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County schools to encourage students to bring electronics to class

by [Laura Johnson](#)
lbjohnson@annistonstar.com

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White Plains Middle School teacher Angie Kelley is learning that technology gives her students more control over their own education.

No longer are students restricted to paper-and-pencil assignments. Now they can use video, email and other applications to show Kelley the concepts they've grasped in her language arts class.

"We don't have to do it just paper-pencil style," Kelley said. "It gives them a lot more say-so about how they express their learning in class."

Kelley's experience is not unique among teachers at White Plains Middle School, which last year became home to a pilot program that asks students to bring their own laptops, smartphones and tablet computers to school. Soon her experience with technology in the classroom will become more common among teachers who work for Calhoun County Schools.

This month the district is expanding the pilot program to five more schools, and by next fall to all county schools. The initiative, named "Bring Your Own Device," is designed to help students and teachers integrate technology into classrooms, administrators said.

The initiative, known to teachers as BYOD, is an alternative to technology programs known as one-to-one initiatives, which provide each student with an Internet-capable device. Piedmont City Schools, for example, provide computers to all students in some grades. Under BYOD, the school system provides wireless Internet service, but the students provide the devices.

"We're going to have a one-to-one initiative, but it's going to be with the parents' help," said Calhoun County Deputy Superintendent Karen Winn. "We need our parents as partners in this."

Preparing teachers and parents

To be sure parents understand the changes in their children's classrooms, Calhoun County School administrators are holding a series of community meetings throughout the month of January. At the meetings parents and other stakeholders can learn which devices are best for the classroom and the school policies regarding the devices.

"We want to make sure we share our vision and goals with them," said Calhoun County Superintendent Joe Dyar. "They may give us an idea we haven't thought about."

The school system is coupling the introduction of the program with on-site professional development for its educators. Because of the extensive nature of the professional

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development, the system is phasing the program in across the system, administrators said.

“We’re thinking big, but we’re starting small,” Winn said.

Communication between educators and parents is key to successfully implementing the program said White Plains Middle School Principal Courtney Wilburn, who oversaw the implementation of BYOD at her school.

“If you go ahead and let everybody know what we’re going to do, it really cuts down the questions,” Williams said.

Keying students in

In class, students at White Plains Middle use devices to do research on the Internet, complete homework, email teachers and give real-time responses in the classroom.

The privilege of having the devices is balanced with daily discussions about how to use technology responsibly. Additionally, the school system has a disciplinary policy that states the devices can be taken from students if they use them improperly, administrators said.

When the program began last year, administrators said they expected to have several of those discipline problems. But, they said, they have not had many problems.

Part of the reason educators say disciplinary calls are down at White Plains Middle is because technology is increasing “student engagement.” That means students are more likely to pay attention in class because they’re interested in the technology.

“They’re getting to use the devices and they don’t want to lose that privilege,” Kelley said.

Educators say that, because of technology, teachers are able to reach some students who have, in the past, been unresponsive.

“There are a lot of kids who will never raise their hand, but they’ll text,” said Lisa Amerson, the system’s technology director. “It breaks down those walls.”

The devices are also being viewed as a school supply. Before Christmas, parents began calling teachers and administrators to find out which type of device they should purchase for their students.

Eighty-seven percent of students can bring some type of device to school. For those who can’t the system lends its own laptops.

To bridge the gap for some students, the system purchased 52 Apple iPads for children who are considered homeless.

Having the devices in the classroom also gives teachers a chance to teach students something the administrators called “digital citizenship.” The idea, they said, is that by using the technology under adult supervision, students will learn how to use the devices responsibly.

Administrators say it’s a task that parents can help with, too.

“They have a very important role in teaching our students to use these devices responsibly,” Winn said. “Parents have to be a part of that.”

The school system plans a series of community meeting to discuss the programs. Details of the meetings will be published at Calhoun County Schools’ website: <http://www.calhoun.k12.al.us>

Schools participating this semester:

- Ohatchee High
- White Plains High
- White Plains Middle
- Weaver Elementary

- Saks Elementary

Schools to be incorporated into the program later:

- Pleasant Valley High
- Weaver High
- Wellborn High
- Saks High
- Alexandria High
- Saks Middle
- Wellborn Elementary
- Ohatchee Elementary
- Pleasant Valley Elementary
- Alexandria Elementary

Staff writer Laura Johnson: 256-235-3544. On Twitter [@LJohnson_Star](#).