

Computer makers adapt laptops for tough school market

By David Koenig, Associated Press
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DALLAS — As the superintendent of a fast-growing suburban school district, Mike Smith faces a textbook shortage every fall. This year will be a little different at the Forney Independent School District.

Every fifth- and sixth-grader at Johnson Elementary, 100 to 150 students, will receive a \$1,350 IBM ThinkPad computer loaded with digital versions of state-approved textbooks and 2,000 works of literature. If the experiment works, the program will be expanded to other grades.

"We think this is better than simply going out and buying more textbooks," said Smith, who expected a shortage of 600 textbooks in August. Enrollment is projected to rise 20% or more at the district, and it takes three months to get new books.

Forney is the first district in the country to sign up with IBM for the digital notebooks as the company tries to get an edge in the competitive school-computer market and jump-start educators' interest in using more laptops, which has lagged because of cost.

IBM hopes that adding content will help it catch up to other companies that sell laptops to schools. IBM ranks fifth in the market, far behind the leader, Round Rock-based Dell Inc.

Will Moore, an executive in IBM's education business, says loading the machines with content makes them a good buy.

"If the students have all of Shakespeare's works loaded on their notebook, the school doesn't need to go out and buy all of those books," Moore said. "And the real benefit is that it's all interactive and searchable."

IBM is working with software partner Vital Source Technologies Inc. of Raleigh, N.C., to sell the bundled notebooks and content to schools.

School districts in Maine, Michigan and elsewhere are already providing laptops to students, but analysts say the cost of the technology is blocking more widespread use.

That's even true at colleges, where dozens of private schools require students to buy their own laptops.

"Many institutions have looked at this and decided, 'We're not ready for this,' whether it's the cost, the politics of the cost, or the difficulty of curriculum differences" from school to school, said Kenneth C. Green, director of The Campus Computing Project, which tracks technology use at colleges.

But Jeanne Hayes, president of research firm Quality Education Data, a unit of Scholastic, said some schools see laptops as a good way to teach remedial courses and meet testing requirements of a recent federal law. Anticipating a trend, textbook publishers are starting to sell digital versions of their products, Hayes said. Other companies, such as Apex Learning, are making educational content available to schools over the Internet, she said.

Computer makers are also adding features to make laptops less prone to break if they are dropped — a big concern of school administrators and parents. Moore said the IBM model that Forney will buy disconnects the recording head from the hard disk drive and locks it when the machine senses it is falling.

In Henrico County, Va., where schools give laptops to all high schoolers, Apple Computer replaced pop-out CD-ROM trays with slides on its iBook laptops when students kept breaking off the trays after forgetting to close them.

"They get heavy use, and occasionally they drop them," said Cathy Fisher, Henrico's director of high school education. Still, she said breakage, as well as thefts, are rare.

The Henrico school board will decide next year whether to renew the deal with Apple, which cost the school district \$18.5 million over four years. Fisher said the district can't prove that computers raise test scores, but she said they make learning more interesting.

Back in the Dallas suburb of Forney, Superintendent Smith doesn't know what he'll do after the experiment with textbook-loaded laptops next year. It all depends on the price, he said.

"A child's set of textbooks costs \$350," Smith said. "If they can get these notebooks down to \$500, it gets cost-effective in a hurry."

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