

## St. Paul schools plan iPad's role - and heed cautionary tales

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Frost Lake Elementary fifth-grader Aaliyah Perry, left, tackles six-digit subtraction and long division problems on her iPad with help from teaching

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As the St. Paul school district sets out to give an iPad to each student, it can find lessons and cautionary tales -- in its own experience and those of a growing number of digitally minded districts.

The district is putting the finishing touches to a leasing deal with Apple: Half of its almost 70 schools will provide a tablet to each student in the fall; the rest will follow suit in 2015.

The news sparked questions: What will the technology cost? Is the district ready?

Some districts in Minnesota and elsewhere are starting to build a case that, with thoughtful planning and training, technology can help make learning more relevant, engaging and personal. Others offer case studies of troubled rollouts and expensive gadgets that do little to enhance learning.

Even passionate advocates for classroom technology say that more often than not, districts are still rushing onto an \$8 billion education technology market without a clear vision of their goals and a solid plan.

"The promise of education technology in the past 30 years has been, 'Just buy our product and you'll be successful,'" said Michael Dronen, the technology executive director in the Minnetonka district. "We've learned that is just not true."

Last week, St. Paul administrators assured their school board that they do have a detailed plan, which they will lay out before a June 24 board vote on the Apple deal.

For the district, the stakes are high. In 2012, leaders told taxpayers who backed their \$9 million-a-year technology plan that it was not about handing out devices; in fact, buying one for each of its 37,800 students might not be practical.

Instead, they highlighted a \$4.3 million project to design and implement a plan involving an online home for the district's digital tools and Dell computers. Earlier this month, though, the district announced that it has pulled the plug on that project after losing patience with its slow progress.

## TAILORED INSTRUCTION

To help prepare teachers for the possible influx of tablets in the fall, St. Paul's chief academic officer, Matt Mohs, said there will be training over the summer and a chance to start slowly. Early on, changes might be as modest as switching from handwritten assignments to papers typed and submitted electronically.

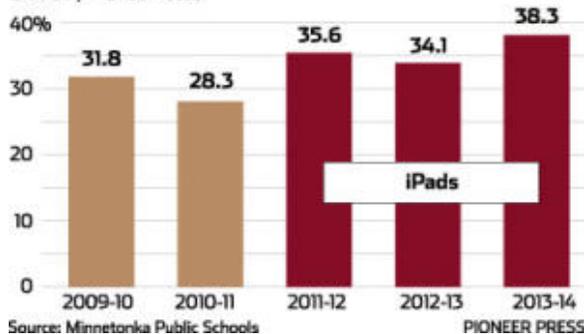
To some technology advocates, that's a decidedly underwhelming example. But in some St. Paul classrooms, teachers are illustrating how the devices can help tailor instruction to student needs.

Take Denise Young's fifth-grade classroom at Frost Lake Elementary, where each student has an iPad to take home. On a recent afternoon, Young sat on the floor with five high-achieving students.

### Tablets and teaching

Since the Minnetonka school district provided an iPad to each ninth-grader in 2011, it has seen an increase in A's and B's and a drop in failing grades.

Percentage of students getting A's in English  
Grade 9, first semester



They were working on a challenge for next year's fifth-graders: a virtual house hunt in which students will practice six-digit subtraction by juggling home prices, closing costs and budgets.

"We're making a game out of math and having a lot of fun," student Emanuel Murphy explained.

Nearby, other students used their iPads to work independently on filling knowledge gaps: long division for one student, means and medians for another. They could click on short video lessons if they needed a refresher.

Special education co-teacher Martin Odima worked with six students who have struggled with the multiple steps required for long division. They watched videos that broke down the process, complete with animation and rap lyrics. Then, they used their iPads as digital whiteboards to tackle a problem.

Young said it troubled her sometimes that other classrooms at her school don't have the access to tablets her class enjoys.

"This is a huge step for our district to finally bridge that digital divide," Young said of the new district plan. "It was not fair."

The Apple effort was announced on the same day this month that district leaders said they were scrapping the Dell deal. That project would have created a platform for teaching and learning, where students would have access to lessons and tests, teachers would monitor their progress and parents would keep up with school work.

Ending the project was "a courageous decision," Superintendent Valeria Silva said. Dell will refund the money spent so far in the form of credit for its technology.

For school board member John Brodrick, who had called for more public vetting of the Dell contract,

learning that the district is close to firming up a new deal with Apple was unsettling. At last week's board meeting, he pressed leaders for more details.

