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New High School Is First In Arizona Schools To Have No Textbooks

By Patricia Hawke

Empire High School in Vail, located on the edge of Tucson, is the first in the Arizona schools to be all-electronic. Instead of textbooks, the 350 students use wireless, Apple laptop computers to research, organize their data, write and graph assignments, and create class presentations.

The Arizona schools Empire High is a new school with a blank slate. Arizona schools officials could hire new teachers committed to technology-based teaching and purchase computers instead of textbooks. The Arizona schools officials wanted to move teachers away from habitual teaching from textbooks, cover-to-cover, and gave area students the choice to attend Empire or another school.

Having researched schools in other states prior to the all-electronic decision, Arizona schools officials found students who were clearly more engaged in their studies and unusually enthusiastic about school. One reason was that they took a more active part in the lesson process, rather than everything being "fed" to them. Another advantage to laptops over textbooks is that groundbreaking information takes five to six years to get into textbooks, especially in the science fields. Of the few all-electronic schools across the nation, many are doing well from the perspective of both the students and the educators. The Arizona schools officials clearly felt they could enhance their students' educational experience with technology over textbooks.

Replacing textbooks with laptops for other Arizona schools would prove expensive at \$850 each. For Empire, they took the usual \$500 to \$600 cost per student for a complete set of textbooks for four years, as well as the cost of a computer lab, and used this money to purchase the laptops and added technology needs.

Some new challenges had to be faced by the Arizona schools' new Empire High and research was done to address them. They had 350 students, who needed to be continuously and reliably connected to the Internet at high speed. All the laptops had to be configured to best suit the needs of the students for learning. The needed educational material had to be located on the Internet and integrated into lesson plans. A method for students to submit assignments across the Web was needed. These were problems they knew had to be resolved before the school year began.

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What the Arizona schools officials had not planned on was a different sort of technological problem. It seems that many students who used home computers for gaming, surfing the Internet, and X-Box, had a difficult time translating these skills to those needed in school, such as using word processing software, saving documents to specific locations, and being able to retrieve the files later. Skills training had to be added to the lesson plans.

For other schools that are interested in setting up an all-electronic school, the Arizona schools officials advise that it must be a public choice. You cannot force such drastic learning changes. Include the parents and teachers in the planning at the ground floor.

After a year, the system is working well overall. The Arizona schools plan to increase enrollment at Empire High to 750 students in the near future.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K-12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and

private K-12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Arizona schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Arizona/index.html>

Spotlight On Success Program To Benefit Arizona Schools

By Stacy Andell

For many years, the Arizona schools have experienced a lot of negative publicity that affects its ability to recruit talent, garner extra funding, and keep students in the public school system. Current superintendent Tom Horne says that much of this publicity is unwarranted and unfair to the Arizona schools that have made many positive strides toward improving education.

To counter this unwanted publicity, Horne developed the Spotlight on Success program for the Arizona schools. Basically, the program works to put as much positive publicity about the Arizona schools into the public spotlight as possible. The superintendent, himself, seeks as many opportunities available for public speaking and voicing his opinions and facts about the Arizona schools to the media. His goal is to emphasize the positive inroads Arizona schools have made both in his public statements and when quoted in the media, and he to refutes any false negative publicity with ruthless tenacity.

Not too long ago, many newspapers within the state of Arizona and across the nation carried a negative story where a Kansas company designated Arizona as the "dumbest state in the country". The story was quite untrue. Arizona schools students performed above the national average in Terra Nova (the only nationally-normed test), which is taken by essentially all Arizona schools students. Though Arizona schools ranks 49th out of 50 states in expenditures per student, the funding handicap has not affected the ability of the Arizona schools to educate their students above the national average. Horne is quick to remind the media of these statistics.

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Another example of false negative publicity is that the Arizona schools have one of the highest dropout rates in the country, according to the "Kids Count" measurement. Horne says the count is incorrect, since the census was used for the measurement — otherwise, whenever the census reporter was told a child between the ages of 16 and 19 was not attending school, it was used to blame the Arizona schools. Many of these children were beyond the control of the Arizona schools, such as children from other countries who have never been enrolled with the Arizona schools, or those who had attended only private schools. If the Arizona schools do not know a child exists, they have no opportunity to educate them.

Three national organizations that keep valid comparative statistics on graduation rates across the nation are Manhattan Institute, Urban Institute, and United Health Foundation. Their most recent figures are from 2002, and all three report that the Arizona schools are at the national average of about 70 percent (plus or minus one percent). Since 2002, the Arizona schools graduation rate has grown from 72.7 percent to 77 percent. According to Horne, unless the rest of the country has had an equally dramatic growth in graduation rates, the Arizona schools are now substantially above the national average.

Horne plans to continue his efforts to refute the erroneous negative publicity about the Arizona schools, which he believes continue to do an excellent job in improving their educational standards.

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