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# Saying No to School Laptops

## Programs to Give All Students Computers Come Under Fire Over Costs, Inappropriate Use by Kids

By JESSICA E. VASCELLARO  
August 31, 2006; Page D1

Last summer, Shawna Adam and her sixth-grade daughter, Abby, eagerly awaited a back-to-school perk: an **Apple Computer** Inc. iBook Abby was issued -- for just \$78, because of her financial need -- through Hermosa Drive Elementary school in Fullerton, Calif.

But after school started, Ms. Adam started to worry. Abby spent class time sending instant messages to friends and wanted to create a page on social-networking site MySpace.com. Her standardized writing-test scores fell, too. So Ms. Adam handed back the computer and pulled her daughter out of the laptop program, which is this year expanding to five schools. "What she learned was how to play games and email her friends," says Ms. Adam. "School was one big happy gabfest."



Getty Images

Some parents are concerned that school laptops could be used inappropriately by kids.

Ms. Adam is part of a backlash against programs that equip every student in a classroom with a computer. A few years ago, such programs, which aim to better engage and train students by giving them round-the-clock computer access, were introduced in schools across the country -- often with encouragement from the large computer makers, such as Apple and **Dell Inc.**, that win the contracts. But now, some parents and educators are having second thoughts over higher-than-anticipated costs and the potential for inappropriate use by kids. At the same time, there is a sense that the vaunted benefits of constant computer access remain unproven. The programs are increasingly under attack -- and in a few cases are crumbling.

An effort to give 63,000 computers to students in Cobb County, Ga., was recently scrapped in response to a lawsuit over a proposal to divert special sales-tax funds to the program. The Fullerton, Calif., school district was forced to make participation in its program contingent upon a parental vote after the American Civil Liberties Union threatened to sue the district late last year for passing the \$1,485 cost per student onto parents. A state-sponsored initiative in New Mexico, whose rollout has already been cut back once, is now under fire from state legislators for its high price tag, lack of evaluation procedures and mixed results. Parents of students enrolled in a Henrico County, Va., flagship program for more than 26,000 students are calling for a delay in issuing laptops to middle-school students until the computers have stronger inappropriate-content filters.

The laptop initiatives, also known as "one-to-one" programs, were first hatched around five years ago to bridge the digital divide between students who had computers at home and those who didn't. Though home-computer penetration has skyrocketed to as high as 72%, according to market researcher Parks Associates, proponents of the programs argue that constant computer access teaches students skills critical to their success in college and at work, such as how to organize multimedia presentations and conduct research online. One-to-one access also makes it easier for

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educators to spruce up lessons with new educational-computing tools like interactive graphing programs without sending the class shuffling back and forth between computer labs.

#### WHERE THE LAPTOPS ARE



See more information on some of the programs that put laptops in schools.

The hurdles aren't derailing the overall push. Competition among schools and the visibility of other laptop initiatives, such as an effort launched by the MIT Media Lab effort to outfit children in developing countries with cheap laptops, is fueling some growth. The number of North American students enrolled in one-to-one laptop programs is growing annually at around 15% and now totals about 500,000, according to the Anywhere Anytime Learning Foundation, a group based in Bellevue, Wash., that studies these initiatives.

But critics say the true costs of a comprehensive laptop program -- from training staff to drafting new curriculum to installing wireless networks in schools -- are just becoming apparent. Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, says schools are balking at the array of hidden costs. "As educational dollars have grown more scarce, those extra costs give pause to more people," he says.

Schools are proceeding more cautiously, says Karen Bruett, vice president of Dell's K-12 education business, which supplies laptops to hundreds of schools across the country. She says that as schools think more carefully about how to best improve learning, they are moving away from a strict one-to-one model and considering other options, such as just giving them to teachers instead.

Funding for such programs varies. Computer initiatives in Michigan and Texas are supported by tens of millions of dollars in federal grant money, as well as some contributions from individual schools. In Virginia's Henrico County, the district covers the program's roughly \$6 million price tag out of the district's \$500 million annual education budget. In Fullerton, families typically "lease" the model for three years at a total cost of around \$1,200, including software and insurance; afterwards the device is theirs to own. In private schools, parents not on financial aid are usually asked to cover the entire price of the device, software and insurance.

