School officials, board seek best way to utilize devices

Local teachers are using mobile devices in their classes in subjects ranging from physical education to algebra II.

Math teacher Chris Epke uses Educreations to solve problems on a computerized blackboard while teaching students in the classroom.

Or in her home or anywhere else.

The lesson can then be accessed through her Internet website.

While District 20 school officials and teachers grapple with the best way to use mobile devices, Epke said she thinks technology is under used in classrooms.

“There are a lot of applications that can be used to further understanding,” she said, noting that a one-to-one classroom could provide amazing opportunities for students.

One-to-one computing is placing a laptop, handheld, tablet or other mobile device, into the hands of every student.

Whether the district is

ready for a one-to-one initiative was discussed at a school Stakeholder meeting Feb. 6 at Gothenburg Public Library.

About 20 community members, representing a cross-section of Gothenburg, listened to presentations about the use of mobile technology by school librarians and media specialists and superintendent Dr. Mike Teahon.

Teahon said district officials think curriculum should drive technology.

Many schools have bought and given laptop computers and other mobile devices to students to use at home or school.

Yet District 20 officials are taking a wait-and-see approach.

Board members and others seek the best way to utilize technology in the classroom, said board member Jon Hudson.

Because of the large number of school computers, laptops,

iPods and iPads and other devices available to District 20 students, Hudson said it’s almost like a one-on-one initiative.

And, he noted, not all children have access to the Internet in their homes.

Technology coordinator Jo Wiggins said she budgets for technological devices to meet student needs.

“We’re unique,” Wiggins said about District 20. “Our building was designed with adequate desktop computer lab space so we’ll fulfill those needs longer than districts with a lot of hand-held devices.”

For the 416 students in the junior and senior high, she said 307 student devices are available. Out of 494 elementary students, 274 have devices available.

Teahon said the biggest challenge in making decisions about what to buy is the availability of funds to buy devices and insuring that they’re used.

Teachers and technology

Empowering teachers with the knowledge of how to use mobile technology is key, school officials said.

“You can have the best idea but if people on the floor don’t get it, it’s a waste of time,” Teahon said.

High school librarian Lori Long worked as an integration specialist for a couple of years, showing teachers how to implement technology in their classrooms and lesson plans.

In addition to their work as librarians, Long and Dudley Elementary librarian Angie Richeson continue to work with teachers and technology. Paraeducator Jayne Eggleston was also hired to help with technology and other duties.

Richeson described teachers as incredibly busy in their classroom with little time to learn new technology.

“That can send stress levels high,” she said, noting that she and Eggleston try to meet teachers in the middle with technology by co-teaching a lesson until a teacher is comfortable.

Long said change is not easy for anyone.

Some teachers take baby steps in learning new technology while others embrace it, she said.

Richeson also alluded to how teaching has changed. Before, teachers often stood in front of a class pushing concepts. Now, they have to think outside of the box more to keep students motivated and engaged.

“As 21st century teachers, we try to pull in problem-solving skills,” she said. “Digital citizenship is real and knowing how to effectively and efficiently find and use information is critical.”

Teahon said the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic has shifted into reading comprehension, math computation and research and information gathering.

“How we deliver instruction has to change,” he said.

Asked how mobile devices are used K-6, Richeson said there’s a fine line between using them to play games or for authentic learning.

“Certain tools work for certain kids and often technology is the way to reach a student,” she said.

Long said the key is figuring out which tool, whether it be flash cards or a mobile application,

works best for students.

“Do we need a song and dance and flash everyday to teach a lesson?” she asked. “There are a wide range of comfort levels and abilities. It’s an individual type of choice.”

Richeson said many kids know more about mobile devices and applications than teachers.

Long said teachers need to be open to being taught by students.

The group also talked about the importance of balancing computer use with everyday life.

Mary Lou Block said her daughter, Kirsten, recognized what a distraction texts and email are after she returned to college last fall.

Last summer, while in Gothenburg, Kirsten used Internet at the library because service was spotty at her parents’ rural home.

Returning to 24-hour a day access at college was noticeable, Mary Lou said.

“I think time unplugged is good,” she said. “Because we forget how to talk or relate to each other.”

Teahon said a study of the brains of young adults shows a chemical reaction and addiction to using mobile devices.

At this point, Wiggins said testing of students can’t be done on iPads. She added that a mix of

computers and mobile devices is a good environment for students.

Staff and board members recently toured Arnold Public Schools to see how the district has implemented a one-to-one initiative with laptop computers.

A group will visit eastern Nebraska schools to how they implement mobile devices and to look at alternative organizational structures within the high school setting.

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