

Administrators find something powerful in their handheld PCs

By Faun S. Fishback

faun.fishback@education.ky.gov

The handheld PC has been a close companion for hundreds of Kentucky school administrators for several years. This device has revolutionized the way school leaders gather data about what is going on in their classrooms and schools. It has given administrators a quicker, better way to collect and manage the data they need to make decisions about teaching and learning in their schools.

This school year, a new program for the handheld devices is creating a buzz throughout the state's 176 school districts. The Web-based eWalk program offers users more flexibility in gathering school data. Users also have the ability to customize applications for specific school needs.

Once data is gathered, administrators can aggregate, analyze and chart data with the tap of the stylus or push of a button. That information can be shared in e-mails, PowerPoint presentations and hard-copy reports.

A little history

A little more than two years ago, grants from the Gates Foundation purchased handheld computers and provided training on the devices for more than 700 school and district administrators. Other administrators purchased their own handheld PCs and were trained to use the program.

The first-generation electronic "walkthrough" program was a big improvement over paper and pen. However, the more administrators used the first program, the more limitations they found.

Last year, the Kentucky Department of Education contracted with Media-X Systems to create a program for Kentucky educators that improved on the first walkthrough and offered the ability to customize the program to the needs of individual schools and districts. The eWalk gives users the flexibility for a wide variety of applications at both the school and district level.

The Professional Growth Branch of the department's Office of Leadership and School Improvement, conducts training on the eWalk program. The number of walkthrough observations is steadily increasing as more and more administrators learn to use the new program. From August 2005 to April 2006, more than 8,000 classroom observations have been conducted statewide using eWalk.

Administrators can receive free training on the eWalk program and use the service at no cost to their school or district. Educators who have not been trained on eWalk or would like

a refresher course on the new program can schedule a class by calling the Professional Development Branch at (502) 564-4201. Educators who would like access to eWalk can register for the program at www.education.ky.gov/web_collector/ewalk.htm. Participants do not have to have a handheld PC to participate in the three-hour training.

It's working in the field

Matt Thompson, principal at Deep Springs Elementary (Fayette County), began conducting classroom observations for more than 30 teachers using the handheld PC nearly two years ago. He finds eWalk much quicker and more user-friendly. "It allows me to capture a snapshot of classroom instruction much more quickly," he said. "I can e-mail the observation immediately to the teacher, which allows for quicker, richer feedback."

"These walkthroughs can be shared from one user to another, so it also increases the potential for collaboration between schools — for example, a high-performing school could share its walkthroughs with a lower-performing school," Thompson explained.

He also is interested in the possibilities eWalk offers for facilities management and other administrative duties. Thompson is creating an application that will allow him to note maintenance issues as he visits throughout the school. He can then e-mail a problem to the school's head custodian to have it corrected.

For years, administrators at Berea Independent Schools recorded classroom observations in triplicate on a paper form. Collating the data for more than 20 teachers was very labor-intensive, said Mike Hogg, principal at Berea Community Elementary.

He started using eWalk this school year and has found it much easier to document what's going on in the school. "You know what you're seeing in the classroom, you can get a lot of good information recorded quickly," he said. "Instead of using 'your gut feeling,' you have data to help you make more sound decisions."

Hogg also sees many applications for the eWalk. "Supporting instruction is the most important," he said. "However, it can be used in other aspects of school like with the technology folks, food services and custodial staff."

He also suggested that having the superintendent, district instructional supervisor and instructional technology supervisor use the eWalk and share their observations would help with school improvement. "The

more eyes, the more information," he said.

Michael Kessinger, assistant superintendent and chief information officer for Martin County Schools, conducts training for administrators in the district and makes certain the equipment and connections work properly. He also is an eWalk user. "As assistant superintendent, I've participated in the walkthrough in our schools and provided feedback through my observations back to the building principal and teachers," he said. "We have found that through a team effort, we can identify strengths and areas needing improvement in the instructional settings."

Eric Neff, principal at Two Rivers Middle School (Covington Independent), has been using the handheld PC for two years. He says he's able to complete more walkthrough observations now. In addition, he can use the device to check e-mails while he's away from his desk computer.

He shares walkthrough data with the school's 32 faculty members. "The instrument allows me to focus on individuals, teams and/or the whole school," Neff said. "I like being able to create graphs that show real numbers of data in regards to instructional practices that are taking place in all classrooms. The data identify specific practices that we need to focus on and implement more fully to meet individual student needs. The eWalk has allowed us to focus on specific areas that will impact student achievement."

Teachers at Mount Washington Middle School like the immediacy of getting feedback from an eWalk observation, said Principal Denise Allen. Although this is the first year she has used the program, she said, "I have a firm conviction that this tool is definitely an asset to a school's instructional leader."



Photo by Rick McCann

Shelli Wilson, principal at Cline Elementary (Campbell County) makes a notation on her handheld PC about a learning activity during a walkthrough observation. Campbell County administrators are among the heaviest users of the eWalk program to gather and analyze data for school improvement.

At the March faculty meeting, Allen made a presentation of the graphs she had compiled this year from eWalk classroom observations. She was able to point out weaknesses and strengths she had observed and recorded on her handheld PC.

"Several days later, a sixth-grade language arts teacher caught me in the hall," Allen said. "The teacher commented that after the faculty meeting she had reflected on what I had

said about the number of teacher-directed instructions that I was observing. She decided to incorporate more small group instruction in her class. The results had already indicated an improvement in student performance!"

For more information, contact the Professional Growth Branch at (502) 564-4201, or e-mail michael.vriesenga@education.ky.gov, john.fields@education.ky.gov.

Education e-mail addresses change

By mid-May, the e-mail addresses for most Kentucky teachers and administrators will have a different look. The Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Education Technology has been working for several months to upgrade the Kentucky Educational Technology System (KETS).

The upgrade for all districts is 80 percent complete. Work in the remaining districts will be completed this summer.

The upgrade improves speed, junk-mail management and virus protection for users. In addition, users have a more user-friendly access to Outlook Web Access, or Webmail, from any computer anywhere in the world.

The visible change for KETS users is in the configuration of the e-mail address. In districts where the upgrade has occurred, e-mail addresses now appear `firstname.lastname@district.`

`kyschools.us`.

Although the "old" e-mail addresses will be recognized through December 2006, school and district employees should begin updating stationery, business cards, Web sites and other items that communicate e-mail addresses, as well as personal contact lists and distribution lists that contain e-mail addresses from the Kentucky Department of Education, their schools or districts and other schools and districts.

Last fall, the department served as the pilot for the upgrade to allow time to resolve any problems with statewide installation. E-mail addresses for department personnel are configured `firstname.lastname@education.ky.gov`.

Kentucky's is the first education system in the nation to provide an e-mail upgrade of this magnitude.