



PHILADELPHIA SPENDS \$63 MILLION TO BUILD 'SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE'

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A new experimental high school in Philadelphia, referred to as "the school of the future," is using state-of-the art technologies to train tomorrow's scientists, mathematicians and problem-solvers.

The "school of the future" opened this year in west Philadelphia in a neighborhood with a high crime rate.

Built with technologies created by Microsoft Corp., the school looks and functions very differently from the traditional American high school.

Individual laptops, unique learning tools

Instead of notebooks and textbooks, students are given laptops with high-speed Internet access in the classroom and at home.

Instead of a library filled with stacks of books, students use the Interactive Learning Center to access a wealth of information in addition to streaming media content created by experts.

"[The laptop is] actually the lifeline, I think, to learning," Principal or "Chief Learner" Shirley Grover told the NewsHour.

Each student also carries a smart card that, among other things, gives them access to digital lockers so there are no combinations to remember, or to forget.

"You can do everything faster. And if you do everything faster, that means you get more assignments. And the more assignments you do, the better your grade comes out," said 9th grader Littleton Hurst.

The card even tracks the calories students consume during lunch. Breakfast and dinner are served, too, before and after school, 9:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The classrooms don't have blackboards but electronic displays for Internet access, videos, and for connecting with other classrooms around the world.

Class schedule and locations change every day -- the information is posted online. And rooms are designed with mobile desks to foster teamwork and project-based learning.

Teachers view the technologies as tools to engage learners.

"The software is marvelous. It makes my job easier. But I think, if I were to put on a scale of 1 to 10, I think I might make it like a 4 for me, personally, because for me it's the human interaction with the students, and it does allow me to open up doors that most teachers don't get the opportunity to do," said teacher Kathy Lee.

Students help build a culture of success

Thousands of students wanted to go to the school, so the district set up a lottery. Only students who live in the west Philadelphia area were eligible to sign up. This year, 170 students were chosen from over 1,500 applications.

"I think everybody here is excited about it, everybody. And the students that have been offered the opportunity to go there has been excited, as well," said parent Eleanor Shockley.

Eighty-five percent of the Class of 2010, the school's first graduation class, came from low-income families and 12 percent have special needs.

Students say they can feel a difference in the school culture, which focuses on success.

"They want you to succeed, so they're like just, 'Go ahead. You can do it. You can do it.' ... They're determined for us to take another step higher," said first-year student Ryan Wheeler.

The school of the future is not cheap

Building such a school doesn't come cheap. The "school of the future" cost \$63 million to create.

Instead of writing a check, though, Microsoft donated millions of dollars in human capital -- people who shared their ideas and expertise with the school system.

"At the end of the day, the human resources is what we're seeking, and sometimes money can't buy high-quality human resources," said Paul Vallas, the head of the Philadelphia school district.

However, with all the fanfare there are some who don't think one new school for 750 students is the best use of resources for a school district of 200,000 kids.

"It's unlikely they can afford to do that with the other 40 or 50 schools that are in the school district," said Diane Jass Ketelhut, who teaches science education at Temple University in Philadelphia.

"What could we have done to raise the level for all students somewhat, as opposed to a lot for a small group of students?"

Vallas says the system plans to create 3,500 classrooms of the future over the next 18 months, eventually providing every public school student access to the same technology that kids in the school of the future enjoy, even if it's not in a new building.

-- *Compiled by Adela Maskova for NewsHour Extra*

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