

Study Claims Poor Children Benefit a Lot From Learning to Use Telecommunications

By NewsBytes@clarinet.com

NEW YORK -- In studies funded in part by NYNEX and Merrill Lynch, researchers at the City University of New York have shown that at-risk students can benefit a lot from access to modem-equipped PCs.

The study was a three-year project by The CUNY Graduate School's Stanton-Heiskell Center for Public Policy in Telecommunications.

"The story of Project Tell is not about computers," insisted Helen Birenbaum, director of the Stanton/ Heiskell Center in a press statement. "It is about finding ways of leveling the technological playing field in ways that provide the greatest social and educational benefit to students."

The project, funded by a \$3.5 million grant from NYNEX, provided a group of sixth-grade students in New York City Public Schools, who had been identified as at-risk of dropping out, with access to computers and information systems both at home and at school while offering training and support throughout the process.

Students received computers and network information systems in their homes. All who successfully remained in the program were able to keep the computers. The project also provided support and training for teachers in their efforts to learn to use computers with telecommunications capacity and to integrate their use in the classroom. As a third component of the project, NYNEX's Voice Messaging service was introduced at PS 75 in Manhattan.

Birenbaum discussed the study with Newsbytes. "There have not been enough studies on kids who are academically at risk of failure. You find them in cities and the country. What we wanted to do was work with these students, who might not have graduated high school otherwise."

Birenbaum said the study used the New York Public Schools' definition of at-risk students: "reading levels between 25-50 percentile, a history of truancy, and moving a lot from one place to another. The students were selected at random from this pool. We also had a control group," she said, of at-risk students who didn't get the technology. "There isn't much known of how these students respond to electronic communities, and electronic learning.

"Many of these students were functionally illiterate, from homes that were functionally illiterate. They didn't read well or write well," she continued. "We had so much success that NYNEX extended the computers in the home funding. We place telecommunications in the homes of these students, and the student became the teacher of the others. We provided training for the student, and caretakers if they chose.

"With the students in the home, the goal was to motivate them to remain in school," and empower them. "We responded to the students, not the reverse. We initiated the program primarily through games we thought were educational, and chat. They'd talk to each other even if they didn't know each other -- they were the same age. The curriculum piece with those students was to tutor them in

areas where they were failing, and they got to keep the hardware if they remained in the program. The program wasn't curriculum-based -- it was supporting a desire to learn.

"The second part of the program, which NYNEX has just funded, allows us to have a seven-year study tutoring and mentoring students over the network. NYNEX has offered scholarship assistance into college. We're trying to get these students into college. Our program is now geared toward the curriculum, and we're bringing on teacher-tutors and mentors in the community. We think this is going to be a very interesting, innovative program."

Results Offer Hope

The results of the study should give new hope to inner-city school systems. "I don't think the school system is aware of what these students can achieve. We just need to find new ways to reach them. Most schools don't have telecommunications or teachers who know how to use it. We're not talking about computers. We're talking about networked learning communities."

In addition to the student study, there was a study of teachers. "We put the equipment into teachers' homes, trained them, and told them that when they were comfortable we'd put it in the classroom. We asked them to create curriculum that would support learning in their classrooms, in any area. That's been not quite as successful. None of the teachers wanted the computers out of their homes -- we had to buy clones for the classroom. Then we found that because most teachers had no experience with telecommunications, it takes more support from the system" to get results. "We're developing a new program based on that, using a Merrill Lynch \$100,000 planning grant. It's a professional development program. We want them to learn to use the computer as a tool, something the teacher can use so they can help kids learn."

Newsbytes asked about the impact of all this on the curriculum. "We're not going to rewrite the curriculum," she said. "What we're doing is helping teachers understand the concepts we want conveyed, through the curriculum. And we support them with this software, a resource that will help the teacher take the class through the learning experience. It encourages collaborative learning, with the teacher becoming the facilitator. It's not standing up in front of the classroom and talking." Of course, "We hope we can influence change in the curriculum" as teachers learn what they can do with the technology to change learning from an industrial model to a post-industrial model. The catch- phrase here is "out with the sage on the stage, in with the guide on the side."

Newsbytes asked Birenbaum about the center. "We're a public policy center. Part of our objective is educational change. We're not in the business of running programs. We create demonstration models from which we can step back. We target policy issues and try to influence policy-makers in school systems, government and funding agencies to realize there can be new ways to look at how learning can occur in our schools. You have to do these studies or you're not taken seriously -- if it's all anecdotal it won't influence. You have to do this well, then you can influence. It isn't obvious to the policy makers, or they'd be more responsive to allowing large urban school systems to buy the technology and do the programs. We have to collaborate with the private sector because the budget isn't there for the hardware. Once we convince the systems they need this, they'll use the budgets they have to make the purchase."

On funding technology, "They don't look at it as books, paper, and pencil yet. We're saying technology should be as integral as books, paper, pencil, and blackboards. And in the public school system it's the government that makes the budget."

Newsbytes asked about the impact of all this on efforts to make education more multicultural. "In history, social studies and geographies you can see different cultures, and ways of living. You can see how people can live among each other. There are programs where you can be networked to other kids, in Costa Rica and Moscow. It's very exciting. Then the school teaches them about these other students. If these kids can get experiences and understand experiences, they'll change."

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