

Do Laptops Help Learning? A Look At The Only Statewide School Laptop Program

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It was the year 2000 and Maine's governor at the time, Angus King, was excited about the Internet. The World Wide Web was still relatively young but King wanted every student in the state to have access to it.

"Go into history class and the teacher says, 'Open your computer. We're going to go to rome.com and we're going to watch an archaeologist explore the Catacombs this morning in real time.' What a learning tool that is!"

Fast-forward a couple of years and that dream became a reality. Maine became the first, and still only, state to offer a statewide laptop program to certain grade levels.

Alison King, no relation, was just a toddler when the program launched. Back then, kids lugged big, bulky iBooks around all day. In her senior year at Gorham High School, she says she uses her laptop — now much smaller — for most of the day, "We hardly ever use paper."

Her American politics class is totally paperless. Alison's teacher, James Welsch, says when he arrived in Gorham seven years ago, he'd never seen so many computers in one classroom. Welsch says it turned the class into an interactive discussion, "It's like, we can put the world on the desk of each kid." His students write blog posts, read each other's work, and share videos and articles — all online.

Then he started to notice that when some students turned in their essays, the writing wasn't as fluid as it was when the students were putting pen to paper. "You could also see an increase in copy-and-paste," he says. "Whether it's from another student, whether it's from a piece online, digital sharing is what these guys do."

Because of that, he says, in some courses he requires his students to write out their essays by hand.

Welsch learned what a lot of teachers, researchers and policymakers in Maine have come to realize over the past 15 years: You can't just put a computer in a kid's hand and expect it to change learning.

Research has shown that "one-to-one" programs, meaning one student one computer, implemented the right way, increase student learning in subjects like writing, math and science. Those results have prompted other states, like Utah and Nevada, to look at implementing their own one-to-one programs in recent years.

Yet, after a decade and a half, and at a cost of about \$12 million annually (around one percent of the state's education budget), Maine has yet to see any measurable increases on statewide standardized test scores. That's part of why Maine's current governor, Paul LePage, has called the program a "massive failure."

"The fact that we're not seeing large-scale increases in student learning leads us to suspect we still need to do some work with helping schools and teachers understand and keep up with the best ways to use technology for student learning," says Amy Johnson, who researches education policy at the University of Southern Maine.

She says it's tough to measure the effects using a simple standardized test, for example, and that teacher training is necessary to get results, but the state de-emphasized some of that training in recent years.

Johnson says this has created a new kind of divide in Maine. Students in larger schools, with more resources, have learned how to use their laptops in more creative ways.

But in Maine's higher poverty and more rural schools, many students are still just using programs like PowerPoint and Microsoft Word.

Some educators also worry that new funding cuts and changes to the program's structure could leave those rural schools even further behind.

However, officials say these challenges shouldn't make people forget about the original goal of this program fifteen years ago: to give every student, in every part of Maine, access to the same digital tools.

Nikolas Sharon, another student at Gorham High School says he couldn't imagine social studies class without his laptop and Internet connection.

"I don't think I could do it, honestly. I probably would have dropped the class," he says. "I don't want to look at a newspaper. I don't even know where to get a newspaper!"

Sharon says he gets all that information right on his laptop.

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