

Trustees approve iPads for SSES, Douglas students

Written by By FAITH HUFFMAN, News-Telegram News Editor
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Trustees this week approved a measure which will put an iPad in the hand of every third, fourth and fifth grader at Sulphur Springs Independent School District in the coming school year.

The district earlier this year provided 200 iPads for use in a pilot program testing use of the devices in select third, fourth and fifth grade teachers classrooms. The plan originally included one math/science and one English/social studies teaching team, each consisting of two teachers per grade, testing the devices. When it was learned one student in the group had previous experience with them, she was added to the test program too.

They were tested in Brooke Doughtie, Kim Ewalt, Brooke Howard, Susan Kennon and Kimberly Slaughter's classes at Sulphur Springs Elementary and in Stephanie Ross and Julie Varosi's classes at Douglas Intermediate School. All seven reported great success of iPads in their classrooms, noting that they were a great tool to engage otherwise uninterested students as well as a great tool for students with disabilities.

Using an iPad cut down on the number of assistance devices needed for one special needs student, allowing him to "do exactly the same thing" as the other students.

The iPad also provided additional opportunities for another student with physical disabilities, drawing and other tasks that require fine motor skills that would otherwise cause his hand to hurt. On the iPad, he was able to do his project the same as others and better than if he'd had to do it with other utensils and paper or canvas.

An inclusion teacher said that the iPad proved beneficial to her class as well, allowing students to work on the devices at their own level without everyone else in the class having to know other students' levels, engaging them in learning.

Another teacher also noted that the iPads are great to help students, who all learn at different levels, not just high, medium or low. Apps can be found to challenge and meet all students needs.

One teacher admitted concern going into the project that the iPads might lead to behavior problem, but instead of creating more problems, the devices actually helps reduce behavior issues, keeping students busy learning.

Another student who openly admitted he "doesn't like school and doesn't want to be at school" was engaged and became excited about school when the iPads were introduced in his classroom. Before he was given an iPad, he could often be found staring into space, not interacting with other kids, overwhelmed by school which he thought to be "too hard." He now "loves school," his teacher said.

Students use the devices for research and, with teacher supervision, have even been able to share and learn from students in other states such as New Jersey and Missouri, and other towns in Texas, including Forney.

One student even developed QR codes which link projects or posters to reports on the iPads.

The iPads not only engage the students but provide additional instant resources at their finger tips and instant feed back. Teachers can also set them so that they'll show how the students are doing problems so that she can see where they're having difficulty to better aid them. They meet needs of Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills curriculum, and so far all applications, other than those that came on the disk, they've used in class have been free.

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This has been especially helpful for the third graders, who haven't really had to take the rigorous standardized state tests before. One teacher even reported her students now get excited about State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness preparations

iPads at the third grade level replaced centers and therefore reducing disruptions in classrooms.

The teachers also told the school board that the iPad proved a good tool to help bridge the gap between home and school. Kids would share what they'd been working on with their parents, who were able to go onto teachers' websites for information to download applications for the students to use on the family's devices at home.

And, the students who used the iPads this semester have been very careful with them, "are proud of them" and "really taken care of them."

The students have taken on a "lot of responsibility" for their own learning, and most often happily so, pilot teachers said. They can see their strengths and weaknesses and utilize applications to strengthen weaker areas and enrich and challenge student in others.

The teachers showed a video featuring some of the kids sharing their thoughts and projects to the school board during the administrative reports and information items portion of the school board meeting.

SSISD trustees later in the meeting approved spending about half a million dollars for the purchase of 800 additional iPads, carts and cases — enough so that every third-fifth grade student would have use of one during the 2014-15 school year. The rest of the teachers will receive training this spring and summer in order to be ready to utilize the iPads for classroom instruction when school starts in August.

Lamb said the district would likely budget for three to four applications at a rate of about 99 cents each but would be looking for as many free apps that could be loaded onto the iPads and utilized as possible.

The iPads will be especially handy for those texts no longer available in book format, only digitally. He said currently the iPads are only recommended for the lower grade levels instead of high school, where students have to type research papers. iPads aren't ideal for those types of uses.

"It's great to hear from the teachers. We want to be aware of other technology and methods. My concern is keeping the personal interaction. That's one of the values of a district like this," board member John Prickette said.

The board was assured that the teachers were still interacting with the students and that the students were able to not only share at home and with other classmates, but with other students across the country, expanding their "real world" exposure.

Board member Tammy Cooper asked about printing costs using the iPads.

"They are doing some. They print the trading cards to put on the wall. They have the bar code on the face so students can pull up their presentations, show their process. As far as the posters, I don't think it's going to change that much," Lamb said.