

Web Links Teachers, Students, Parents

By Jennifer Wolcott Christian Science Monitor

If Cori Capik forgets to jot down a math assignment, she no longer squanders an evening calling classmates who also might be clueless. With a few clicks of her laptop mouse, the eighth-grader at Miami's Palmer Trinity School easily can track down that homework assignment or any others she might have missed. While she's at it, she can peek at her current grades, check the date of her next science quiz or ,download the middle school dance schedule.

Her mom, meanwhile, has all the same access. Several times each week, Cherri Capik takes full advantage of the Edline software that her daughter's school implemented about three years ago, simply by visiting Palmer Trinity's Web site and entering her password.

"This keeps me from asking every day about her assignments," she says. "Now we can bypass that conversation, and I can still be supportive."

Although students at Palmer Trinity, a private middle and high school, are largely from affluent families, they are -not necessarily part of an elite club. Every year, more schools across the United States, both public and private, are joining the online world with Web sites that post news about school events and also a parents and students, via confidential passwords, to access teacher comments, test results and grades.

As this phenomenon is still relatively new, statistics about how many schools are wired for parental access are hard to come by, says Don Blake from the U.S. Department of Education. Nevertheless, the National Center for Education Statistics did determine in 2002 that 99 percent of public schools have access to the Internet, 86 percent of those schools host a Web site, and 68 percent of those update the Web site at least once a month.

Interviews reveal generally positive reports about America's increasingly wired classrooms. Even teachers, for whom frequent updates about students' work means more record-keeping, are enthusiastic. For them, it also can mean less phone tag with parents, fewer surprises when it comes time for parent-teacher conferences or report cards, and the ability to deal faster with problems.

"This is a wonderful change," says Steve Laredo, a history teacher at Nantucket High School in Massachusetts. "It allows parents to really know what is going on and support their kids' learning. It also removes any doubt or conflict, since the students know their parents know what the deal is, so they're less likely to try and scam their parents."

Mrs. Capik puts it another way: "The only bad news is for kids. They can't make any more excuses."

For some families, Internet access to information makes it possible to monitor and more quickly correct behavior problems.

Maria Derife became concerned when she heard her granddaughter's grades were slipping. Although she lives in Rhode Island and the girl goes to school in Florida, Ms. Derife did some online sleuthing. Not only was she able to determine that her granddaughter was skipping classes regularly, but she even was able to learn exactly which classes were being cut on which days--information she quickly shared with the girl's parents, who put an end to the problem.

When students are out ill, such systems don't allow them much slack, as it's typically expected that those who have this kind of access will keep up with missed work.

Many wired schools also provide extra help with Web links to reference research sites or a teacher's email address.

The degree of involvement on the teachers' part varies with their interest and technological savvy; some opt to spend hours posting photos concerning homework, illustrations, maps, charts and Web links, and others just do the minimum expected of them, typically posting grades and comments every few weeks.