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HOLLY McQUEEN/THE REGISTER
Mackenzie Hart, 6, leans in as Jackson Dopheide, 7, watches and listens to a video about the Mount St. Helens volcano Thursday on a laptop computer used in a first-grade class at Saydel's Cornell Elementary School. At right is Chase McClure, 7.

Iowa and the Midwest

Iowa received a "C" grade in the 10th annual "Technology Counts" report, which grades states on access, use and capacity for technology. Iowa was one of four states in the upper Midwest to receive such a grade.

Illinois C+
Kansas B-
Minnesota C
Missouri C-
Nebraska C
North Dakota C+
South Dakota A-
Wisconsin C

Read the report

To see this year's Technology Counts report, go to www.edweek.org.

ZOOM

HOLLY MCQUEEN/THE REGISTER
Jackson Dopheide, 7, wears a colorful headset Thursday as a video plays on a laptop computer at Saydel's Cornell Elementary School. Saydel used a grant from Polk County to set up mobile computer labs at its elementary schools.

Computer access creeps forward at Iowa's schools

State shows improvement but trails U.S. averages, report says. Keeping machines up to date poses big challenge for districts.

By LYNN CAMPBELL
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

March 31, 2007

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Iowa has made strides over the past decade to reduce the number of students forced to share computers, but the state still lags in getting those computers into the classroom.

Iowa schools have 3.2 students for every computer, a vast improvement from the 7.2 students per computer in 1995-96, according to a new report from Education Week and the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

The Cedar Rapids school district, however, still has seven or eight students per computer, said Jay Marino, associate superintendent. The district wants to reduce that ratio to 5-to-1 with money from a new local-option sales tax.

"We have seven-year-old machines being used by kids and teachers," Marino said. "It's outdated enough that it won't take the next Windows update. We no longer have hard drive space."

Only 37.5 percent of Iowa students have a computer in the classroom, compared with 49.5 percent nationwide, the report said. Others get computer time in a labs or media centers.

The report gave Iowa an overall grade of "C" for access, use and capacity of school technology.

"For the most part, states continue to receive average marks for performance in technology," said Carol Bausell, project director for the report, called "Technology Counts."

"Iowa's pretty typical and maybe slightly below average to some other states," she said.

Iowa and Mississippi are the only states, along with the District of Columbia, without state standards to spell out what students need to know and how they should be able to use technology.
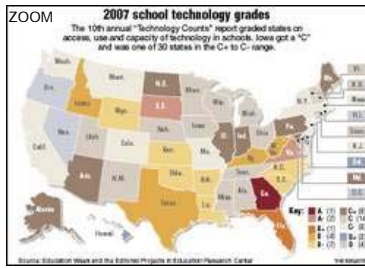
That's because Iowa is a "local control" state that largely lets school districts decide what's best for kids, said Pam Pfitzenmaier, an administrator with the state Department of Education. She said Iowa's standards have focused on reading, math and science under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"Our emphasis has been integrating the technology into the content areas," Pfitzenmaier said. "There are no separate technology standards on a statewide level."

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2007 school technology grades

The 10th annual "Technology Counts" report graded states on access, use and capacity of technology in schools. Iowa got a "C" and was one of 30 states in the C+ to C- range.

Iowa gained national attention a decade ago for a proposal by the Governor's Commission on Educational Excellence for the 21st Century to give all students in fourth grade and above access to a laptop computer. The plan would have made Iowa one of 11 states with a state-financed laptop program, Bausell said.

"It was a priority then and, as far as I'm concerned, it's a priority now," said Marvin Pomerantz, a Des Moines businessman who was chairman of the 1997 commission.

Instead, state legislators in 2001 eliminated a $30 million-a-year program for technology. The focus has since shifted to higher teacher salaries.

Meanwhile, school districts have scrambled to find money for computer upgrades. Some simply couldn't.

"It was easier to neglect replacing a computer for another year than it was to start reducing the number of teachers in the classroom," Marino said.

Ways that schools have paid for technology include:

- The Saydel school district used a grant from Polk County to buy laptops for mobile computer labs at Cornell and Norwoodville elementary schools.

- Cedar Rapids plans to use $20.6 million from an estimated $128.9 million from the local-option sales tax to replace its 6,000 computers every five years - 1,200 each year. The district also plans to allow wireless Internet access in all buildings and to purchase at least 210 laptops.

- Des Moines uses about $500,000 a year from a special property tax levy to replace computers every seven years. The district will also receive $1 million from Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino in Altoona each of the next four years to expand computer-based instruction and the use of tools like Smart Boards and digital presenters.

"We're certainly not on the leading edge of things, but given our resources, we've held steady over the last four to five years," said Greg Davis, district technology director.

Rep. Ako Abdul-Samad, a Des Moines Democrat and former school board member, has introduced a bill that would restore the $30 million for school technology, but leaders have not acted on it.

"It is imperative that we are educating our young people with the latest in technology to prepare them to be emerged into the global market," Abdul-Samad said.

Under No Child Left Behind, school districts were required for the first time this year to test eighth-graders on their ability to do word processing, find information on the Internet and determine whether a Web site is credible. Results will be reported this spring.

Reporter Lynn Campbell can be reached at (515) 284-8360 or **lcampbel@dmreg.com**

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