

Schools see rising scores with iPads

From wire service reports

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Want to improve student academic performance? There's an app for that.

Hundreds of middle school students in the central San Joaquin Valley, Calif., and across the state—each with a school-issued iPad—are using curriculum apps for their classwork and homework.

Educators say students who use the touch-screen devices for class appear to be more engaged in their studies. Students can view their school work anywhere and eMail their teachers anytime.

It seems to be making a difference: Test scores of iPad-using students are climbing.

[1] Educators say students who use the touch-screen devices for class appear to be more engaged in their studies.

In Fresno Unified School District, where 100 students at Kings Canyon and Sequoia middle schools are part of a four-district pilot program, the results are promising, spokeswoman Susan Bedi said.

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"The iPads have created excitement about learning algebra, which indicates that students are more engaged in the classroom," she said, "and that will equate to higher achievement."

School is cool

Teachers say students are more interested in learning because it's happening where they want to be—on the cutting edge of technology.

This year, each sixth-grader at Corcoran Unified's John Muir Middle School got an iPad from the district, one of the few in the nation to hand them out to an entire grade level.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of her classroom last week, sixth-grader Dominique Hunt glided her finger over her iPad screen to display several of Pablo Picasso's paintings in full color. Within seconds she transferred them to a presentation about the Spanish painter for her English class.

The iPad comes to students with hundreds of lessons, games, and learning applications already loaded in by teachers, and students can add their own.

When they're not using iPads for school work, students can eMail friends, add new applications, surf the internet, or go to Facebook. Filters keep students from inappropriate websites.

Sixth-grader Savannah Smart said she and her classmates caught on quickly to the notebook-sized computer.

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Savannah showed how she can draw with her finger on the iPad screen or circle an answer on a quiz.

It's so convenient and fun to use, she said, that "I can study while I'm helping my mom make dinner."

If there's a downside to having an iPad, it will be having to live without one during the summer break, the girls said. The iPads will be collected from students after school ends.

Said Dominique, "I will feel so empty."

Test scores rising

More districts across California and elsewhere are putting in orders for iPads.

Four hundred students in the Fresno, Long Beach, San Francisco, and Riverside Unified School Districts are in a pilot program sponsored by textbook publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Apple to teach algebra with iPads.

In one video application, a well-known math expert who is regarded as algebra's equivalent of "Bill Nye the Science Guy" introduces sometimes tedious and difficult concepts with a dose of humor. He uses props to make a math problem come to life, wearing multiple hats to demonstrate the number of combinations a person can wear.

If students don't understand the lesson the first time, they can watch it repeatedly until they've learned it, said John Sipe, national retail sales manager for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in San Diego.

"They could watch the video 15 times, and no one has to know, and it takes away the stigma of not getting it," he said. "This is a move toward personalized and individualized instruction so the students take more of a role in their learning."

That might help explain some of the results schools are reporting.

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Jay McPhail, Riverside Unified's director of instructional technology, said 90.5 percent of students using iPads are testing as proficient or above on benchmark tests, compared with 60 percent in other classes.

Benchmark tests are given to mark progress during the school year. Results from the California Standardized Tests, which students are taking this month, won't be known until August.

"What we are hearing over and over from the students using iPads is the ease of having all the resources in one place," he said.

Shellie Escobedo, a sixth-grade teacher at Corcoran Unified's John Muir Middle, said her language arts students' scores jumped 11 percent compared with benchmarks from last year.

"This is the most confident I have felt going into state testing in my 10 years as a teacher," she said. "I don't know how we will not have an increase."

A growing number

Joining the iPad experiment was a no-brainer for districts that got theirs for free by joining pilot programs or using grant funds.

Madera Unified used \$140,000 in grant money to buy 120 iPads and other equipment for math classes at Desmond Middle School.

But Corcoran Unified spent \$200,000 in district funds to lease iPads and to provide wireless access to the kids. For many families, it marked the first time they had home access to the internet.

The John Muir Middle students use iPads for math, language arts, science, and social studies. They only have one book in the four core subjects: a language arts workbook.

The district is leasing 250 more iPads next school year for college-bound high school students and eventually, all students in grades 6 through 12 will have them, said Kathi Felder, the district's academic technology coach.

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Students with iPads are doing a better job on their schoolwork and homework, said Steve Brown, Corcoran's director of educational services: "Some students who were barely turning their assignments in through December are now turning in their homework."

And discipline issues have almost disappeared since iPads were introduced to students, who risk losing theirs if they misbehave, Escobedo said.

iPads replace textbooks

Could the iPad spell the death knell for heavy backpacks?

Textbook companies are scrambling to develop applications to replace textbooks.

"The iPad gave us our first opportunity to reimagine how we deliver content," said Sipe of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "Instead of toting a 700-page, 8-pound algebra book, you have the iPad with video examples and guided answers."

But it's up to software developers to keep pace with tech-savvy kids, said Susan Einhorn, executive director of the Anytime Anywhere Learning Foundation based in Washington state.

Just putting flash cards into applications will not be enough to keep students engaged, she said. And iPads aren't suited for word-processing or lengthy writing assignments.

"The main question is, what are you going to do with it?" she asked. "We want all kids to have a laptop, and I don't know if this will replace the laptop."

Printed textbooks are definitely on their way out, said Otto Benavides, who teaches technology integration courses for teachers at the Kremen School of Education at Fresno State.

In four or five years, most textbooks will come on devices like the iPad, he said.

The iPad might not always have a monopoly in classrooms, said Warren Buckleitner, the New Jersey-based editor of Children's Technology Review. Competition for classroom dollars will spur manufacturers to design new products that likely will be cheaper, he said.

But the iPad, Buckleitner said, will always represent the "launch of a new renaissance" in education.

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