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A netbook for every student

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FIFTH-GRADERS BRADLEY Hill and Abby Perlee work on their new laptops for the first time Thursday morning. Independent photo/Trent Campbell

BRISTOL — For the students in Hannah Estey and Rebecca Zavadil's fifth-grade classes, Christmas came a bit early this year.

On Thursday, the Bristol Elementary School fifth-graders all received new Dell netbooks to use at school and at home through the end of the school year as part of the education portion of the "e-Vermont" grant awarded to the town earlier this year.

In May, Bristol was one of 12 towns to receive a portion of a $3.8 million grant meant to boost community access to Internet resources. e-Vermont goals for Bristol include improving the town's web site, creating public wireless hotspots and developing programming related to the new resources.

The grant also provided the 40-plus netbooks to the elementary school, along with training for both students and teachers by representatives of e-Vermont's partner, Digital Wish. Digital Wish is a Manchester-based nonprofit whose goal is to get technology into schools and enable

students to enter "tomorrow's workforce."

"These students need to be trained in this type of technology starting in these young grades so that they can advance as the years go by throughout their education," said Digital Wish Lead Trainer Eric Bird. "You look at any job requirements and you know, students are going to be graduating and tech skills are necessary to land a good job. So that's really one of our goals. We want to go in and help the schools, we want to get them technology and we want to provide training."

On Thursday, the students could hardly keep still as they waited for their teachers and Principal Catrina DiNapoli — who helped write the town's e-Vermont grant application — to call their name and hand them their very own netbook.

"Dude, this is so sick!" called out one student, as his computer powered up and Windows tones began to chime around the room.

Bird proceeded to introduce the overjoyed fifth-grades to the various icons on the desktop toolbar, allowing them to test out programs like "Snapshot" and "Microsoft Paint."

"This is just like a Christmas present!" another girl cried, eyes still focused intently on the tiny screen of her mini-laptop computer.

Though this was the students' first introduction to the netbooks, it was not the first time that Bird had presented to the class.

Earlier this fall, Bird began meeting with Bristol Elementary teachers and administrators in order to assess the school's technology needs, and to plan technology lessons that would fit into the existing curriculum.

Before the netbooks were doled out, students were equipped with the basic knowledge they need to enter the digital sphere.

Each week for the last month, Bird visited both fifth-grade classes to teach lessons related to "Digital Citizenship and Cyber Safety."

"We thought that was the most important thing, perhaps, to address upfront," he said. "Each one of our units ties in with the NETS-S standards."

NETS-S is shorthand for the standards for students set by the International Society for Technology in Education. Digital Wish crafts lessons that not only tie in with NETS-S, but also strives to make a connection to the school's curriculum and to the community, as a whole.

"There are three primary things that we always keep in mind and those are responsibility, respect and safety," Bird said. "We bring it up every time we come in. But you make it fun for the kids, you do special claps — they love that. You make it a really positive experience."

But even without the goofy "volleyball" and "bodybuilder" claps that Bird uses to get the class' attention, the students were hooked. Smiles lit up their faces as they eagerly checked the status of their computers' batteries.

"Mine has five hours and 40 minutes!"

"Mine has five hours and 21 minutes!"

And even trickier tasks like capturing video and moving it to the recycle bin did not seem to faze them.

"It's really the world that they're growing up in, so they're way more capable than when we were kids," said Bird, who explained that in future lessons, students will learn how to use video-editing and podcasting software. "What's really awesome is that they see it as applicable to the world that they live in."

But the learning won't end after students leave the classroom.

NOT JUST FOR KIDS

"One really cool thing that we're doing with this project, too, is the school-to-home initiative," Bird said. "They have the netbooks here at school during the day and then they'll go home at night to be used within the household. And that's one of the primary reasons why we selected the fourth-through-sixth-grade range, because you still have that really strong tie between parents and students. We want the kids going home and sharing what they did, sharing their projects and saying, 'Hey! Look at this new technology.'"

Bird explained that each night, when the students return home with their netbooks, their parents will have the chance to get online. Each student will also take home a printer package, allowing families to save and print off documents. And in addition to the lessons taught at school, Bird will be offering training sessions for parents later in the year.

"It's not just a school initiative for us, it goes well beyond that and it ties in with the community," Bird said. "And that's always a key aspect that we're hitting."

Though e-Vermont only provided netbooks for the fifth-graders, Bird said that Digital Wish's overall plan is to have the technology spread organically throughout the school. He encourages other teachers to follow the progress of the two classes, and to start applying for additional grants.

"Something really neat happens when we get the netbooks into the school, suddenly the surrounding grades start to see what's happening in other classrooms," he said. "It starts in one grade level and then it starts spreading through the school."

Though Bird will only be working with the school through the end of this year, the netbooks and hardware will remain with the fifth-grade classes. Bird hopes to make both the teachers and Lisa Brande, the school's tech expert, completely self-sufficient before the grant money dries up.

"We want to make self-sustainable system so that once we're gone, it just keeps on going and keeps on growing," he said.

DiNapoli is confident that the school will continue to improve on its technology education programs. Though they only have enough netbooks for one grade, she hopes that once these students have moved up to sixth grade, they will be able to pair up with their fifth-grade peers and show them the ropes.

Both fifth-grade teachers are very excited about incorporating new technology into their teaching plans, according to DiNapoli, and have already assigned projected using wikis and other media tools. Estey and Zavadil also maintain class websites, and DiNapoli writes a blog.

"We're just very excited to have this opportunity," she said of the e-Vermont project as a whole. "It makes the projects so much stronger when you have a lot of people working together to

problem solve and get things done. Bristol is looking toward the future."

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