

# **By the book? Not in today's tech-savvy schools**

## **Orlando's Edgewater High aims to lead the way in using the blogosphere to teach digital kids.**

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Ditched French class? Podcast the lecture. Forgot the algebra assignment? IM the teacher. Dog ate the homework? Blog it.

All Greek to you? Not to your kids. Welcome to school, 2006.

Edgewater High School in Orlando hopes to lead Central Florida in harnessing the blogosphere to help today's digital kids learn.

"We need to engage students, and to do that, we need to think like them," Principal Rob Anderson said.

Much of the wizardry -- podcasting, blogging, virtual tutoring -- was pioneered in universities, but it has started creeping into elementary and secondary schools across the country.

The move is spurred in part by the federal No Child Left Behind requirements to make all eighth-graders technologically literate by the end of 2006.

The rest is just common sense, Anderson said. He wants his school, home to a science, technology and computer magnet program, to be a "tech model" for the state.

Anderson said he briefly thought students were following the campus no-CD player rule this year. Then he realized they were listening instead to iPods -- pocket-sized devices used typically to download music.

"You just can't see them," he said. "I thought, I've got to make this work for us. We have to break some traditions at this point."

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, released last year by the Philadelphia-based Pew Charitable Trusts, 87 percent of teens 12 to 17 years old use the

Internet. Most have open-networked devices, such as laptop computers, personal digital assistants or cellular phones.

For Edgewater animation students Cam Nordin, 17, and Ryan Cordell, 18, life without electronic devices is unthinkable.

"Old people have record players," Nordin said. But today's teens have "this stuff," Cordell said.

Anderson's plans to make technology work for Edgewater students include new cybercafes, podcasting, virtual tutoring and blogging.

Edgewater's renovation plans include kiosks in its two cafeterias where students can log on to check assignments or finish work.

In the meantime, Anderson makes the daily announcement available for download to iPods and functionally similar MP3 players. Within the next few months, about a dozen teachers will begin "podcasting" lectures.

Cordell plans to use podcasts to help with his French accent. So will sophomore Demetrius Baldwin, especially if sniffles keep him home.

"If I was sick, I'd be all over that computer," he said.

Edgewater instructors already have begun using InterWrite SchoolPads, wireless keyboards that let them teach from anywhere in the classroom. They can type or write on the boards, or access software and the Internet from them.

They also can pass the board to students, who can contribute from their seats. The results are displayed on a screen in the classroom -- no more overhead projectors.

During the next few months, teachers will take the pads home to hold "virtual tutoring" sessions so students at any computer can get real-time answers. Connected by the school's network, they'll converse by instant message or e-mail.

The pads let teachers reach through cyberspace to, perhaps, an algebra student who might need help wading through equations.

Teacher Scott Bowen uses these techniques in his classes. He kicked off a blog -- or Web log, an online journaling tool -- for his pre-Advanced Placement ninth-graders this semester with profound questions about existentialism. The answers "astounded" him, he said.

One otherwise silent boy "blossomed" when he wrote a paragraph on his perception of reality, Bowen said.

Blossoming through blogs isn't unusual, experts say.

James Welsh, a project manager for the Florida Center for Instructional Technology at the University of South Florida in Tampa, said teachers know students write better when they have an audience. With the Web, they have the potential to reach not only classmates but millions of peers.

"One thing technology does is level the playing field," he added.

It can happen locally with wallflowers in classrooms, Welsh said, or on a larger scale. Students who might not have Internet access at home can find new opportunities if a school plans properly, he said.

Edgewater isn't alone in its quest for cybersuperiority, educators said. But Edgewater is a giant leap ahead of most of its peers in Orange and neighboring districts. Most are slowly testing today's technological tools.

Osceola County, for example, hopes to entice low-performing high-schoolers to work smarter this year with Palm hand-held organizers. Students at ninth-grade center Zenith School and New Dimensions High School, both in Kissimmee, use them to organize assignments and create them.

"Technology has to be in students' hands all day every day, or our students will be far behind," said Rosalind Riser, Osceola's director of media and instructional technology. At less than \$200 apiece, Palms are a way for the cash-strapped district to take baby steps toward meeting that goal, she said.

In Lake County, raising your hand in class could become obsolete. The district is buying most of its schools "rapid response devices," or "clickers." The infrared devices chart and beam students' answers -- both for "yes and no" and multiple-choice questions -- to a screen in the room.

Teachers can see immediately who knows the answers and who doesn't, said Al Larry, principal of Eustis Middle, which piloted the program.

Welsh cautioned that educators shouldn't use technology for technology's sake -- plenty of schools still use rote drills on the computer.

"If they're just clicking, you're not really teaching them," he said.

Larry is confident his program works.

"I wouldn't give two flips and a penny why," he said. Technology is the future, he said, and his classes aren't going back.

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