

**PART OF 3-YEAR INITIATIVE**

# Sparking kids' interest

## Teachers and students pleased in first phase of Greenwich district's digital learning program

BY PAUL SCHOTT



Dru Nadler/For Greenwich Time

Teacher Corey Riccio works with fourth-grade student Angelina Ponce with her iPad at Hamilton Avenue Greenwich school district's Digital Learning initiative.



**Kaycee Piro uses an iPad to record a video of Camila Guadalupe last month at Hamilton Avenue School in Greenwich.**



**Dru Nadler/For Greenwich Time**  
**Students Sabine Daoud and Jackie Colin work with their iPads in a music class at Hamilton Avenue Sc**



**Fourth-grade students Kayla Buchanan and Marco Manitone work on their iPads, led by teacher Corey Riccio, at Hamilton Avenue School last month.**



Grace Naylor and Patrick Caruso work with their iPads during a music class at Hamilton Avenue School last month.

What is the number “two notches” from 2.40 and three from 2.50?

That was the question Riverside School teacher Mary McGuire asked her fourth-graders on a recent Monday morning.

She did not write it on a whiteboard, yet they all saw it. Not a single student’s hand went up, but they all answered. And with the flick of a finger, McGuire could see all of their responses.

Telepathy?

No. Try technology.

Each of McGuire’s students has an iPad Air. From her own device, McGuire could put the question on their screens, see their answers, and share the correct one, 2.44. She could send messages to students all at once. Or separate ones individually.

In late February, McGuire’s students became part of the first wave in the school district’s Digital Learning initiative when they and every other student at Riverside and Hamilton Avenue schools received an iPad. District officials argue that the three-year project to increase the use of technology in town classrooms will allow teachers to better tailor lessons to each student, get kids more engaged in their learning and also foster more classroom collaboration.

“Now that everybody has an iPad, we’re full steam ahead,” said Riverside Principal Christopher Weiss.

This first phase of the project is costing \$1.2 million.

In the early going, enthusiasm for the initiative abounds among students and teachers — even as they recognize that the new devices come with limits.

Walking into a Hamilton Avenue or Riverside classroom, the iPads are impossible to miss. Students and teachers say that accessibility is one of the devices’ greatest advantages.

“With the computers, we had to check them out and sometimes we couldn’t get the computers because another class would be using them,” said Hamilton Avenue fourth-grader Grace Naylor. “But we can use the iPads anytime we want.”

Students use their iPads like digital Swiss Army knives: To do online research for opinion papers, and write papers they share immediately with teachers through Google Drive. They use one app to record their voices for spoken-word projects, and other apps to hone math and spelling skills. Or they turn their iPads into mini drum kits and make beats in GarageBand.

With all the possibilities available, teachers are continually tweaking lesson plans based on students’ different needs and abilities.

“Student A can be where they’re at and student B can be where they’re at,” said Hamilton Avenue music teacher Lisa Edele. “I can add more challenges to the project. Everyone is engaged.”

But the focus on personalization raises a question: If each kid is working on a tailor-made lesson, won’t the tablets lead to isolation? Teachers interviewed said no, pointing to opportunities for kids to collaborate on projects and share what they’ve learned. For example, Hamilton Avenue fourth-grader Zach Mantione made a video using the Educreations app explaining how to do long division. His teacher Tami Summerton then picked it up as a resource for the entire class.

“I sent it out to all the parents, and they were thrilled with it,” Summerton said. “It was a way to help them with their homework. They’re teaching each

other, and sometimes they teach me. We teach each other.”

McGuire cited examples where she has used the iPads for group projects, such as having students work simultaneously on scripts for social-studies presentations or take part in discussion threads about books and news articles.

“On the whole, this has been really a great tool for collaboration,” she said.

Perhaps it’s not surprising in a town where Apple products abound in many families’ homes that kids at the two schools rave about their new iPads.

“It’s working out great,” said Zach Mantione. “I like it, because it makes learning a lot easier, especially Educreations.”

Riverside fourth-grader Sadie Ball agreed with her Hamilton Avenue counterpart.

“It’s easier to use than just a pencil and a piece of paper,” she said. “The teacher can respond because she can see what we’re doing. And we get these really fun apps.”

Fun is great, teachers said, but it should be a by-product of using the tablets in the classroom, not the point. In the weeks before the students’ iPads arrived, they drilled that lesson home. McGuire, for example, had her students write down three things that they wanted to do with them.

“If you want to take silly photographs, that’s not what they’re used for,” McGuire said. “We emphasized that the iPads are now their work computers.”

The Digital Learning initiative also involves extensive teacher training. Hamilton Avenue and Riverside teachers are scheduled to complete about 43 hours of professional development during the current school year.

The iPads have changed how teachers prepare for their classes.

“It’s taking a lot more planning, but in the long run, I’m planning in a way that I can use it again in future years,” Summerton said. “The legwork is really time-consuming, but I am definitely enjoying incorporating it in the classroom.”

At the same time, for all the talk of the iPad revolution, educators point out that much of the classroom experience in Greenwich remains the same as it's always been. On an average day, students' iPad use could total an hour, said Riverside's Weiss.

"We like to say the best one-to-one device for students is the teacher," Weiss said. "The teacher is the essential piece in every puzzle with education."

In many cases, the new devices blend with old tools. While they do online research for opinion essays, Riverside teacher Kimberly Schultheiss' students jot down their findings in notebooks.

"If the iPad would be a distraction, take away from the learning, or it wouldn't be as good of an experience as not with the iPad, then we don't use them," Weiss said. "If the iPad is not going to assist in covering the curriculum, then we're not going to use the iPad for that part of the lesson. Teachers know that. They want to cover the curriculum."