Entry Name:
Voter-approved tech investments give students, families new learning flexibility

Organization Name:
Tacoma Public Schools

Category:
Excellence in Writing
**Why did we tell this story?**

Our school district gave all students laptops to learn remotely during the pandemic. Knowing it would not serve students well to put those devices on a shelf when they returned to in-person learning, we needed to help people see the long-term value of those devices for in-school and at-home use.

That, coupled with an upcoming technology levy that would pay for laptop replacement every four years, gave us the motivation we needed to talk tech with our families and voters.

**What challenges lay in telling this story?**

Finding the right teacher to showcase how technology can be a success in the classroom was paramount. After exploring a number of recommendations, we landed on elementary teacher Jennifer Fagan, who was a compelling amount of confident, compassionate and curious.

Through rigorous reporting, we also found a staff member who could speak globally about the benefits technology can bring to students, including personalized instruction for students who need it most.

With the help of our staff, we identified a family who could speak to the advantages of enrolling in Tacoma Online, the online school we opened during the pandemic in response to the desire of students and families to learn from home on a permanent basis. Those students are part of our technology story in that they also received a district-issued laptop, making online learning possible for anyone who wanted to do it.

**Target audiences**

Telling this story was a way to personalize the need for technology levy funding. We needed that message to reach this set of voters so they could understand what they would be supporting with their vote:

- Parents of students currently enrolled in our schools
- People of voting age without students currently in our schools
- Tacoma Public Schools’ staff

We ran this story in tools that would reach those audiences. They included our “Spotlight” newsletter, district e-newsletter and website, and social media.
Voter-approved tech investments give students, families new learning flexibility

Teacher Jennifer Fagan is nervous and excited at the same time as students return to school in person and full time. In her “split” class with both fourth- and fifth-graders at DeLong Elementary, she’s using technology to recreate—and improve—the way she teaches math.

Because Fagan teaches two different grades in one classroom, her students need a range of lessons depending on what they need to learn. While fourth-graders work on place values, fifth-graders work on decimals.

How to do that without wasting precious time? Fagan’s solution uses technology to her advantage. Instead of standing in front of the classroom and delivering a lesson that only applies to half the class, she records each grade’s math lessons. After they’ve talked about their math goal for the day, each student puts on headphones, opens their computer and watches the lesson she created for them. From there, what happens is based on the student.

If they understand the lesson, they complete the follow-up assignment and even move ahead to the next learning module if they’re ready.

If they don’t quite get it, they can watch it again or choose to watch a supporting lesson that gives even more detail.

Meanwhile, Fagan walks through the classroom, watching each student’s progress and helping whoever needs it, either in small groups or individually. Students who need the most help get the most time with her.

Continued page 4
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With their own laptop, students who struggle with reading can have text read to them. Students who struggle with writing can speak and their laptop will record it. English language learners can use an online translator. The list of tools will grow.

“Using technology gives teachers more flexibility in how they provide opportunities for students, and students can demonstrate their learning in lots of different ways, which is huge,” Everett said.

That doesn’t mean traditional teaching tools are no longer options.

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Choice and flexibility

As the pandemic created the need for all students to have a laptop, it also opened doors to at-home learning on a permanent basis.

During the 2020-2021 school year, TPS opened Tacoma Online (TOL) in response to the desire of students and families to choose to learn from home even as others transitioned back to school in person. TOL is an all-inclusive virtual school that provides TPS teachers, core content courses and elective courses in grades K-12. Students have access to their courses online anytime, from anywhere, and they can work at their own pace.

TOL provides its students a coach who helps them develop a yearly learning plan and meets with them weekly. Even in an online environment, students need a trusted adult they can connect with and someone to help personalize their education, said TOL Associate Principal Paul Eliot.

While it started as a district program, TOL is now its own school recognized by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, with nearly 1,700 K-12 students enrolled. That change in status was cemented by the desire of students and their families to have more flexibility in how and when they receive their instruction – regardless of outside influences like the pandemic.

In Eliot’s experience, people have a variety of reasons for choosing TOL—from health concerns and complicated family schedules to employment needs and the desire to have the choice to complete schoolwork on their own time.

“We like it because of the freedom,” Ramos said. “We are able to do some family activities together during the school day, where we would not normally be able to. We go to museums, the beach, park. We meet up with other families that are doing the same thing.”

TOL also accommodates her desire to be active in her children’s education, particularly in the cases of her middle and high school students.

“I’m able to see what they’re learning and learn with them. I can be involved and help. I like the hands-on aspect of it and the freedom of learning wherever you are. All of those factors made us want to do TOL.”

In some ways, long-time educator Eliot sees the advent of TOL and the access to laptops as the school district’s acknowledgement of students’ evolving needs and their view of the world.

“These kids, they don’t see why everything has to fit in the same box. They appreciate a system that responds to them and allows them to do it their way.”

Melissa Ramos, parent of three children in TOL, said she’s been looking for a fit like this for years.
How did we share this story?

- Hard copy “Spotlight” newsletter, mailed to all mail stops in school district boundary
- District website
- District eNewsletter
- District social media

Tacoma Public Schools
October 17, 2021

Now that every student has a laptop, students and families are experiencing a new-found access to technology and a flexibility in learning. In Tacoma, these changes are here to stay, bringing with it many benefits, including a competitive advantage for students and the potential for personalized instruction.

Read about the benefits that voter-approved technology brings to students and families: https://bit.ly/3F5eQF9

Tech access gives advantages to students

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a chance in computer access so that all students would gain at home with a laptop. White schools were either closed or remote learning was a hybrid status, but recommends technology blended learning. This is the tool to teach a new way.

Using technology gives students more flexibility in how they provide opportunities for students, and students can demonstrate their learning in lots of different ways, which is huge. Students have access to their courses anytime, from anywhere, so they can work at their own pace.

Laptop technology gives teachers more flexibility. They have the time to teach what is best, not what they have to teach. Eltzmeyer said, "I’m not sure teachers are as flexibility. They have less freedom." Teachers are more flexible because they have the freedom to teach more.

The investment gives students more flexibility. It’s the idea of personalized instruction that focuses on the most efficient for students. Instructional facilitator Tyler Swain, who supports teachers with curriculum and professional development, explained by pointing to helping teachers understand how they’re bringing technology into classrooms. He said, "It’s a time to teach, but it’s also a time to teach. It’s a time to teach, but it’s also a time to teach.

District social media

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Tacoma Public Schools
Every student. Every day.