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Teachers wary of high-tech distractions

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Technology has become an invaluable teaching tool in area school districts, but like teachers across the country, Lakelands teachers have to compete against the distractions technology provides.

From instant messaging to Web surfing to social networking sites, the distractions that can be found in one computer connected to the Internet are endless. Teachers must overcome all these things to take advantage of technology.

“If you write it off, you’re doing the kids a big disservice,” said Cynthia Hughes, District 50 instructional technology specialist.

To Hughes, the challenges of technology in the classroom far outweigh the potential hurdles, but she admits challenges do exist.

New software is attempting to make it easier for teachers to ensure students stay focused on academics while surfing the Internet and using other computer tools. Programs are now available that allow teachers to view student computer screens on their own in real time and monitor key strokes.

“Technology is really great for all these reasons, but now it’s harder to monitor students,” said Jenni Hilton, a marketing and public relations manager for NetSupport. NetSupport is one of many software companies that produces educational software.

Conversely, the technology also can allow teachers to be proactive in the learning process by individually addressing student concerns on their computer screens without ever having to leave their own.

“It’s complete management in that computer lab,” Hilton said.

Jennifer Madden, technology director at Ninety Six School District 52, said such software has been in use at Ninety Six High School for about a year, and it has proved an excellent teaching tool.

“It was something that we knew we would use,” she said.

Madden said teachers and students have been happy with the new tools. For instance, she said students are more willing to ask questions when they do not have to do so in front of the entire class. They can simply send the teacher an e-mail, or message within a program.

In the computer lab setting, the software is used mostly as a teaching aid, but in the library it is used more for monitoring student activity, Madden said.

That being said, no technology is 100 percent perfect.

“Kids are smart, and they are going to find ways to get around any program or filter you use,” Madden said.

That is where simple classroom management comes in, Hughes said.

“From the beginning of time, when you’ve had kids in a classroom, there have been distractions,” she said.

Hughes said it all came down to teachers being able to capture the interest of their students, something technology can help them do.

“It is a resource that brings to students a variety of things they wouldn’t otherwise have access to,” Hughes said.

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