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Charlestown students learn how to be Digital Connectors as part of the one-to-one computer initiative

Students get connected

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The wheels of the new one-to-one computer initiative in Charlestown are starting to move as students receive training this week on how to be Digital Connectors, a type of technology teacher, for the area.

The initiative — which involves placing a laptop in each middle- and high-school student's hands in Charlestown — hasn't been easy. Much debate has started on whether the money set aside for technology with the Charlestown High School building project can be used for laptops, let alone for those computers at the middle-school level.

Bob McEwen — who is school board president for Greater Clark County Schools as well as redevelopment director for Charlestown — said the funding for the high school part is cleared. He said he believes the middle-school portion also will be allowed. However, if it's not approved by the school board, he said the project won't die there.

"I believe the community is going to find a way to involve the middle school," McEwen said, adding that the city and private donations could come together to pay for that part of the project.

"I feel confident it's going to go through," Charlestown Mayor Bob Hall said of the middle-school project.

When the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance was asked earlier this year about whether the funds will be allowed to be used in the middle and high schools, Amanda Stanley, communications specialist for the department, said, "If an expense was included in the original bond order, funds from the bonds can be used for that expense. We reviewed the file containing the information used to develop the bond order and found that the Greater Clark County School did specify that a portion of the bond funds would be used for loose equipment and technical equipment."

Hall said having this program in the middle school is very important, so that children can work on learning the technology and be prepared to use it to acquire knowledge about

other subjects later while in high school.

But before the computers are handed out to any students this fall, some need to be trained. So, a grant was used to pay for One Economy to come in and teach a group of students how to use the new technology over a span of three days. The students can then pass that knowledge on to classmates, parents and more.

Holly Kalemeris, of One Economy, led the group of 16 students, who gave up a few days of their spring break to learn more about technology.

Kalemeris said this same training was done in Greene County, N.C., which is one of the one-to-one areas Greater Clark is basing its program after.

Kalemeris said she is working to inform the students not only how to use the technology, but also how to teach the basics to others.

Students said they were up for the task awaiting them.

“I really like being a leader, and I didn’t want to miss out on this,” 16-year-old Holly Abbott said of giving up her vacation for the training. “I wanted to be able to teach and not be the one being taught.”

“I did have plans, but I thought it’d be more productive to do this rather than go out of town,” 17-year-old Randy DeMars said.

Some are even looking beyond just using this new knowledge in high school.

“I’m going to be way ahead of the competition, so when I graduate high school, I’ll be one step ahead when it comes to jobs,” said Andy Stidham, a Charlestown High School sophomore.

Students said they are happy to see this project become a reality, especially after hearing that funding might be an issue.

“It’s really exciting to see it really happening and especially to be a part of it,” 16-year-old Aaron Fielding said.

“It’s really going to change Charlestown High School and the community as a whole,” 16-year-old McKenzie Price said, adding that she never thought Charlestown would be picked for a program such as this. “Charlestown has always been talked down before, but when people say, ‘Why Charlestown?’ our motto this week was ‘Why not Charlestown?’”

McEwen said this training is just the beginning. He said he hopes to have more sessions like this to train a total of 50 to 100 students before school starts in the fall.

ABOUT DIGITAL CONNECTORS

- One Economy's Digital Connectors program is a best practice, youth-development movement that engages teenagers and young adults, ages 14-21, in leadership development, digital education, life-skills management and community service. By learning and involving themselves in their respective communities, taking field trips to high-tech companies and hearing from emerging leaders, youth are able to hone technical competencies and grasp lifelong principles that inspire educational advancement and work force preparation.

Nationally, these young people connect to each other through the Connectors Club Web site, a social networking and information portal that gives them the ability to access and share information about college, jobs and life skills.

The Digital Connectors program was launched in 2001 in Washington, D.C., with less than 25 youth from one of the city's most distressed neighborhoods. Today, the program is active with partners from more than 20 rural and urban areas across the country. Thousands of Digital Connectors have provided tens of thousands of service hours in communities from New York to San Francisco. Digital Connectors are going to college, working in the city youth employment programs and finding careers in 21st century industries.

— One Economy