November 5, 2003 11:45 PM

Survey finds more kids than adults use computers

By Robin J. Youngblood, staff writer

Public education is no stranger to technology.

In the past decade, the number of students using computers in school and at home has grown dramatically, and Internet use is up 35 percent from eight years ago, the U.S. Department of Education said last week.

The department surveyed more than 56,000 households and a sample of schools in 50 states and Washington, D.C., about children's computer and Internet use in 2001 and 2002.

About 90 percent of 5- to 17-year-olds use computers, the survey said, and 59 percent of them use the Internet. Percentages are lower for adults. The survey also found 25 percent of kindergartners have used the Internet.

The findings didn't surprise local school officials. Many districts have been attuned to technology for several years, thanks to their own funding and state and federal grants.

Lincoln Elementary and three other Rock Island district schools recently got a grant for the Breakthrough to Literacy computer program, which helps teach reading. Lincoln and the rest of the district have had Internet access since 1995, said principal David Bloom.

Teachers regularly use computers for teaching, record-keeping, curriculum and other educational purposes -- and kids benefit, local educators said.

Leigh Egger, director of Project NOW Head Start in Silvis, which serves 3- to 4-year-olds from low-income families, said learning to operate computers is like learning a language. Children have a greater grasp of language -- as they do with computers -- at a very young age.

``Our children learn very quickly,'' she said.

Exposing kids from low-income families to technology, as Head Start does, also helps bridge the gap between them and their more affluent peers, the study said. Every Head Start classroom has computers, Ms. Egger said.

``Children are often the first adopters of a lot of technology,'' said John Bailey, who oversees educational technology for the federal government. ``They grow up with it. They don't have to adapt to it.''

Even some people who use technology every day can't keep up with its changes. In schools, however, curriculum drives technology use, said Jay Marino, Rock Island's assistant superintendent of curriculum.

``We use technology to enhance effective instruction in our classrooms,'' he said.

Teachers fuel some student use by putting homework assignments and the class syllabus online, Mr. Marino said. Many districts also have mobile computer labs -- sets of laptop computers teachers can check out periodically.

Jim Giseburt, the Moline school district's technology coordinator, said his department has used many grants to put computers in classrooms. The district has had Internet access since about 1994.

Computer use also likely has grown among children because school communities use the Internet for research and to communicate between home and school.

According to the national study, 60 percent of 10-year-olds have used the Internet. By age 16, that figure grows to 80 percent.

Responding to that heavy use, nearly every Quad-Cities district has a Web site to display e-mail addresses, district information and calendars of events. Individual schools also are creating Web sites.

``It's a good way to coordinate and see what's happening in the district,'' Mr. Marino said.

The study did find one problem. While nearly 75 percent of white students have a computer at home, only 41 percent of black students have one. The result is less Internet use by minorities, according to the survey.

``We need to address the limited access to technology that many students have outside of school,'' said Rod Paige, secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. ``There is much more we can do.''

``We believe that understanding technology is very important for the children, their families and our staff,'' Project NOW's Ms. Egger said.

Head Start supports that belief by offering regular classes at both Ms. Egger's facility and at Rock Island classrooms to allow parents to use computers side-by-side with their children.

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