

Berkshire Wireless Learning Initiative

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Q: What is the Berkshire Wireless Learning Initiative?

A: The **Berkshire Wireless Learning Initiative (BWLI)** is a 1:1 laptop program (one laptop for every student and teacher) that was designed to improve student achievement and transform the way education is delivered in the North Adams and Pittsfield Middle Schools. As a result of BWLI, both students and teachers became more engaged in the educational process. Students improved their academic and research skills, learned to work more effectively in groups and gained tools for enhancing their creativity.

Q: Who participated in BWLI?

A: The participating schools were Silvio O. Conte Middle School in North Adams and Herberg Middle School, Reid Middle School and St. Mark School in Pittsfield. Over 2,300 students and teachers at these schools participated in the Initiative.

Q: Besides the schools, who were some of the other project partners and what were their roles?

A: BWLI was a collaboration among educators, government, and business.

- Berkshire Connect, Inc. provided project management for the initiative.
- The Massachusetts Technology Collaborative oversaw fiscal management of state funds for BWLI and coordinated the evaluation study.
- The Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) coordinated the approach to professional development for teachers and also developed specialized graduate school offerings. Their VP of Administration and Finance provided overall leadership to the Initiative as co-chair of the Steering Committee.
- The Berkshire Chamber of Commerce oversaw marketing and private sector fundraising. Their VP/COO provides overall leadership to the Initiative as co-chair of the Steering Committee.
- The Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation provided fiscal management of private funds.
- Business partners assisted with project planning, marketing and fundraising.

Q: Why was this Initiative piloted in Berkshire County? Was it because of test scores?

A: Former State Representative Peter Larkin spearheaded an effort in 2003 to enable the Berkshires to pilot a 1:1 program for Massachusetts schools. North Adams and Pittsfield were selected as the testing ground for several reasons. Piloting a 1:1 program in these two communities engaged a significant population of the middle school students from the Berkshires. School representatives and business community representatives had demonstrated an eagerness to collaboratively introduce a 1:1 program based upon visits to Maine and efforts already underway in the schools.

Each of the four participating middle schools has made a commitment to utilize technology to enhance education. The schools all have strong teams of administrators and teachers who are dedicated to working together to implement this Initiative. The business community urged elected officials to accelerate the adoption of a 1:1 approach and pledged to help raise funds.

Q: What kind of laptops did the students use?

A: The students used Apple iBook G4 laptops that were designed especially to withstand use in a school environment. Each laptop was equipped with a protective sleeve and charging unit.

Q: When did the students receive their laptops?

A: The laptops were distributed to all students in 2006, beginning with seventh graders in January 2006. When students graduate from eighth grade, they return their laptops to the school. The laptops are the property of the schools.

Q: How are the laptops used in the classroom?

A: Some of the applications of laptops in the classroom are conducting Internet research, writing reports and term papers, creating multimedia projects, websites, videos and movies, preparing graphs and charts and taking tests and quizzes.

Q: What types of software applications do the students use?

A: Students have access to a variety of software programs that can help them write, set up spreadsheets, draw, or develop multimedia projects that include features such as a movie or music. The main software packages that students are using on the laptops are the Safari web browser, Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint, iTunes, iMovie, iPhoto and Netrekker.

Q: What kind of training was provided to teachers?

A: The Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts coordinates professional development for teachers, working closely with the technical staff in the schools and with Apple Computer. Teachers have had many opportunities to learn how to use the laptop computers. Professional development sessions led by district technology integration specialists, educational consultants and Apple Computer have helped teachers to learn how to integrate applications such as Word, Excel, MacJournal, and I-Photo into their teaching. Ongoing cross-district project meetings enable teachers to share their new learning with one another.

Q: Will other schools in the county be getting laptops through BWLI?

A: The pilot program included only the middle schools in Pittsfield and North Adams. Based on the positive evaluation results, we hope that funding will be available in the future for other regions throughout the county and state to start one-to-one laptop programs.

Q: How was BWLI evaluated?

