

School District

On-line testing offers students, teachers immediate feedback for improving educational efforts

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Students at Harbor Springs Public School have not only benefitted from brand new school facilities in recent years, they have also enjoyed the benefits of new technology. In this occasional series, we look at the impact of technology on teaching and learning here in Harbor Springs.*

By Kate Bassett
HARBOR LIGHT NEWSPAPER

Mention standardized testing and most educators will groan and utter phrases like "waste of instructional time" and "frustrating delays in results." So, it came as a surprise when two Harbor Springs principals gushed about Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), a new testing measure used in this district.

"This is absolutely phenomenal when it comes to testing. We are so excited about the educational opportunities that will stem from using this test. The technology is incredible," said high school principal Susan Jacobs.

NWEA, a non-profit organization working alongside member school districts to create a culture that "values and uses data to improve instruction and student learning," represents the newest generation of academic measuring sticks, and takes full advantage of technological advancements. Tests are taken on the computer, and unlike familiar testing methods like the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), NWEA tests are scored "the second the kids push submit," Jacobs said.

The testing costs the district some \$10,000 annually, said superintendent David Larson, and replaces the Metro Test, a nationally standardized test the district had used for years.

"All of the testing is done on-line, so it utilizes the immediacy the Internet can provide. It also has a good system of checks and balances, and we are notified immediately if there is a discrepancy. For example, if 81 students took the test and only 80 results are filed, they pinpoint it right away. Everything is done on the computer and it makes the

wait time next to nothing for our results," he said.

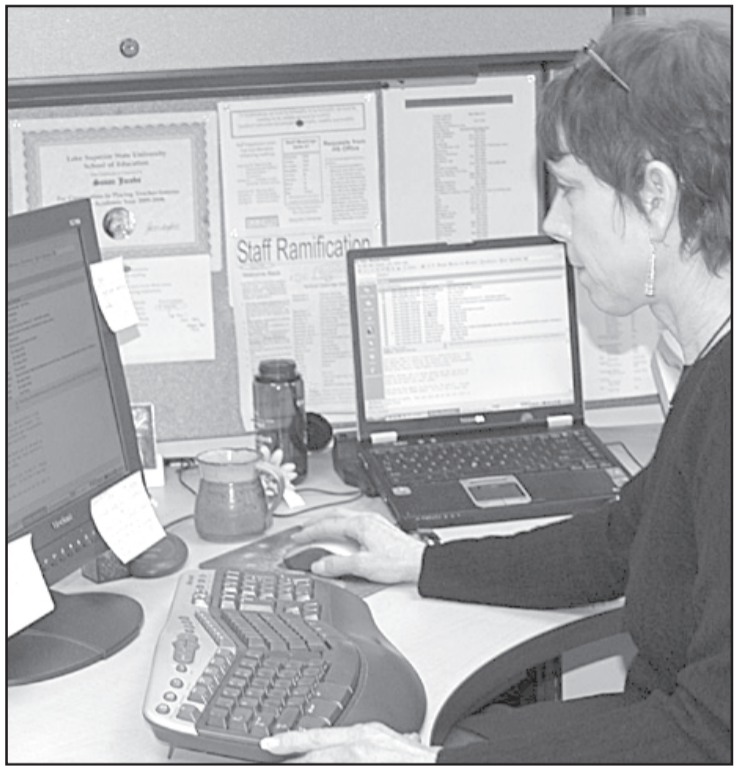
"We have the results back within 24 hours of our students taking the test," Jacobs noted. "Our teachers can then analyze the data immediately. For the first time, our staff has the chance to really look at results that plot out every child's knowledge base. We know the 'ready to learn' point of each student, and can tailor our instruction to meet them right where they are. It gives us the opportunity to diversify teaching immediately."

Middle school principal, Wil Cwikiel, agreed. His students also recently completed the testing, which covered Language Arts, as well as math and science.

"NWEA, to me, provides us with two main benefits. The first is the immediate feedback. We are able to look at results right away. It allows teachers to make changes in classroom instruction literally the next day, unlike the MEAP test, which we see results from three or four months after the test is taken. This test provides information in a time frame that allows us to make changes in classroom instruction that are really useful," he said.

