

At Philly 'Future' School, Books Are So 20th Century

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October 16, 2006 - LINDA WERTHEIMER, host:

There's a new high school this fall in the poor neighborhood in Philadelphia - a new kind of high school designed to incorporate technology into virtually every aspect of the school's academic and social life. For starters, every student has a laptop computer. NPR's Phyllis Fletcher visited the school.

PHYLLIS FLETCHER: West Philadelphia is full of boarded up apartments and empty storefronts. In the middle of one residential neighborhood is a big, white experiment. Mary Cullinane helped build it. She's a project manager at Microsoft.

Ms. MARY CULLINANE (Project Manager at Microsoft): Basically we were trying to answer the question, what if. What if a company like Microsoft and an organization like the school district of Philadelphia, came together to build a school of the future, what would it look like?

Mr. LITTLETON HURST(ph) (High School Freshman): It looked like Bill Gates' house.

FLETCHER: Littleton Hurst is a freshman at the School of the Future.

Mr. HURST: Our cafeteria looks like a restaurant. Our gym looks like an NBA-sized basketball court.

FLETCHER: The classrooms look like corporate meeting rooms, with video projectors. And the coolest thing?
(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. HURST: No pencils. No paper. No books. None.

FLETCHER: Just laptops. Standard issue at the school.

Hurst goes by Mista. He's in the wide front hallway with his classmate, Soleil Widman. They're sitting at one of a half-dozen or so round tables, like you might find outside a café. Hurst leans into his laptop to show off photos he took for a blog assignment.

Mr. HURST: This is my neighborhood.

FLETCHER: Hurst lives across the street from the school.

Mr. HURST: That's our Chinese store that everybody be at. And across the street is Spiro's(ph). You get a cheese steak for like \$2 there.

FLETCHER: Hurst and his classmates will write about their neighborhood for the blog too.

The School of the Future teaches reading, writing, and arithmetic like any other school. The difference is how it's taught.

Ms. SHIRLEY GROVER (Principal, School of the Future, Philadelphia): Real life problems are what kids like. Adolescents want to be not in their seats, not listening to me or to you. They want to be active, taking life on.

FLETCHER: Shirley Grover is principal of the School of the Future. She says assignments like blogging aren't about bells and whistles. They're about finding news ways to teach fundamentals.

One question that comes up a lot: how does she know students in class aren't on their laptops goofing around?

Ms. GROVER: My question to you is how do your teachers make sure that when you are sitting in the classroom that you aren't goofing around, even though you didn't have a laptop? I think the issues remain the same.

FLETCHER: She says teachers here need to come up with assignments that will prepare kids for the future.

Ms. GROVER: In this case, the laptop - sure, it's an invitation to do other things - it's up to us to make sure that the work is meaningful and that it'll challenge them.

FLETCHER: The school district of Philadelphia built this school on the same budget it uses for other high schools. Microsoft donated time and expertise to plan the project.

The whole school is hooked up for Wi-Fi. Teachers can check on their students' attendance, and grades in other classes, at any time with just a few keystrokes. The school's physical structure is impressive too. The bathrooms have Italian marble they got on the cheap, and the lockers...

Ms. SOLEIL WIDMAN (Freshman Student): This is (unintelligible) locker.

FLETCHER: Hurst's classmate Soleil Widman shows off her smart card. It's a student ID with a chip inside. She holds it over a panel on the wall.

Ms. WIDMAN: And all you do is, like, you can go like this...

FLETCHER: She waves her ID over the panel.

Ms. WIDMAN: See how mine just popped open? And this is all that's in my locker. I have my mouse and my laptop, my lotion, a dictionary, a comb and a brush, which I needed today, my mp3 player, tapes...

FLETCHER: All that and some pencils and pens - which she doesn't need.