"What I am afraid is we're jumping from the frying pan to the fire," he said.

Officials, who haven't made public a list of St. Paul schools chosen to receive iPads in the fall, promised those details soon.

## **ROUGH STARTS**

In recent years, districts large and small have launched bold initiatives to distribute devices to each student -- only to falter and rethink their timelines. Officials in Los Angeles slowed their \$1 billion rollout when problems such as students accessing noneducational sites in the devices surfaced.

Some pioneers of equipping each student with a computer, such as Stillwater, have since pulled back and shifted to larger reliance on devices students bring from home. That's an approach St. Paul says would not work as well in a high-poverty urban district.

Dronen, a former Stillwater technology coordinator, says the district learned tough lessons: An early decision to provide laptops at only one of two junior highs caused an outcry about fairness. The district, where voters rejected a technology levy in 2011, saw a need to communicate its goals and direction to educators and residents more clearly.

The past couple of years have done little to reassure education technology skeptics such as Larry Cuban, a well-known expert at Stanford University. He says many districts still are making hasty decisions, failing to listen to their teachers and offering flimsy evidence that new technology translates into student gains.

Michael Horn, a national authority on innovative uses of technology in education, says too many districts still "lead with the technology": They pick hardware and software before clearly spelling out the measurable academic goals and vision that should dictate those purchasing decisions.

"Just equipping students with technology without first defining the goals you are trying to achieve and the problems you are trying to solve is a mistake we often see districts make," Horn said. "You want to be wary of technology for technology's sake."

In the metro area, more districts are undertaking device initiatives, sometimes dipping their toes with one school or in a handful of classrooms. Osseo, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan and White Bear Lake are about to join the list of districts embarking on larger-scale deployments. Private schools such as Cretin-Derham Hall and Breck School have made the shift, too.

"I'd be surprised if there are any districts that haven't at least considered it," said Greg Bartley at TIES, a Minnesota technology purchasing consortium.

## **TEACHERS TAKING THE LEAD**

Officials in some districts that by all accounts have had successful rollouts swear by a more gradual approach. Minnetonka, held up as a model by the National School Boards Association, started with its ninth-graders three years ago. It has since added two grades each year -- after pausing to size up student

results each spring.

The district is providing devices to all its sixth-grade teachers now, so they have a full academic year to get comfortable and adapt their curriculums before their students get iPads in 2015-16.

The smaller Farmington district handed out iPads to all students over the course of last school year. But Superintendent Jay Haugen credits 90 early adopter educators who took the first three months to lead the way and trouble-shoot before other classrooms joined in. White Bear Lake is piloting Chromebooks in eighth grade next fall.

"We want to make sure there is an (educational) shift along with the technology integration," said Mark Garrison, the director of technology.

Districts and experts agree that training for teachers is paramount. Bartley said much training still focuses primarily on how to operate the devices rather than on how to harness them to overhaul learning.

For instance, educators who want to "flip" their classrooms -- let students watch lessons at home and save class time for questions and hands-on work -- need to learn how to record video lectures. But more important, they need guidance on how to make the most of the freed-up class time.

White Bear Lake teamed up with Hamline University last year to offer 30 educators a yearlong education technology course. They'll be the go-to experts in their schools.

There are many other important decisions a district such as St. Paul faces: If students are taking the devices home, will the district insure them or ask parents to chip in? How will the district protect student privacy at a time of growing concern about how schools and private companies use the information kids reveal and share through education apps? How will it best tap the knowhow of experienced, savvy technology users such as Frost Lake's Young to help their colleagues?

Districts also need to reckon with an increasingly vocal group of parents who see a value in limiting screen time.

Meanwhile, some districts report their technology efforts are paying off. Farmington is saving on traditional textbooks and paper copies; when extreme cold closed schools for four days last winter, students and teachers took to the Web to keep up with classes.

Minnetonka has seen a steady increase in students who get A's and B's and fewer D's and F's. The district hosted educators from across the state and district this spring for a showcase.

"What stood out was how embedded the technology was in the teaching and learning," Dronen said.

"If done right, the technology fades behind the scenes."

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## **CHROMEBOOKS vs. iPADS**

The iPad is still the dominant device of choice for school districts, but interest in Chromebooks is growing.

Nationally, Chromebooks made up almost 20 percent of school mobile computer purchases last year, up from less than 1 percent in 2012. Each device has its selling points, experts say.

## iPads

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