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Student iTeams fix tech troubles

By TESS NACELEWICZ, Portland Press Herald Writer

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As Maine's pioneering laptop initiative got under way in the state's middle schools two years ago, it quickly became clear that some of today's computer-savvy students knew more about using the portable computers than their teachers did.

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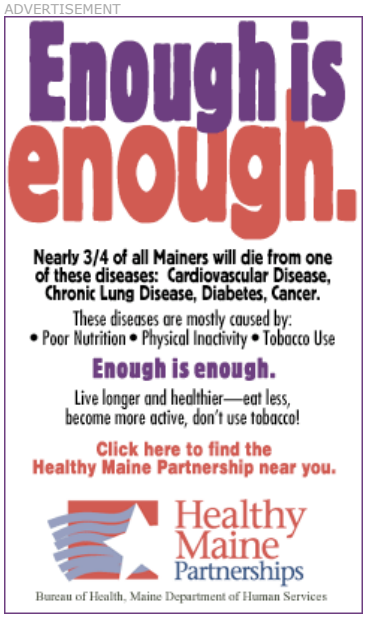

Now, with an Apple iBook computer in the hands of every one of the state's 34,000 seventh- and eighth-graders, educators have learned to take advantage of the knowledge and skills of that computer-literate generation. Schools are forming "iTeams," groups of students who have the technological ability to help other students - and sometimes even teachers - quickly resolve computer glitches, such as not being able to print a document, and get on with learning.

"The students are the first responders in the classroom," said Gary Lanoie, technology coordinator for Cape Elizabeth schools, who is credited with starting one of the first iTeams and coining the name.

The state considers iTeams such a successful idea that it is hosting a statewide conference today for students and educators who are on iTeams or want to learn about creating such teams in their schools. The First Annual Maine Learning Technology iTeam Conference is being held at Gorham Middle School. About 240 students and 70 educators from around the state plan to attend.

Educators and students say iTeams benefit everyone. Fellow students and teachers quickly get the assistance they need, and the iTeam members hone their computer knowledge and gain self-esteem being technological troubleshooters.

"Even the teachers ask you for help, and that feels good," said Davis Backer, 14, a member of the iTeam at Cape Elizabeth Middle School.

Kelly Arsenault, integration mentor for the state's laptop initiative and coordinator of today's conference, estimates there are already iTeams in about one-third of the nearly 240 public schools where the state has distributed laptops.

She said schools have various names for their iTeams. For example, Gorham Middle School has a Tech Team and Massabesic Junior High in Waterboro has a group called Massabesic's Wizards. Kelly said the state likes the iTeam name because the word suggests creativity, technology and sharing.

Lanoie, who will talk about Cape Elizabeth Middle School's iTeam at the conference along with students on the team, said he got

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the idea when the laptop initiative started in 2002.

Maine's $37 million laptop program, the brainchild of former Gov. Angus King, has gained national and international attention. Maine was the first in the nation to distribute computers to students statewide. Other states have given them to students in particular schools or counties.

Maine started by giving the laptops to all of its seventh-graders in the fall of 2002, then gave laptops to all its eighth-graders this year. The students don't own the computers, but use them in class. In some school districts they can take them home on loan, as they would a library book.

Lanoie is in charge of the computers not just for Cape Elizabeth Middle School, but also the high school and elementary school. At first it seemed a little daunting that each of the 160 seventh-graders would have his or her own laptop, he said.

"I was wondering how I could support 160 individuals in the classroom without any extra staff, and came up with the idea of putting together a tech team of students," Lanoie said. He called it the iTeam because the students were getting iBooks.

Alex Caron, 13, now an eighth-grader, has been a team member since last year, joining because he enjoys "fooling around" with computers. "I figured that I could help people because I knew stuff about computers," he said.

His classmate, Rebecca Simmons, 13, also joined last year. "I thought maybe I could help and it would be really cool," she said. "I have a computer at my house, and me and my dad were the only ones who knew how to work it. I had to show my sisters."

Beverly Bisbee, Cape Elizabeth Middle School's lead teacher for the laptop initiative, said the team now numbers about 50 seventh- and eighth-graders, and they are a big help. "If a student says, 'I'm not sure how to do this,' an iTeam member can raise their hands and say, 'I can help you.' "

Among tasks that iTeam members have tackled: helping fellow students access the wireless network, or aiding a teacher in connecting a laptop to a projector.

At Greely Junior High School in Cumberland, which has a small iTeam of about eight eighth-graders, the students helped a class of 200 seventh-graders set up their e-mail accounts on their laptops, said Michelle Dubey, laptop technology coordinator for the school. She said the work, which the students did in their free periods, would have taken her three weeks to complete alone. "With my iTeam, it took a week," she said.

In Cape Elizabeth, the iTeam also troubleshoots new software. Lanoie said it's a boon for him to be able to install some new software on the iTeam's computers and have them work out the bugs before he installs it on all the students' laptops.

Students on iTeams relish such technological challenges. "I've learned about half I know about computers from being on the iTeam," Caron said.

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