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N.Y. school goes all in on digital textbooks

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Math students follow a lesson in a digital textbook at Archbishop Stepinac High School in White Plains, N.Y.

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. — At Archbishop Stepinac High School, the backpacks got a whole lot lighter this year because nearly every book — from freshman biology to senior calculus — is now digital, accessible on students' laptops and tablets.

Lost weight and a book bill that dropped from \$600 to \$150 were not the main reasons the all-boys Roman Catholic school north of New York City went all in on digital textbooks.

Except for books on religion, all texts the school uses are part of a digital bookshelf kept on an Internet cloud.

“We went to digital because it makes for better learning,” said Frank Portanova, Stepinac vice principal. “This is the way kids learn today. The online content is a lot richer. You’ve got assessments, you’ve got virtual labs, you’ve got blogging.”

The online history books, for example, include videos on subjects ranging from Woodrow Wilson to Malcolm X. The science books show scientific processes in motion. The English books grade an essay and offer a student a worksheet on the proper use of commas if it is needed. Students can highlight passages or leave notes to themselves in the margins, without ruining the book for anyone else.

All the books are available to all the students, so a junior can look back at the freshman algebra book to review a concept. Students can click to find every reference to “osmosis,” say, in all the books. The school’s technology director, Patricia Murphy, said the textbooks have been updated three times this semester alone.

Lisa Alfasi of New Jersey-based Pearson Education Inc., publisher of the digital library, said Stepinac is the only school in the country that has arranged access to all books for all students.

History teacher Joe Cupertino said having so much “enrichment” available in the digital text means homework is productive and “frees us to do more discussion, more analysis in class.”

Freshman Michael Bilotta said he is particularly fond of a feature that allows the digital books to read themselves out loud.

“So when you’re tired, on the bus or something, you can just put earphones on and hear the lesson,” he said.

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