

---

Friday, February 29, 2008

## School laptop program begets writing gains

Mon, Feb 04, 2008

School laptop program begets writing gains

Results of first comprehensive study of Maine's pioneering ed-tech initiative show promise

From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

Primary Topic Channel: [Research](#)

Maine's pioneering program to give every middle school student a laptop computer is leading to better writing, according to a new study.

Despite creating a language all their own using eMail and text messages, students are still learning standard English, and their writing scores have improved on a standardized test since laptop computers were distributed, the study says.

Moreover, the students' writing skills improved even when they were using pen and paper, not just a computer keyboard.

"If you concentrate on whether laptops are helping kids achieve 21st-century skills, this demonstrates that it's happening in writing," said David Silvernail, director of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern Maine.

The study, authored by Silvernail and Aaron Gritter, is the first in a series in which educators aim to evaluate Maine's first-in-the-nation laptop program.

The program, which seeks to eliminate the so-called "digital divide" between wealthy and poor students, kicked off with distribution of about 36,000 computers to each seventh- and eighth-grader in Maine public schools in 2002 and 2003.

The study focused on eighth-graders' scores on the Maine Educational Assessment to see if the standardized test results backed up the perception of both students and teachers alike that laptops have led to better writing skills.

State Education Commissioner Sue Gendron said the study represents the first concrete evidence that backs up what most educators already believe: that the laptop program, known as the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, is working.

"It's about enhancing learning opportunities, and the evidence and the data we've received in this report substantiates that this is the right approach," she said.

Maine Education Assessment scores indicate 49 percent of eighth-graders were proficient in 2005 in writing, compared with 29 percent in 2000.

And it wasn't just a function of taking the writing portion of the test using a computer and keyboard. Students who used pen and paper, and those who used a computer keyboard, showed similar improvements on the test, Silvernail said.

During the same period, math scores were unchanged and science scores improved by 2 points, while reading scores actually dropped 3 points, Silvernail said. Writing showed the biggest improvement of 7 points, from 530 to 537, he said.

Silvernail said it's unrealistic to expect big increases on standardized test scores that are tied to laptops, but writing is the exception.

Laptops make it easier for students to edit their copy and make changes without getting writer's cramp, he said. As a result, students are writing and revising their work more frequently, which leads to better results. And it's important, Silvernail said, that those skills translated when the test was taken with pen and paper, too.

Virginia Rebar, principal at Piscataquis Community Middle School, said she was not surprised by the results, because language skills are being developed every time the computers are used, in social studies and other subjects beyond language arts.

**Continued**

Pages: [1](#) [2](#) | [Next >>](#)

**eSchoolNews**

7920 Norfolk Ave, Suite 900, Bethesda Maryland, 20814

Tel. (866) 394-0115, Fax. (301) 913-0119

Web: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>, Email: [WebAdmin@eschoolnews.com](mailto:WebAdmin@eschoolnews.com)