

LAGUNA BEACH
COASTLINE PILOT

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Education

Fired up by technology

District produces a movie to illustrate the advantages of using technology in the classroom.

By Candice Baker

What better way to tout the pros of technology than by making analog an analogy?

When the Laguna Beach Unified School District was asked to tell SchoolPower its future needs, officials immediately concurred that technology was their priority.

The district produced a sophisticated video using its existing resources to show the power of technology in fostering future students.

The nonprofit Laguna Beach Education Foundation, which also goes by the name SchoolPower, raises funds from parents, corporate donors and the community that can be given back to the district's four public schools in their areas of biggest need.

In addition to SchoolPower's many grants made directly to teachers, its annual Fund-a-Need program provides resources at the district level.

"We have a vision of a 21st-century classroom," Thurston Middle School Principal Joanne Culverhouse said.

She was on the team of district staff that developed the video.

"We thought they would give us a list of three things," SchoolPower Program Director Stephanie Reid said. "But to make us a video ... We were so blown away. I think all our jaws dropped."

The "Simply Integrated" Fund-a-Need would use the technology to increase student collaboration, involvement and enthusiasm.

In the film, a student using a tablet notebook PC talks to a student using a textbook about education.

The archaic and modern teaching methods were both played in dual-screen by high school senior Brendan McGrady, who was recently accepted to study drama at New York University's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts.

The textbook was a mass of lost and disorganized papers; the tablet was able to archive his notes in his digital locker.

He also discussed the merits of the new online MyAccess program and showed kids video conferencing with students around the world.

The textbook, on the other hand, lamented the endless piles of homework packets, and equally endless boredom in class, describing the typical school experience as “uneventful.”

The duo compared the future of their respective students: the tablet shows a scene in the Tom Cruise flick “Minority Report,” in which the dashing hero used his hands to manipulate data on floating computer screens.

The notebook’s future student was none other than Dwight from hit sitcom “The Office,” bawling in a typical meltdown.

The film then takes a serious note, with a famous quote from former Secretary of Education Richard Riley:

“We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet.”

“Is anyone silently worried we’re not doing enough?” the film asks.

The district’s goals in using technology are engaged learners, active involvement and collaborative processes.

It would use the SchoolPower funds to purchase Computers on Wheels, or “COWs,” giant rolling racks which hold enough tablet PCs for an entire classroom, as well as document cameras that can project and record images.

“I think we all benefit from knowing where the district wants to go,” Reid said.

A home economics teacher could position the document camera over a mixing bowl and give every student a close-up view as ingredients are added; geometry teachers could use the technology to introduce shapes.

Thurston currently has 12 teachers trained to use the COWs in their classrooms.

“The great thing about our teachers that are trained to implement this is that their learning curve is straight up,” Culverhouse said.

Students use a stylus to operate its touchscreen monitor, and are able to highlight and take notes from their textbooks directly on the screen.

In one recent project, students highlighted images to make history timelines using the stylus.

In making PowerPoint presentations, students create their own voice-overs or record teachers’ lectures, then import them into the presentation.

They add animations and custom art to their presentations, and can hand-sign their names on them using the stylus.

Thurston teacher Michelle Martinez said that some students who normally shut down when in normal book-and-paper learning environments become her biggest stars when the laptops are rolled out.

She recalled a recent e-mail from a parent who told her that their normally unengaged son is excited to share his electronic work with his parents, opening new doors of communication for the family.

“The kids are fired up and excited about it,” Culverhouse said.

Students save their work in online digital lockers at home or in school, where they can instantly send them to their teachers, removing the need for paper.

Culverhouse said the goal is not to become a paperless society, but to engage students and prepare them for their future careers.

“We are moving as a district to integrating technology with the Fund-a-Need to get there faster,” she said.

The video will be shown at Saturday’s SchoolPower Dinner Dance, and is also available to watch at the SchoolPower office; call (949) 494-6811 to schedule a viewing.