and other students.

"It's more of an interactive experience for everyone, rather than kids getting bored," he said.

Sam Bates, a senior at Downers Grove South, likes that she's able to work at her own pace by, for instance, completing enrichment assignments at home for her Spanish class.

"I definitely was one of those students who needed to take time, so I'd go home and finish at my own pace," she said.

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