For the computer suppliers, it is a lucrative and brand-building business. Most programs are partnerships between schools or districts and the computer manufacturers who bid for the contracts, usually Apple, H-P and Dell. The companies supply and configure the laptops, often loading them with expensive software like Microsoft Office or Adobe PhotoShop. The manufacturers also offer a menu of support services and warranties that can add several hundred dollars to the price of a laptop.

The Maine Department of Education's current four-year contract with Apple is worth \$41 million. "The sale in the short term is great for the bottom line," says Michael Gartenberg, vice president at Jupiter Research in New York. "And capturing customers when they are teenagers creates strong brand affiliation."

The round-the-clock access is widely popular with kids. Jeremy Terman, a 12-year-old at the Barstow School, an independent school in Kansas City, Mo., that requires sixth, seventh and eighth graders to have laptops, is tethered to his Dell computer, which he has decorated with a Kansas University sticker. The seventh grader says it helps him tackle longer writing assignments without hurting his hand and understand tricky science concepts, like electromagnetic attraction, by watching simulations at his desk. "The only thing I don't use it for is gym," he adds.

But some parents worry that the laptops are teaching the wrong skills. Dugan Slovenski, 47 of Brunswick, Maine, says having a laptop has encouraged her thirteen-year-old son to spend more time dazzling up presentations with fancy fonts instead of digging through library books. "They need to be able to learn to research beyond what is accomplished by Googling a word or phrase," she says.

Few comprehensive studies exist on whether these programs live up to their claims to boost achievement, in part because the initiatives are so new. A preliminary study on the impact of laptops in Texas middle schools released by the Texas Center for Educational Research this spring reported that technology immersion improved student attitudes and behaviors but had a neutral impact on student achievement.

Parents are also worried about the laptops encouraging their kids to spend too much time online, often browsing dangerous sites. In Henrico County, 232 students were suspended for violating the school's acceptable-use policy last

year. Some of those cases involved students using school computers to search for pornography. Students have also been caught snooping on inappropriate sites late at night by bumming wireless Internet connections off neighbors, says Lisa Marshall, PTA president of Henrico's Tuckahoe Middle School.

A spokesman for the Henrico School district says middle-school laptops will be outfitted with more robust filters in a month or so and encourages parents to keep their children in line by checking their computers' logs of sites visited.

And some parents, while concerned about safety, are still enthusiastic laptop proponents. Anne Carson, a 49-year-old parent in Glen Allen, Va., says the laptop has helped her twelve-year-old son master critical professional skills like how to compile a PowerPoint presentation. "He's really picking up on a lot of opportunities I don't think he would have gotten without the laptop," she says.

Write to Jessica E. Vascellaro at [jessica.vascellaro@wsj.com](mailto:jessica.vascellaro@wsj.com)<sup>1</sup>

## Where the Laptops Are

The size and scope of some of the nation's largest public-school laptop programs.

PROGRAM/STATE	SCOPE	FUNDING	MANUFACTURER	COMMENT
<b>Technology Immersion Project</b> /Texas	Around 14,000 students in 23 school districts, mostly middle schoolers.	More than \$26 million in federal funding, along with hundreds of thousands in local funding.	Two-thirds Dell; one-third Apple.	One district is issuing Dell handhelds to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade.
<b>Freedom to Learn</b> /Michigan	23,000 students across 100 school districts, mostly in middle schools.	\$30 million federal grant plus \$7 million in state funding and some contributions from schools.	Hewlett-Packard and a small share of Apples.	Federal grant funds must be targeted to districts that have a high poverty rate or that are part of a consortium that includes a district with a high poverty rate.
<b>Maine Learning Technology Initiative</b>	42,000 students, teachers and administrators; mostly in middle schools with some elementary and high schools participating.	About \$10 million a year from the state budget, plus costs like teacher training. An additional \$1.5 million from local schools.	Apple.	60% of students surveyed in a participating high school said their laptops made them more motivated to do work.
<b>Henrico County Laptop Program</b> Virginia	All 26,200 students in grades 6 through 12.	Around \$6 million from district's operational budget.	Apple in middle school; Dell in high school.	Parents pay \$50 user fee.

Source: WSJ research

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(1) <mailto:jessica.vascellaro@wsj.com>

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