The second benefit of the new test, Cwikiel said, is the fact that it is broken into "strands," which on a Language Arts test means subjects like reading are broken into everything from "word recognition" to "reading comprehension."

"Those strands allow us to really understand skill sets of students. The way the data is laid out is really beneficial," he said. "Overall, this is a huge advancement in standardized testing. It truly allows us to assess every student—which is supposed to be the goal of testing—and it also provides us with great data to start looking



Above: Harbor Springs High School principal Susan Jacobs discusses the benefits of the district's new standardized testing from Northwest Evaluation Association. The test utilizes the instant nature of the Internet to score, file, and return student test results within 24 hours. (Harbor Light photo by Kate Bassett)

at our curriculum across the board."

The new technology further pushes educators like Jacobs and Cwikiel to question why tests like the MEAP, Michigan's barometer for school achievement, are still in use, at least in their current format.

"Some states are abandoning their own tests and only using NWEA," Cwikiel said. "It is happening, just not in Michigan, at least not right now."

While the new MEAP is still in its infancy—it was revamped to meet No Child Left Behind Requirements just two years ago—Larson said with the exception of the writing portion, he does anticipate eventually all standardized testing will move in the direction of NWEA.

"This method is so efficient and so much less cumbersome, because it is handled entirely on-line. Within the test itself then, they are able to get much more detailed in each area; it really allows us to mark a student's progress and adjust our classrooms and our curriculum," Larson said.

He was quick to point out that while the technology may make testing easier, it will still likely be a while before it becomes the norm.

"We are fortunate that because of our bond issue, we are able to have the number of computer labs that we do. We can have whole classes go in and take an on-line test in an efficient way. Unfortunately, there are some schools who just don't have that kind of technological infrastructure. Even if the MEAP could go on-line tomorrow, I'm not sure how many districts could take advantage of that option," Larson said.

Still, Jacobs said, having that opportunity is something that could—and eventually will—benefit all schools.

"When you can get a picture of where each child is on the continuum of learning immediately, it's amazing," she said. "Without it, teachers can be half-way through the year before they can dial in each student's needs. Now, within a week, they can diversify their lesson plans to meet the class where it is, and in a time when more and more mandates have us looking at students as a group as opposed to individuals, that is an incredible gift. It is what we are supposed to gain for testing, because it really is about providing better educations, not just making the grade."

Harbor Springs High School and Middle School teachers have already met and worked on curricular issues for the

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Green day care, care facility to be explored

"There is a senior citizens residence in Traverse City, Pavilions, that currently operates as a multi-generational facility, and that's what we are hoping to model," Boughner said.

"I came from working at Pavilions, which has a very large day care center. I know

architect to begin a plan," she said.

Bailey said there is still some ground work that will need to be laid before the project proceeds. That includes checking in with the City of Harbor Springs. The land the care facility is on was originally owned by the City, and in its

them, and that at some point in their lives, one of their family members will be able to utilize services here. We are also going to be working with our foundation to ensure that we have a step program for lower income families, and we will be looking at ways to maximize our programs, like providing

School using new electronic testing technology

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 d Co.-CONTINUED from page 3. so this is still very new to us," assessment.
 enter English Language Arts portion Cwikel said. Students will be "The sophisticated nature of s
 y of of the NWEA test, and the tested again in the spring, and the test, combined with the help students be successful in
 e of energy the workday created that data will help track continuum of learning frame-their educations. For us, that's
 Policy was exciting, Cwikel said. progress as well as allow work, provides teachers with the best result we can ask for."
 ll be "To be able to sit down and teachers to determine if their
 com look at the data, then at our instructional changes worked.
 health courses, and see areas where For Cwikel, however, one
 drives a district we are not as test was enough to show that
 artic strong as we might like, was so NWEA-- and the technology it
 d. helpful to our teachers. Uses-- is the future of student
 p.m. were able to talk about what
 5 p.m. we are going to do to improve, igan and then do it," he said.
 s to The two schools are meeting
 s wh again to discuss math this week.
 Shay elementary fifth grade, multi-age, and special education students will also take the NWEA. Their testing begins this week.
 "We have only had one test,

fantastic tools to help them be
 successful in their careers and
 help students be successful in
 their educations. For us, that's
 the best result we can ask for."

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