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Linking up to Learn

Joan Kuersten

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teacher say, "I can't imagine teaching without this technology any more."

When a school or school district develops a technology plan, it needs to know precisely what it wants to use the computers for. "You have to know what your objective is to begin with," Roberts said.

According to Roberts, some schools feel that these tools enable students to learn a different skill set as they do research and develop critical thinking skills. Other schools have much more specific curriculum

objectives such as improving basic reading and math skills. In other words, making effective use of technology in the schools takes more than installing the proper wiring, phone lines, and setting up Internet access. It takes training the teachers, having a clear goal for the tools, and a lot of hard work.

"It's not a silver bullet that magically changes everything in the classroom," Roberts said. **OC**

LINKING UP TO LEARN

Technology grant allows a PTSA to connect with senior citizens

by Joan Kuersten

Connecting young people with older people in a learning environment is a win-win situation. Both groups learn and both groups grow to appreciate what each of them brings to the experience. Such is the case with the Collaborative Learning Through Technology Program operating at W.T. Clarke Middle School in Westbury, New York, sponsored by the Clarke PTSA.

The program hooks up middle school students with senior citizens in the community who want to learn or hone computer skills. It grew out of a \$7,000 grant the PTSA and school received from the AOL Foundation, the philanthropic arm of America Online. Sandy Sanger, Clarke PTSA's president and technology chair for her district and council PTAs, saw a notice about the grant program while surfing the National PTA website, Children First. The Interactive Education Initiative grant program was looking for proposals that would provide innovative hands-on experiences with computer software and the Internet for the purpose of enhancing student performance.

"We believed the grant, valued up to \$7,500, would enable our middle school service learning program to expand so that we could teach the senior citizens in our community computer skills, while enhancing our students' skills, and also provide computer access to those students and families in our

community who did not have a personal computer in their home," said Sanger.

One of 54 grant recipients out of 600 applicants, the Clarke PTSA used its grant monies to purchase four laptop computers, a color printer, a scanner, and several cameras for student use. Just before the start of the new year, interested middle schoolers introduced the collaborative technology learning program to interested senior citizens. Meeting at the school, students created a multimedia presentation using slides and computers to demonstrate to the senior students different software applications, computer games, and Internet use. At the end of this session seniors were asked to fill out a needs assessment that asked what they would like to learn. "Many of these senior citizens had computers at home equipped with the latest software, and some even had an Internet account, but they didn't know how to use any of it," said Sanger. "So, following the introductory class, our seniors and students now meet bimonthly for an hour after school to work one-on-one on building the seniors' computer skills," Sanger added. "Now our seniors write letters using the word processing program, email their grandchildren, and surf the net," Sanger proudly states. And the students have grown in confidence and made some very good older friends.



In addition, the four laptops that the PTA purchased are available for loan to students who wish to work on school projects at home. Parents sign an agreement to return the laptop in good condition by a certain date—usually two weeks—and that they will save all their work on a disk.

Plans for the upcoming school year include several introductory classes for parents—a hands-on computer basics class, and a class on the Internet about how to use it as a research tool for school assignments and how to surf safely. Sanger also hopes to do a Links-Up event, based on the America Links Up initiative, a national education campaign that aims to ensure that children and youth have a safe and rewarding experience online. Clarke High School, which the Clarke PTSA also serves, would hook up with its sister high school across town to share information and dialog about mutual concerns via the schools' distance learning laboratories. Sanger thinks this would be a particularly beneficial event, since the district in which the schools are located is spread over many miles. "The link-up," said Sanger, "would help bring our two schools and their accompanying communities closer together,"—another bonus of the AOL Foundation grant. **OC**

For more information on this program, contact Sandy Sanger at 28 Cottonwood Lane, Westbury, NY 11590, or email her at ssanger98@yahoo.com.