

Web keeps everyone in 'School Loop'

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It's now easier for students, their parents and teachers to stay in the "loop" with one another regarding class assignments, grades and progress reports. Alameda Unified School District has rolled out a pilot program this year to enhance communication in education aptly called "School Loop."

The Web-based program allows teachers to post grades, homework, attendance records and any other important information about the class or its students. The kids and their parents then may register for full access to the site, keeping tabs on performance on a daily basis.

A district teacher on special assignment, Diana Kenney, is responsible for implementing "School Loop" in five schools this year — Lincoln, Chipman and Will C. Wood middle schools, and Alameda and Encinal high schools. The district's plan is for all schools to have access to the program by 2009.

"I consider 'School Loop' to be a comprehensive communication portal for parents, students and teachers," said Kenney, who is also responsible for the program's on-site training. "It allows students to take an active role in their learning. It's a way for teachers to communicate about individual students and administrators to keep track of those targeted students they don't want to fall between the cracks."

Lincoln Middle School seventh grader Lennea "Lenni" Lawson, 12, said she was failing school last year and credits "School Loop" for her improved performance this year.

"My mom checks the site from work and will say 'Lenni, I'm not mad, but you need to complete this assignment' and I'm like 'yeah, OK.' She's more involved in my school work now," said Lawson, who doesn't have Internet access at home, but likes to log on to "School Loop" and check her grades whenever she gets the chance. "I've been doing a lot better, getting C's and B's instead of F's and D's."

Kenney, also a parent, said she realized a disconnection between the important players in a student's education because many teachers and parents are simply very busy. "School Loop" keeps those lines of communication open easily with just a few clicks of the mouse.

"It saves time on parent phone calls about grades. It definitely saves teachers time on progress reports and at report card time," said Lincoln Middle School Vice Principal Michael Hans. "The program is designed for a novice tech person's perspective, making use as easy as possible. All registered parents and students have to do is log on and everything pops up automatically for them. The school sends a nightly e-mail on new grades, assignments posted, everything — all they have to do is log on and it's all there for them."

Lincoln Middle School math teacher Lorna Williams agreed "School Loop" saves her time, but it also keeps her in check.

"Parents and kids have online access to the grades and if there's any doubt about details of a particular assignment. It allows parents to keep a closer eye on their kid's school work," said Williams, who is new to Lincoln this year. "They can also check their grades and tell me if I've made an error or mistake somewhere. I can then fix it really easily and quickly."

There are many applications to "School Loop" the schools have not yet tapped into, such as its "Digital Locker," which opens gateways for students to research, post on discussion boards and form academic groups.

"I don't think we're fully aware of the program's full potential yet," said Hans. "We are just two months into it and where we are now is nowhere near where we'll be with it in two years. It's really one of those tools you just gotta get your feet wet, get in there and play with it and it just gets easier and easier."

Teachers are not required to register for use of "School Loop" in their classes, but are strongly encouraged to do so. Hans said most of his staff has jumped on board.

"Everyone's excited about it. I've been here for four years and haven't seen this kind of participation," he added. "It's really the wave of the future. You gotta embrace it. That's my mindset. To resist it would be like putting your head in the sand."