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Practical yet aggressive tech plan in place at Norwalk Public Schools

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Jeff Beckley, a fifth-grade teacher at Kendall Elementary School, uses the INTERWRITE Mobi, a mobile interactive whiteboard system used in conjunction with the Classroom Performance System (CPS) clickers, with his students recently. Photo: Contributed Photo

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Robert Polselli Jr., director of technology for Norwalk Public Schools, was not surprised that the citty's Board of Education voted unanimously to approve the 2012-15 Educational Technology Plan last month.

"I really think it's a practical, yet aggressive, plan to put the technologies in place that are truly going to make a difference," Polselli said.

A highlight is to have the Interwrite Mobi, a mobile interactive system used in conjunction with the Classroom Performance System clickers, in every classroom in the next three years.

"And that is pretty exciting because three years ago the plan was to just keep adding 40 Smartboards," Polselli said. "That's a problem, because if you add 40 Smartboards a year and you have 900 classrooms, it's going to take 20 years to get that done. And in 10 years, there will be different technology.

"We have now deployed in almost 200 classrooms a Mobi and mounted projectors. With that, we have put at least two bags of clickers in every school and many schools have purchased three or four or eight bags themselves."

Polselli demonstrated the Interwrite Mobi and handed out CPS clickers to BOE members at the Aug. 21 meeting so they could test the technology for themselves. Teachers use the Mobi's electromagnetic pen to write, draw, insert images, highlight, interact with and annotate over instructional content projected onto any surface. The Mobi's LCD screen instantly displays student responses to teachers' questions when they use the CPS clickers, allowing teachers to capture real-time assessment data to gauge student comprehension as they teach.

The system can also be used to automate and streamline time-consuming administrative tasks like taking attendance, grading quizzes or tests and recording the results.

Teachers who have experienced the technology are excited, according to Polselli said.

"It's changing how they are teaching for the better," Polselli said "Clickers are not a magic-bullet solution, but they provide a benefit for students and teachers. Teachers are having to grade less, but are able to use data more. Students are getting immediate feedback and all students are engaged.

"Imagine a special ed student using a clicker. They have just as much time and ability to answer a question as that superstar student who knows every answer and answers so quickly that they are always involved in every question. With the clickers, every child is asked a question and given an opportunity to answer. Not by raising their hand so that only one or two kids are involved. And the teacher has the data and knows who is not understanding what they are talking about."

Polselli said that because of the technology, the teachers can position themselves to help one or two students or five students, or they can stop the whole lesson and ask, "What can we do better? How can we make this easier to understand?

"The opportunities provided by these types of technology have never been available to us before. None of the technologies are flashy or glitzy, but they all have a very solid instructional purpose. You don't have to wait until the weekend to see that the student hasn't mastered the concept. You know immediately, so you can help them out."

Polselli doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk, using Mobi and CPS technology as a pilot instructor.

"What more important curriculum is there than teaching a pilot how to fly?," Polselli said. "Pilots have the lives of millions in their hands every second of every day. The (Federal Aviation Administration) curriculum is very standardized. I've seen a 40 to 50 percent increase in understanding with the clicker technology and Mobis.

"As a teacher, when you know what the students know, the game changes, and when the students know you know, the game completely changes."

Another crucial element of the technology plan is a partnership with Linkit, a data-driven education technology company. Linkit provides a strategic data-driven instruction and evaluation system.

"We've had a data portal for two years that we built, so it's homegrown," Polselli said. "It shows CMT and CAPT scores, too, but this is going to be even more robust and allow for a lot more reporting. That's a tool that is going to be really great moving forward."

Polselli said the technology team is also looking at the best decisions it can make over the next 18 months to support Common Core State Standards.

"One of the decisions that is definitely going to be the right decision is we need to build a robust wireless network," he said. "The difficulty with that is we don't have funding for it. ... We are really looking to private funding and grants to help us out.

"Every building has some wireless area, but it's not the way we want it. We want guest and secure access. We want to have the same ID in every building so that when someone brings a device into Brien McMahon (High School), they can also go over to Norwalk High and Briggs (High) with the same device."

A lack of funding also is making professional development a challenge.

"The most critical element of using technology in the classrrom is professional development," Polselli said. "A challenge right now is staffing and to be able to provide that."

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