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MATTHEW CHEESEMAN, San Lorenzo High chemistry teacher



CRAIG LEE / The Chronicle

Ilana Reyes, sprawled in front of Alexandria Benson and Alexandria's mother, Tammy Benson, on a field trip to San Francisco.

San Leandro kids lap up their lessons

Electronic learning for students from 4th to 12th grade

By Meredith May
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It's absolutely quiet in Lois Guest's fifth-grade classroom save for the soft tick of computer key tapping.

Thirty kids, their new school-issue laptops before them, are engrossed in state reports. A.J. Ramos chose Alaska, and in a few clicks he checks a live Web view of Juneau Harbor, tunes in to KINY Alaska news radio and listens to his laptop chirp the state song.

"It's faster than going to the library," said A.J., a student at Hesperian Elementary in San Lorenzo.

"And books don't have sound or pictures that move," said classmate Gerry Hoover.

State reports are just one way school has changed since the San Lorenzo district embarked on a \$20 million experiment this year to give wireless Internet laptops to 1,500 youngsters in grades 4 through 12. It's the most extensive test of electronic learning in the Bay Area.

A month after the machines arrived, paper is nearly gone from some high school classes, where students take notes, do their home-

work and turn in reports electronically. Teachers rove more and lecture less as students do their own research.

In elementary classrooms, outdated encyclopedias sit on the shelves, and students no longer have to jostle for time in the school's computer lab. Teachers are adjusting to new responsibilities as they teach their students how to stay away from online strangers and sort the difference between facts and advertisements on the Internet.

"The kids are so jazzed, and I can see such a difference over last year — a rise in maturity," said Hesperian Principal Sharon Lampel. "There's a desire to be there, which is such a battle anyway to give them reasons to want to be in school."

Big and small kids alike love the laptops and customize their screens with teen idols and hot rods. They sometimes go too far, Web-surfing when they should be writing down algebra equations. And nagging password and network problems have turned teachers into IT troubleshooters, making them worry that they are wasting time needed to prepare for



MARK COSTANTINI / The Chronicle

Fifth-graders in Lois Guest's class busily worked on their laptops at Hesperian elementary.



FREDERIC LARSON / The Chronicle

state tests.

"We spent nearly two hours learning to open a file in Microsoft Word, give it a name and save it," said one harried fifth-grade teacher.

At San Lorenzo High, chemistry teacher Matthew Cheeseman is taking all homework on disks, not paper. It was foreign at first, to look out over a room of students behind

EDITOR'S NOTE:
The Chronicle is following students and teachers in one Bay Area school district who are using laptop computers as everyday learning tools.

Ilesha Rush (left with a smile), a fifth-grader at Hesperian Elementary in San Lorenzo, is in a class using the Internet laptops.

► KIDS: Page A24 Col. 1

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Above: Lois Guest and her student Jeremy Aranzanendez work on a laptop computer. Right: From left, Demarrea Powell, Dowel Juan, Joey Ayala and Jerome Clary work on their laptops during a field trip.



CRAIG LEE / The Chronicle

Laptop learning transforms San Lorenzo classrooms

► KIDS

From Page A21

computer screens, but it began to feel natural in a few days.

"It's a little hard because you can't see what they are looking at on their computers, and it's so easy to just quickly check the baseball score," Cheeseman said. "But before, I'd have to write an equation on the board, have them copy it, then erase it and write something else. Now, they can store everything and keep flipping back and forth through their notes. I can tell they are catching on faster."

District leaders bought the laptops on the notion that youngsters should become e-literate before they graduate because the univer-

sity and the working world is already computerized. Using bond proceeds and general funds, they want to double the program each year until all 8,000 students above the third grade have laptops, making San Lorenzo the most ambitious laptop district in the Bay Area.

San Lorenzo has become something of a tourist spot for school leaders from other districts who are considering getting laptops, too. The East Side Union High District of San Jose visited recently and is planning to copy the program. Although research to date is anecdotal on the benefits of laptop learning, San Lorenzo is moving ahead.

Fifteen more San Lorenzo teachers and their students will be

added to the program after the Christmas break. Unlike other districts that make parents pay outright or lease laptops, San Lorenzo is giving them to students for free.

When Kevin Groves took his fifth-grade class on a field trip to Yerba Buena Gardens near San Francisco's Metreon this month, students insisted that they bring their laptops.

Salvador Mata spread out on the grass with his mother, Irene, to explain in Spanish how to make a Powerpoint presentation. The kids drew curious stares from the noontime crowd of conference-goers in the park, but the children didn't notice because they were so engrossed in their computers.

"I am so happy he has this, because I have four children, and we don't have the Internet at home," said Irene Mata. "If my son learns this now, by the time he's an

adult, he'll have a really good job."

Most students got their laptops several weeks after school started in late August. Administrators thought the laptops would come loaded with software, but discovered they would have to add the programs to every computer first. Shipments slowed down after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack when Dell rushed to fill military and medical orders, prompting rumors at schools that the laptop program had been scrapped.

"There are bound to be little glitches with any new program, especially one of this scale," said Assistant Superintendent Arnie Glassberg.

The new machines mark a monumental career shift for Guest, a 35-year Hesperian Elementary veteran who remembers when slide projectors were the height of high-tech. She is now

building a Web site for her class and learning how to use a digital camera and scanner.

"I'm learning a lot, but the students are also teaching me how to do things on the computer," she said. "It's amazing how much they already know."

Playground culture also changed, and now students want to stay in during recess to visit Barbie.com to see her latest wardrobe or listen to Little Romeo's latest rap song.

"The other kids say it stinks that they don't have one, and they want to use ours," said Danielle Martinez, a fifth grader at Hesperian.

A couple of children were hauled into the principal's office for continuing their playground spats in cyberspace and flaming their peers with mean e-mail.

Some kids are even offering the fifth graders money to download

songs off the Internet and burn CDs — something they can't do anyway, said Iliana Reyes, 10.

"I want to come to school a little more now," said Bianca Gutierrez, whose home computer isn't hooked to the Internet.

Capitalizing on their students' enthusiasm for the laptops, teachers have quickly learned to use the threat of the shut-off switch as a way to silence the talkers and goad the procrastinators into passing their spelling tests.

In the middle and high schools, students in the program have a "laptop homeroom" where every student has a computer. But after leaving their homeroom, they scatter out to other classes and sometimes may be the only student with a laptop in some rooms.

It's a bit awkward being the only one, said San Lorenzo High student Stephanie Gill, but she's still glad she doesn't have to write notes like everyone else.

Sometimes, the whole class benefits.

Mihail Cucu, the only student in anatomy class with a laptop, downloaded a detailed map of the human body that impressed the teacher so much that he made copies for his classmates to use in studying.

Cucu wishes he could download movies and games or use chat rooms, but the district blocked those functions. Teachers and district leaders have new liabilities with laptops, and have to take new precautions.

"The laptops are wonderful, but you have to research every link you put on your Web site to make sure it won't lead to something bad for kids," Groves said.