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7 Chicago schools to get \$100K technology grant

By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Tribune reporter

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Seven Chicago schools will be awarded grants of up to \$100,000 each Tuesday to explore how laptops, iPhones and iPads can help teachers move away from single lesson plans toward a more individualized approach to learning. advertisement

The education groups administering the grants say technology can help teachers provide extra help for struggling students and additional work for the children who excel.

"This isn't just about using iPads as a fancy note-taking device," said Heather Anichini, CEO of the Chicago Public Education Fund. "This is about radically changing how schools are doing school, to incorporate technology into the classroom to allow for more individualized learning."

Half the money for the Breakthrough Schools grants comes from the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which have historically backed privately run charter schools.

The grant money is being awarded to three charter schools and one "turnaround" high school managed by the Academy for Urban School Leadership, as well as to a district-run magnet school and two neighborhood grammar schools.

Phyllis Lockett, CEO of LEAP Innovations, a new organization that advocates for more technology in the classroom, said the grants offered an opportunity "to work across both traditional schools and charter schools." District schools this year are operating on significantly reduced budgets, making grant money crucial to helping teachers stay on top of technological advances, Lockett said.

"In the context of budget cuts that schools are experiencing and that the state is experiencing, it's tough to take the time and money to think about innovation," Lockett said. "The technology enables two things — the data helps teachers pinpoint on a regular basis where every student is and how to solve gaps in their learning, and it also helps each student self-pace."

Students at one of the schools getting a grant, Chicago International Charter School's West Belden campus, already use iPhones and laptops purchased with previous grant funding.

On Monday, fifth-graders answered vocabulary questions using their iPhones. "When I read textbooks I get bored," said Yamylett Correa, 10. "I can concentrate better using the iPhone."

In a classroom across the hall, a stack of dictionaries sat unused as seventh-graders worked through a program

that teaches them how to highlight and annotate texts. If an unfamiliar word pops up, an app pronounces the word and gives the students its meaning and context.

The \$100,000 grants will be used to train teachers on new technology, provide wireless systems and furnish classrooms with couches and U-shaped tables.

"We asked teachers if they learn better sitting on couches at Starbucks or in hard chairs in a fourth-grade classroom, and they said Starbucks," said CICS West Belden Principal Scott Frauenheim. "We're trying to reimagine space so there's no more desks in rows, but rather a comfortable, inviting atmosphere."

Lockett is the former CEO of New Schools for Chicago and Renaissance Schools Fund, both of which provided money to start many of the city's charter schools and helped the best grow into multicampus networks.

She said she was approached by the national Next Generation Learning Challenges, which along with the Broad Foundation wanted to create pilot programs in two cities in which entire schools would use technology to deliver personalized learning for all students.

LEAP and the Chicago Public Education Fund covered the remaining costs, helped schools develop ideas and eventually selected the schools that are getting the grants. They're hoping the program will lead CPS to incorporate additional technology at more schools.

Frauenheim said technology can't revamp every phase of learning. His middle schoolers each have a laptop but use them only about 40 percent of the day. And students are encouraged to make good use of a well-stocked library.

"We're trying to find a balance," he said.

Other schools winning a grant are: Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center; Chicago Academy High School; John C. Haines Elementary School; and Wildwood Magnet Elementary School. Two other charter schools, a middle school operated by KIPP and a school operated by Great Lakes Academy, have not yet opened.

Some of the schools will be selected for an additional \$350,000 in grant money after results come back from the pilot programs.

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