

Palm Springs Unified to put tablets into the hands of more students

Written by Brett Kelman *The Desert Sun*

Jun. 21, 2013 |

mydesert.com

CHROMEBOOKS, IPADS AND CLASSROOMS

Palm Springs Unified will add at least 1,000 new mobile devices — iPads and Chromebooks — to dozens of classrooms in the fall. Here is a breakdown of what schools will receive the devices:**Chromebooks:** These devices will be used to supplement a “bring your own device” pilot program that is being expanded into middle and high schools. The purchase also includes devices for teachers and eight days of district-led training. Cost: \$1 million of redevelopment funding
Desert Hot Springs High School: Eight to 10 classrooms
Palm Springs High School: Six classrooms
Cathedral City High School: Six to eight classrooms
Rancho Mirage High School: 12 to 16 classrooms
Painted Hills Middle School: Four to six classrooms
Raymond Cree Middle School: Four to six classrooms
Desert Springs Middle School: Four to six classrooms
Nellie Coffman Middle School: Two to six classrooms
James Workman Middle School: Two to six classrooms
iPads: Four hundred iPads will be issued to students in some of the third- fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms at Vista Del Monte, Cathedral City and Aqua Caliente elementary schools. This purchase also includes twenty iPads for teachers of these classrooms and training led by Apple. Cost: \$328,900 of federal funding

PALM SPRINGS — The Palm Springs Unified school district will introduce no less than 1,000 mobile computer devices into classrooms this fall, allowing students who once had to share computers to handle a technological tool of their own.

About 400 Apple iPads will be issued to some students at three elementary schools. Hundreds of Google Chromebooks will expand the “bring your own device” pilot program into the district’s middle and high schools. Some schools and classrooms also have pursued technology grants on their own.

“It’s going to be phenomenal,” said Lorraina Robison, a sixth- grade teacher at Painted Hills Middle School in Desert Hot Springs. On Wednesday, Robison gushed about how grant-funding would put Chromebooks in hands of all her students, many of whom come from low-income families.

“A lot of my students don’t have access to the Internet. When we started last year, they didn’t know how to do research on the Internet,” she said. “We started with an Internet treasure hunt, which I thought was going to take one period and it ended up taking three periods. So next year, I’m flipping my classroom. We are going to do everything we possibly can on the Internet.”

All three desert school districts share a long-term goal of issuing some form of mobile technological device to most or all of their students, but each district has chosen to tackle this expensive project in its own way.

At Palm Springs Unified, the new iPads and Chromebooks are part of a multistage plan to provide mobile devices to all students in third through 12th grade. This entire plan is estimated to cost as much as \$14 million, so the district is tackling it in phases, funding smaller technology projects as pockets of money become available.

The school board approved the first phase in February. The district used about \$329,000 of federal

funding to purchase iPads for some of the third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classes at Vista Del Monte, Cathedral City and Aqua Caliente elementary schools. The purchase also included iPads and training for about 20 teachers.

During a meeting June 11, the school board approved another phase — the expansion of a “bring your own device” pilot program. Under this program, students are encouraged to bring tablets or smart phones from home, and the district distributes supplemental devices to any students who can’t provide one of their own. The program has been expanded into 50 to 70 classrooms.

Palm Springs Unified estimates it will need to buy Chromebooks for at least 40 percent of the students in the pilot classrooms, said Mike Swize, assistant superintendent of educational services. However, until the district verifies how many students can to bring devices from home, that estimate is extremely “flexible,” Swize said.

A survey of families at the pilot schools has already begun, he said. The district plans to buy extra Chromebooks to ensure that no classroom in the pilot program falls short, Swize said.

“We might have some classrooms where 90 percent of students are using a school device, and we might have other classrooms where 90 percent of students are using a device they brought from home. And that number can fluctuate wildly from one day to the next,” Swize said.

The expanded pilot is estimated to cost \$1 million. The school board approved a plan to cover the cost with redevelopment funding. This price tag includes eight days of summer training for teachers in the pilot.

That training began Wednesday, when teachers from all over the district squeezed into student desks at James Workman Middle School.

Sixth-grade teacher Jessica Pack, one of three teachers who piloted the program last year, gave trainees a different mobile device, then challenged them to collaborate a mock assignment.

Although the “bring your own device” program keeps district costs low, it can also create a hodgepodge of technology in a single class. Classmates could end up using iPads, iPhones, Kindles, Chromebooks and Android products all at once, Pack said.

“I really spent the year finding device-agnostic tools, which could work on any type of device,” Pack said. “It really becomes more about the task than the app, or phone or the platform. That’s the purpose of this activity — to give them that experience of everybody using something different. We are all accomplishing the same thing, but in different ways.”

Palm Springs Unified is not the only district asking to students to bring devices from home.

The Desert Sands Unified school district launched a similar “bring your own device” program last year, although that district has not expanded their pilot as aggressively. Instead, many Desert Sands teachers have submitted Chromebook requests to DonorsChoose.org, a crowd-funding website that collects donations on behalf of needy classrooms. Some Desert Sands classrooms have received class-sets of Chromebooks, fully funded by donations.

The Coachella Valley Unified school district has taken a more ambitious, more expensive approach.

The district decided last school year to buy iPads for all 18,000 students using \$11.9 million in bond funding.

This across-the-board purchase prompted some criticism of district leaders, but Superintendent Darryl Adams insists the iPads will captivate students and help the district prepare sweeping curriculum changes.

“I know we are on the right track,” Adams said at a school board meeting Tuesday. “We are ahead of the game, actually. We are at the point now — yeah, there is a little concern and fear about it — but we are leaders. We are doers. We are innovators and creators. We are going to make this work.”

In the next few years, public schools across the nation are required to move to a new standardized curriculum — called Common Core. The Common Core curriculum requires districts to test their students through mobile devices, like iPads. Although many districts are not prepared for the mandate, Coachella Valley should have all the technology it needs.

Brett Kelman can be reached on the phone at (760) 778-4642, or via email at brett.kelman@