A: The Massachusetts Technology Collaborative selected Boston College's Technology and Assessment Study Collaborative, housed in the Lynch School of Education, to conduct a three-year evaluation of BWLI. The study measuring how successfully the program achieved its goals. Some of the methods that used in the evaluation study were teacher and student surveys, classroom observations, student drawings, teacher interviews, and analysis of school tracking data and assessments. The final evaluation results

were very positive, showing that BWLI had met all of its goals. More information about inTASC and the BWLI evaluation results is available at: <http://www.bc.edu/research/intasc/>.

Q: Did students take their laptops home? Were they charged a fee?

A: Giving students access to their laptops at home was an important part of BWLI, but also came with responsibilities. Individual schools determined at what point students will be given the privilege to take their laptop home each year. Parents were required each year to review and sign off on the school's Take Home Policy. A fee of \$50 per year was charged to students for the privilege of taking their laptops home. This fee could be prorated to a lower amount if students received their laptops sometime after the start of the school year. The schools found it difficult to get all of the students to take their laptops home. Parents were concerned about being responsible for damage during transit and students were able to do some of their assignments on home computers. The schools now set their own take home policies and some of them are choosing not to allow students to take home the laptops.

Q: Were family members permitted to use the laptops?

A: Family members were highly encouraged to familiarize themselves with the laptops when students bring them home. They are expected to review and follow policy guidelines that explain how to care for the laptops and safely access the Internet. Parental supervision is essential when students use the laptops at home. Investigation of other 1:1 programs suggests that in the home, children are helping parents adapt to this powerful technology.

Q: When were the laptops maintained and updated?

A: Students are sometimes asked to turn the laptops in during school vacations. They also return the laptop at the end of the school year. During these time periods, routine maintenance may be done on the laptops and software is updated.

Q: When are the laptop batteries charged?

A: When students take their laptops home, they are expected to bring them to school the next day fully charged. When the laptops remain at school, charging stations are available.

Q: What if a laptop was damaged, lost or stolen?

A: Students are expected to abide by the Apple iBook Guidelines that have been distributed. Following these guidelines will help to ensure that the laptops are cared for properly. Laptops that are damaged while on school property will either be repaired under the Apple warranty or in some cases replaced. Students may lose their laptop privileges for a period of time if their laptop is damaged due to neglect. Stolen laptops will be reported to the police. The schools have also developed Take Home policies that guide students in caring for their laptops at home to minimize the possibility of damage or loss. Parents and students will be required to sign off on these policies.

Q: What kinds of safeguards were in place to prevent misuse of the laptops by students?

A: Every student and parent is required to sign off on their school's Acceptable Use Policy, which describes guidelines for safely accessing the Internet while using the laptops. Each school uses content filters, but these do not block 100% of inappropriate material. Teachers and parents need to also play a role in supervising students' safe use of the Internet. The schools conduct Internet safety training sessions for teachers, students and parents. Teachers have been trained to oversee the safe use of the laptops while students are in school and parents will be expected to ensure that they are used safely at home.

Q: How did the laptops address the requirements of students with special needs?

A: A Universal Access control panel is provided on the operating system (Mac OS X) of the iBook to make specific accessibility features easy to locate. These are examples of such features: 1) For students who have difficulty seeing objects on the computer screen, there are different screen contrasts; 2) A flash screen feature provides visual cues for students who have hearing impairments; 3) Speech recognition technology allows students to do anything on the laptops that could be done by double clicking; and 4) The "Mouse Keys" feature allows students to use the numeric keypad in place of the mouse. For more information about accessibility options, refer to:

<http://www.apple.com/education/accessibility/technology/>

Q: How was BWLI funded?

A: This three-year program is supported by a combination of state, private, and school funding. The state has designated \$2.5 million toward the Initiative. An additional \$1 million will be raised from the private sector. The schools are providing approximately \$1.7 million, which represents both a cash contribution and dedicated staffing for BWLI. State support for the Berkshire Wireless Learning Initiative has been provided through the John Adams Innovation Institute, the economic development division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

Q: How were the Catholic Schools of Pittsfield funded?

A: The Catholic Schools of Pittsfield were full participants in BWLI, but did not receive any state funding. Their participation was supported by funds from the school and from private contributors.

Q: Did the Initiative continue after the pilot program?

A: Each of the participating school systems is contributing its own resources to BWLI and is strongly committed to sustaining the Initiative. The pilot schools continue to use the laptops and are working to identify resources to replace them when as they wear out.