

20 schools to receive laptops

Rounds' pilot program criticized by candidates

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More than 5,000 students in 20 school districts in South Dakota will receive laptop computers in the pilot phase of a program Gov. Mike Rounds calls "Classroom Connection."

The program's ultimate goal is to put a laptop computer in the hands of every high school student in the state.

"Young people should feel comfortable with technology," Round said as he made public the names of participating schools during an appearance in Mitchell on Tuesday. "One reason we wanted laptops is because this is something kids can take home."

Critics - including two Democrats running for governor - said project will be too expensive for most schools.

Rounds said the state has \$4.2 million available for the pilot project. It's money Citibank donated for technology projects after a lawsuit over unclaimed property in 1999.

The governor first talked of the program late last year, proposing a \$39 million program, of which school districts would pay two-thirds of the cost. Some legislators, and several school officials, were skeptical of the plan. Rounds and Education Secretary Rick Melmer then said the plan was to phase in the program with a pilot project of perhaps 4,000 to 5,000 students.

Rounds said 30 schools applied to be pilot sites and 20 were chosen. The largest district, Watertown, has 1,275 students participating. The smallest, Bonesteel-Fairfax, has 43.

The governor said he believes the pilot project will be successful enough that the state will be able to go to the 2007 Legislature and "ask them to put additional resources in for the second and third year."

Choices of pilot sites were based on a district's ability to show a funding source, to have a plan for ongoing teacher training and to show a commitment of staff, board and community to the project, Rounds said.

Wade Pogany of the state Education Department said it's impossible to tell in advance exactly how much the pilot program will cost each district. It depends on the number of students, whether changes must be made in the school's wireless network and what level of training will be required for teachers, he said.

Laptop technology should improve students' skills in critical thinking and problem solving; research, writing and communicating, and technology literacy, Melmer said.

In an interview Tuesday, the governor said his biggest concern about the program isn't whether students will care for the laptops but "getting teachers up to speed."

Training teachers to use laptop technology effectively in the classroom will be a key to success of the initiative, Rounds said.

Both candidates for the Democratic nomination for governor criticized the initiative as show over substance.

Dennis Wiese of Flandreau called it "a smokescreen for a failed policy. It's a way to avoid talking about how to fund education in a meaningful way."

Jack Billion of Sioux Falls said laptops can be an effective tool in education, but only if local school districts decide that it is a priority.

"I don't think this is a successful thing because I don't think he has sold educators on it," Billion said. "If you can afford them, they're a popular tool. But schools need money for programs and teacher pay. You're forcing them to pay two-thirds of the cost of a state program."

The Pierre School District, where one of Rounds' sons is a high school student, decided against participating in the program.

"That tells you your story," Wiese said. "It's not a priority there."

In an interview Tuesday, Rounds said he was disappointed that the Pierre school didn't join the first year of the program.

"Sure, we were," he said. "Naturally I'd like my son to have a laptop like other students in South Dakota."

But he also said he understands the reluctance of some districts to join the program in the first year. "We didn't want it in communities where there was uneasiness about it," he said.

Pierre Superintendent John Pedersen said he hopes his school is among those "who come in on the second wave."

Timing and staff training were key issues, he said.

"I believe laptops are the future of education, and it will be part of the program in Pierre. It's just a question of when," Pedersen said.

Having the program announced in May, trying to train teachers and other staff through the summer "and having laptops in the kids' hands in the fall just was an issue," he said.

Districts will pay \$1,207 per laptop, information from Round's office said. Rounds said Gateway is providing convertible notebooks at discounted prices.

The state Education Department and Dakota State University will cooperate on the teacher-training program. The state Bureau of Information and Telecommunications will be involved in technical advice and support for the pilot sites.

Initial training for school district technology coordinators is scheduled for June at DSU. Teacher training is planned in July, with a final session for all participants in August.

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