

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Chicago Public Schools technology use falls below national average

Chicago public schools lag behind schools nationally in the availability and use of technology in the classroom, according to a report issued by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Scholars found that students in magnet high schools were the most likely to have access to computers and use technology regularly as part of instruction. But in many other schools, the number of computers was inadequate and teacher training too limited to help students benefit from the new teaching tools, according to “Educational Technology: Its Availability and Use in Chicago’s Public Schools,” written by researchers Holly Hart, Elaine Allensworth, Doug Lauen, and Robert Gladden.

Based on surveys of students and teachers administered in the spring of 2001, the study compared students’ and teachers’ observations with findings from a 1999 report by the National Center for Education Statistics. The Consortium study found that while 60 percent of the elementary school classrooms and 72 percent of the urban high school classrooms nationwide had access to the Internet in 1999, only a third of CPS teachers reported Internet access in their classrooms two years later. Three quarters of high school teachers nationally reported having a computer in the classroom, compared to only about half of CPS high school teachers.

Although it is easy to identify the reasons why Chicago lags behind other cities, “CPS students must be prepared to compete with students from small and more advantage districts,” the report stated. The study found that 17 percent of CPS students never use technology at all and 36 percent never have an assignment using technology in a core class.

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“It is difficult to see how these students in particular will succeed in higher education and in an increasingly computerized economy without some level of school-based computer literacy,” the report noted. When technology is used, the report stated, it is often for Internet searches or word processing, tasks that don’t expose students to the full potential of computers and the Internet.

Overall, however, inequities along the lines of the digital divide that are found nationally were not present in CPS schools. “Differences in school availability and use are not strongly related to the racial composition or family income levels of students in the school,” the report stated.

The report noted that a greater availability of computers could help the system boost its use of technology. “Small improvements in computer availability are associated with substantial increases in student use, especially in schools with limited access,” the report said. However, researchers also show that providing hardware alone is not sufficient for good technology integration. A combination of assistance, including in-school technical support, and ongoing teacher training and mentoring are also necessary. Critical to obtaining such assistance is vigorous leadership committed to this goal.

Despite the low level of use across the system, report authors noted that some CPS schools are using technology in innovative and engaging ways that integrate knowledge and expand students’ capacity to learn. Demonstrations and simulations can make abstract concepts tangible, the report pointed out. “Computers provide immediate feedback on tasks and engage students in new ways of learning. Email and electronic bulletin boards facilitate communication among teachers, students, and parents.”

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