

The Faith Community as a Delivery System for Technology

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Introduction

The mission of the rural school district of Madison County, Florida technology project was to increase the technology utilization, knowledge and skills of teachers, students, and community members. Through the technology grant monies, operation hardware (PC's, scanners, printers) was purchased for school classrooms and community learning centers and a bundled set of software (Front Page, Encarta "98, MS Office SBE) was placed in each of the project computers. Teachers from four schools with high free and reduced lunch rates participated in a training program that required participation in four day-long Saturday sessions. Training facilitators from Florida State University provided both distance and on-site instruction. Instructional activities focused upon improved computer utilization as an instructional tool, a knowledge tool, a management tool, and as a communications tool. Further, three community technology centers were established in various county locations including the Greenville School Community Center. Another center was established in a community library, and the third in a church. After appropriate training, volunteers and parents representing various churches, civic organizations, and school groups coordinated the after-school and evening technology center activities. Measurement and evaluative activities were conducted at various intervals by an outside evaluator. This article specifically addresses the development of the community technology program in Greenville, Florida.

The Greenville School Community Center

Madison County is a sparsely populated, rural county with 19,035 residents living in 710 square miles, resulting in a population density of 28 residents per square mile. Madison, Greenville, Lee, and Pinetta are the incorporated county areas. The median household income is \$18,153, compared to Florida's state average of \$24,498. African-Americans account for over two-

thirds of the county population and 40% live at the poverty level (1997 Madison County Profile). According to the 1990 Census data, the Town of Greenville had a population of 950 persons and 223 families. The "Other Greenville Tracts" had a population of 2,453 individuals and 666 families. For both tracts, there were a total of 1,602 (47%) males and 1,801 (53%) females. The Town of Greenville was composed of 285 Whites and 656 African-Americans (Census Data, 1990), whereas the Greenville Tract was composed of 1,382 Whites and 1,071 African-Americans. According to School District 1998 records, 276 youth attend Greenville Primary and 209 youth attend Greenville Middle School.

Initially, the Madison County Public Library, Greenville Branch, had agreed to provide space for the community component of the technology program. Using the library became impossible due to construction and limited space at the proposed site. Instead, the school district and the local health department, who co-shared the responsibility for community center activities, cooperatively encouraged grant officials to place the computer lab at the community center located on property at the middle school. By so doing, the same computer center would be able to serve both as a teacher-training center as well as a community technology center. The center's central location at the middle school seemed the best alternative for providing convenient access for students and parents in the area.

A public relations campaign was designed to attract community leaders who could serve as computer mentors. Various community leaders (mayor, councilmen, county commissioners, city manager, senior citizen board members, and principals) were contacted in an effort to develop project support. Spiritual influences have been present within our health and educational systems for most of our nation's history. The faith community of this rural district is a vital partner for any area reform. Several individuals suggested that the best way to proceed was to hold initial community meeting at a local church. First, the support of the church ministers had to be gained. The

project director met with each of the ministers or their representatives individually to inform them of the district's proposed plans, the availability of resources, and to gain their support. A church-community meeting was planned by a focus group consisting of the project director, project evaluator, trainers, school principal, a county school administrator, and several community members. The church/community meeting consisted of an opening prayer and statement by the host minister, self-introductions of those in attendance, and a trusted community member sharing the project purposes and potential values for the community. After discussions concerning project activities, meeting attendees indicated strong interest. The meeting participants' personal reactions were of excitement – this was the first time that a major activity had come to the smaller community instead of the county's largest community. However, each of the church representatives wanted to gain full support from their church ministers and membership prior to committing to program participation. This project would not succeed in helping the youth and their families without the involvement of the faith community. Three churches decided that their membership would volunteer to monitor activities at the community centers one Tuesday night per month. The Parent Teacher Organization volunteered to facilitate community activities at the computer lab the other Tuesday evenings. A responsible parent who lived near the school was identified and agreed to accept responsibility for keeping community center keys and maintaining security.

A series of computer training sessions were held for the interested community volunteers. Training activities addressed the use of the computers including information related to computer maintenance and operation. Further, additional time was spent on using the word processing program, conducting and printing searches from the Internet. Volunteers expressed interest in locating home pages related to personal interests such as wrestling, hunting, cooking, or Florida facts. After contacting teachers, specific web sites were identified and "book marked" that could be used later to help youth with their various homework assignments, e-mail, or problem-solving games. Basic operational procedures were established, addressing such things as security, locating circuit breakers, restrooms, computer on/off processes, safe modes/restart procedures, or emergency phone contacts.

At the same time that volunteer training was occurring, youth and their family support units were encouraged to participate in community center

computer activities. A parental permission/participant "Sign-In-Sign-Out" form was co-developed by the project director and community volunteers for use. The permission form presented basic operational procedures and participant expectations. Among the pertinent data presented on the form included operational hours on Tuesdays from six until eight, expected youth behaviors, and reassurance that a minimum of two volunteers would be on site at all times.

The community computer center officially opened after the participants had completed three training sessions. Volunteer monitors were expected to welcome the students and their parents, assist participants with sign-in procedures and collect parent permission slips, assign computer work stations, make adjustments in time allocations depending upon the number of participants awaiting a computer, shutdown workstations at the proper time and lock unsecured areas. An average of twelve individuals participated in the initial sessions. In later sessions, youth also had an opportunity to participate with mentors in non-computer games, chess, or paper/pencil problem-solving activities as they waited for an available workstation. In conducting an informal survey, the evaluators found that most participants were pleased that they had this new opportunity.

A year after the initial program started, the churches and PTO are continuing the Tuesday evening program. The school technology center continues to be well-attended by students, parents and community members. Present plans call for the inclusion of specific homework assignments on teachers' web pages, the development of life skills computer-based learning activities and reinforced problem-solving games. Recently, parents have been observed using the computers to perform job searches, as well as emailing biblical quotations and stories of faith and hope to friends and family. The computer lab continues to serve, not only as a community learning center after regular school hours, but also as the central technology laboratory during school and as a primary technology training site for staff development with teachers. This technology project offered a new vision of community-care/cure for the mind, body, and heart-which pervades this rural area today.

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