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GEARED UP

Every fifth-, sixth-grader at Apple Valley school to get personal laptop

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APPLE VALLEY • Every fifth and sixth-grade student at the Academy for Academic Excellence school will take home a 13-inch MacBook laptop this fall.

“We’re very excited about venturing out and doing something new,” said academy Principal Chip Kling, who expects the personal computers will improve academic achievement.

The academy’s Board of Directors on Monday approved piloting Apple’s 1 to 1 Laptop Learning Program for its 208 fifth- and sixthgraders, following suit with schools around the country. Some schools have opted for even newer technology, with St. Andrews in Savannah, Ga., providing iPads to 470 students, according to the school’s website.

The idea for the Academy’s laptop pilot project caught fire last year after academy officials visited schools in Fullerton and Roland Heights, which had implemented the 1-to-1 laptop program.

“We just saw amazing things, from second-graders who are creating podcasts to eighth-graders who are creating full digital movies,” said David Kenneally, director of technology at the academy, near Highway 18 and Apple Valley Road.

The parent-funded project aims to motivate students, raise test scores and prepare students for a tech-savvy workforce by broadening computer access and engaging students in interactive programs. Parents will make \$38 payments monthly for up to three years, with the option to own the laptop sooner by paying the full \$1,300 whenever they choose.

Heather Juarez, a sixth grade teacher at the academy, estimates roughly one-third of her students haven’t had access to home computers.

Not that computer technology hasn’t already played a sizable role in the preteens’ school days.

They create iMovies to share their school experiences with parents and design brochures for a unit on ancient civilizations. They prepare PowerPoint presentations and type final reports on a word processor.

The two grades share an Apple computer lab, but Juarez said generally students only get to have one to two lab days per week.

Now, more everyday assignments will switch from pen and paper to computer, Juarez said. They’ll type essays in class, create podcasts and do more multimediabased learning.

“What I really like about using the technology is the visual,” she said. “I can teach the kids about volcanoes and have them look at pictures in the book, but with computers there are great websites where they can actually build their own volcano and watch it explode and see all the terminology and so forth.”

Students will also have constant access to MyMentor, an online network that lets them send assignments and ask questions to teachers.

The online learning lessons can also be individualized, so teachers can help struggling students while other students move ahead, Juarez said.

Though Juarez generally expects students to be engaged enough to stay on task — and not surf the Internet or play games — she has the ability to monitor all of her students' laptop screens from her own computer, through software called SynchronEyes. Students also will go through specific training on computer use and care, and the computers will be preloaded with Web filters to prevent accessing inappropriate material.

The school is offering financial assistance for families who can't make the full payments, with the Apple Valley Rotary Club, local businesses and other groups already committing to sponsor laptops for students.

If the pilot proves successful, Kenneally said, ultimately every student in grades 2-12 will become a laptop owner.

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TECH-SAVVY: Nelson Estes, left, and London Willford work on Apple MacBook computers at the Academy for Academic Excellence during summer school. This fall the school is planning to begin a program in fall, in which every fifth- and sixth-grade student will get their own laptop.

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