

Rockdale Citizen



Staff Photo: Shannon Peacock

Conyers Middle School eighth-grader Lauren Stewart holds her ACTIVote, which she will use to wirelessly transmit her answer to a multiple choice question teacher Maryland Nesmith posts on the classroom's ACTIVboard.

Technology prevalent in county classrooms

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CONYERS — The 19 students in Maryland Nesmith's eighth-grade language arts class at Conyers Middle School looked over four possible answers to a question displayed on the room's ACTIVboard. Students made their selections by pressing a button on their handheld, egg-shaped ACTIVote.

"We're waiting for number 17," Nesmith said.

Numbers posted on the ACTIVboard indicated all

other students already had chimed in. Number 17 lit up, and with the tap of a handheld pen that works like a computer mouse, the screen displayed what each student answered. The right answers were displayed in green, wrong answers in red.

Long gone are the good old days of students kicking back and letting just the smart kids carry classroom work. Though it may look like students are buzzing in answers on a game show, ACTIVote actually guarantees 100 percent classroom participation

on every question.

Each time no one buzzed in a wrong answer, Nesmith added a minute to the class' lunchtime break.

Half the schools in the county already use ACTIVboards, said Katherine Williams, the county school system's technology coordinator.

"The most are at Peek's Chapel Elementary," Williams said. "When the new classrooms were added; they all had ACTIVboards, the projectors and wireless

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Conyers Middle School student

Roderick Powell

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access. That was our big project. A lot in one place. Most of the elementary schools have at least one ACTIVboard, if not more."

Along with ACTIVboards, Conyers Middle has been testing some of the newest classroom technology available. The school also uses smart word processors called DANAs and is the county's pilot school for MY Access!

MY Access! is a software program that instantly evaluates students' prose and edits it for immediate feedback.

"MY Access!, like (Microsoft) Word, gives suggestions for punctuation and spelling," Nesmith said. "The bonus is that it also tells us how each child is doing in composing, spelling, sentence structure, (the) areas students are evaluated on the writing test in January."

During the program's 10-

week trial period, which began in November, all the eighth-graders at Conyers Middle used MY Access!

"In that 10-week period, eighth-graders submitted 5,000 writing compositions," said Eugene Baker, assistant principal of Conyers Middle.

Those compositions could then be displayed on the classroom's ACTIVboard.

"Kids don't know whose essay it is," said Andrea McMahan, a language arts and mathematics teacher at Conyers Middle. "It gives the class creative license. We go through it and help make it better.

"In addition, a report (generated by MY Access!) allows them to see the most common mistakes," McMahan said. "It tells how many errors and how frequently they occurred. It allows me to decide what the lesson will be for the next day."

Conyers Middle students

also use DANAs, best described as portable word processors which allow students to "beam" their work to other DANAs.

"We've become more paperless," McMahan said. "They beam me. I can make an assignment and beam it to all my kids. I can also take what they write and save it into an application."

That work can then be downloaded, password protected, by the student at home. This cuts down on computer lab time, teachers say.

Beaming work around also allows for peer editing.

"He can check my paper for me," said Roderick Powell, pointing to fellow classmate Julius Giles.

"Learning how to use this was easy, real easy," Powell said.

But even trial technology comes at a cost. The funds used for 10 weeks of MY

Access! came from grants. The school has asked for additional funding in the system's budget set to be approved next month.

Planning for her students to continue with new technology, Conyers Middle Principal Sue Snow is planning to purchase much of the same for Rockdale County High School when she becomes the principal there next year. Baker will be the new principal at Conyers Middle.

"We asked for a grant and will use part of our Title 1 funds in case the grant doesn't come through," Snow said. "We want all Conyers Middle eighth-graders moving up to continue to work with the program."

"Our central office is very technology-friendly. It's one thing to buy technology and another to know how to use it effectively to better enhance learning," Baker said.