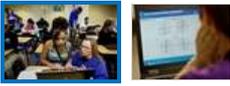




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Central High School junior Myosha Ryan gets help setting up her wireless account from Kelly Means, the school's business, marketing and IT department chairwoman. Central Principal Keith Bigsby says improved test scores were a byproduct of the school's upgrade to a completely wireless campus.

Classroom updates

By *Jonathon Braden*
World-Herald Staff Writer

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Bolstering the school's future educational options — not improving state test scores — was the aim of a recent capital campaign to install a wireless network at Central High.

But Principal Keith Bigsby said the state's largest high school got both. Going wireless made more computers available, allowing Central to condense its testing schedule. School officials believe that led to higher scores.

The school's efforts, along with a state mandate, also have nudged the district to think differently about using technology, Bigsby said.

Last spring, Bigsby wanted to boost the intensity that juniors applied to the state tests, which don't affect students' grades or college admission status, but do affect a school's reputation and progress toward federal goals.

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So he and the staff at Central changed their state testing schedule to more closely resemble that of a college admissions test: Students took the state tests in about 90-minute increments. Staff cordoned off the fourth floor of the school building so that only juniors could enter.

They gave juniors shout-outs during announcements, challenging them to do better than the juniors before them. And instead of repeating the mantra for 24 days — the old testing schedule — the school's partially installed wireless network allowed the whole junior class to complete the tests in four days and move on.

Among high schools in the Omaha Public Schools, Central's 2012 juniors showed the most improvement on the state math test, compared to the 2011 juniors, and scored the highest on the state reading exam.

The number of Central juniors who scored proficient on the exams — 57 percent for reading, 46 percent for math — is still well below state averages and below what Bigsby wants to see. Across Nebraska, 64 percent of juniors scored proficient on the reading exam, and 55 percent did so for the math test.

But Bigsby thinks the condensed schedule helped kids stay focused, boosting their performance.

"Some of that is better classroom preparation, but we think again our testing procedures were a part of that (improvement)," Bigsby said. "Our kids had the opportunity to make it important, and our kids treated it like it was important."

Another OPS high school, Burke, is considering changing its testing schedule next spring.

"We don't want the performance to be based on being tired of taking a test as opposed to being excited about taking the test," said Deborah Frison, Burke principal.

Central is the first OPS high school to become wireless, although others in the metro area have been wireless for years.

The technology upgrades at Central — more laptops and a completely wireless campus this fall — also have pushed OPS to move forward with its technology plans, Bigsby said. Earlier this year, OPS administrators introduced a five-year plan to upgrade the district's computer tally and wireless networks.

In addition to educational wants, OPS's efforts are being nudged by a state mandate: The Nebraska Board of Education voted earlier this year to have the state's reading, math and science exams be administered almost exclusively online in spring 2013.

"It is time for us to make some moves," Dennis Pool, OPS assistant superintendent, told the Omaha school board in May.

The Nebraska State Accountability tests have been administered both online and in paper-and-pencil form the past three years. Districts could take their pick.

Some districts have had to buy computers and strengthen their wireless networks to meet the new mandate, said Valorie Foy, Nebraska director of statewide assessment. Other districts were already buying more computers and making more buildings wireless, she said.

Among metro districts, Millard, Elkhorn and Westside have been wireless for some time.

State officials say the online exams save money — no more buying paper-and-pencil tests. The mandate will have a few exceptions: Special-education students and students learning English can still take the paper-and-pencil versions of the tests, Foy said.

Last spring, more than 80 percent of the state's students took the online tests in reading and science, and 66 percent took the online math test.

Other states are planning similar moves or have already done so, including Idaho, Ohio

COLUMNISTS »



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The Iowa Department of Education, however, has no plans to switch to all online state testing, said a department spokeswoman. But that hasn't slowed the Council Bluffs Community School District. This fall, the district of 9,300 students and 18 school buildings became all wireless.

Council Bluffs' wireless push came from the district's strategic plan, approved in 2009, to eventually have laptops for all students in grades 3 through 12, said David Fringer, the district's information systems director.

In Nebraska, district officials say creative scheduling has helped accommodate online testing thus far.

At Grand Island Senior High School, only students taking a state test use the laptops or computer labs during the six-week spring testing period. "It kind of shuts down the computer use in the classroom," said Robin Dexter, assistant superintendent for student services.

All the schools in the district are wireless, she said.

Before Central became wireless, online state testing was limited to 75 computers. Last spring, when the school was partially wireless, Central was able to move classes around and clear out the fourth floor for testing.

OPS's total upgrade — improving schools' wireless and electrical capabilities, along with buying nearly 1,600 computers — could cost at least \$19.5 million over five years, according to an earlier presentation to the school board.

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Wireless Central

The Central High School Foundation's capital campaign to upgrade the school's technology began in March 2011. Some wireless points were installed last spring; the rest in July.

The campaign by the numbers:

\$400,000 Foundation's contribution, including installing the wireless access points

\$100,000 Omaha Public Schools' contribution, including paying for Internet access at Central

\$500,000 Contribution from Central's budget, including purchasing SMART Boards, training teachers and buying laptops

75 SMART Boards bought

110 Laptops purchased

400 Number of wired computers at Central

586,000 Square feet that Central occupies

163 Access points needed for school to become completely wireless, including four points posted 40 feet high on light poles around the school's football field.

Sources: Miller Electric; Michele Roberts, executive director of the Central High School Foundation; Keith Bigsby, Central principal.

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