

IPADS AND LAPTOPS

In transit: computers on their way to district schools

BY PAUL SCHOTT



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Fourth-graders, from left, Ibuki Matsushita, Will Duncan, Tori Ware and Logan Gilbrid use an iPad for a math project at North Mianus School in Greenwich in April. With the advances of technology in the classroom, students and teachers are balancing digital learning on platforms like the iPad with traditional pen and paper, non-digital resources.

Greenwich students are set to receive iPads or laptops the first week of classes in September as school officials gear up for the third and largest phase of the district's digital learning initiative.

All district students in preschool through fifth grade will receive an iPad, and all students in grades six through 12 will receive a Chromebook as part of the third phase of digital learning.

The expanded initiative follows smaller rollouts in each of the past two school years. In February 2014, all students at Hamilton Avenue and Riverside Schools received iPad Airs. Last October, all sixth-graders at the district's three middle schools received Chrome-books.

“We’re moving forward pretty rapidly and things are going well,” said Phillip Dunn, the district’s chief information officer. “It is more challenging in that we’re obviously scaling up, but we’ve been here before in the last two years of digital learning.”

The district Thursday started shipping about 3,800 iPad Airs from its Greenwich Avenue headquarters to the elementary schools. Starting Sept. 8, the iPads will be distributed to elementary students.

About 4,500 Lenovo Chromebook laptops are expected to be delivered by Aug. 31 from a northern California wholesaler to the district’s three middle schools and Greenwich High School. The Chrome-book shipment is running about a week and a half behind schedule because of a manufacturing issue, Dunn said. Nonetheless, the laptops are still scheduled to be handed out in the first week of school.

The iPads are costing the district a total of about \$1.4 million, while the bill for the Chromebooks comes to about \$1.9 million. Those numbers are “about where we expected to land financially,” Dunn said.

By giving every student a device, educators want to make learning more personalized, help students develop critical-thinking skills and encourage more collaboration among students and faculty, Dunn said.

Parent opinions on digital learning are mixed. At the schools that have already started the initiative, many speak highly of the program’s ability to engage their children in the classroom.

But other parents have said they are worried about how much time their children will spend on the devices, not wanting the screen time to come at the expense of traditional face-to-face interactions with other students and teachers.

Educators said that they keep a close eye on students’ screen time. At Riverside, kindergartners and first graders generally use their iPads up to an hour a day, while students in grades two through five use their devices an average of about one to two hours each day, according to Principal Christopher Weiss.

Parents have also asked how school officials will protect their children so people outside the district cannot access students' academic work and personal information.

School officials said students work online within a “walled garden” — a firewall that prevents non-district computers from accessing data on district servers. They said they are also confident in Google's oversight of the district's cloud-based Google Apps data.

Board of Education members are strong supporters of digital learning, but some argue there is room for improvement.

“I'm sure there is incredible (digital) innovation happening by classroom teachers in fundamentally changing how our kids learn and preparing them for the world they will live in,” board member Peter Sherr has said. “I'm sure that's happening across the district to great effect. The fundamental question is how can the leadership of the district accelerate this classroom transformation, so it happens for all kids faster.”