

The computer age has arrived at Acton schools

BY DOUG HARRISON
The Acton Tanner

Ten years ago, schools were hyping the arrival of the most versatile computer on the market — remember the Commodore 64?

Today, Acton schools are talking about integrating video technology on their computers, becoming pen pals with students in Australia via external networking and envisioning library books being taken off the shelf and put on CD-ROM.

The Tanner visited the town's three public schools, separate school and Acton High recently to get a grasp of computers in the '90s and what the future holds at these institutions.

At Robert Little, where everyone from Kindergarten to Grade 5 gets instruction on one of the 25 Macintosh, 22 Apple IIE or six IBM machines, the focus for the 1994-95 school year has shifted to video technology.

According to computer teachers Brian Speed and Andrew Kiser, the video component will allow students to record their learning

experiences, take a cut or animated sequence and incorporate it onto a screen.

"It will be good for the community and parents, who can keep a record of their child's work and have a visual record of what is happening at the school," says Kiser, a first-year teacher at Robert Little.

Internal-external networking is also 75 per cent complete. When finished, it will allow teachers to communicate with other classes and, in the future, other schools. Speed says Robert Little is currently negotiating with a school in Australia regarding pen-pals.

Bob Armstrong's ultimate goal at McKenzie-Smith, meanwhile, is for students to be using computers as easily as they do a pen.

"Kids today will learn faster than us," he says, "because they are used to learning new things. There are no limits to what they can do."

The computer teacher says the school is keen on keeping students familiar with changing technology. Recently the school offered a refresher course in keyboarding using the Almerna program.

McKenzie-Smith's 50 mostly Macintosh computers are used for anything from word processing and spreadsheets to drawing and paint applications.

According to M.Z. Bennett computer guru Kevin Waitson, you're not literate today unless you're computer literate.

M.Z. has 30 computers, with at least one in each classroom. Students — some as young as Grade



SCHOOL IN THE '90S: M.Z. Bennett teacher Kevin Waitson conducts a lesson on a Macintosh computer to Grade 4 students David McAnsh and Hayley Green, both 9. (Doug Harrison photo)

1 — can word process or work with HyperCard or HyperStudio programs, demonstrating problem solving and organizational skills.

"It's expected that these kids will leave here with basic language, math and problem solving skills," says Waitson, who's in his fourth year at M.Z. "But they will be computer literate as well."

"We don't have games on our computers, so when they are done their assigned class work they ask if they can work on the computer, not play on it. It's a whole different attitude."

Waitson says the school's long-

term goal is to have enough computers for a lab, along with maintaining one terminal in each classroom.

St. Joseph's Separate School, on the other hand, has its computer lab equipped with 14 ICON and IBM computers, but is now working on its ultimate goal — a computer in each class.

Classes at the school are booked for sessions in the lab a minimum of twice a week.

Students work on programs reinforce basic computer skills, word processing, keyboarding, graphics, multimedia, logo program-

ming, database, spreadsheets and telecommunications.

"Computers will help every student in some form," remarks Catherine Verlingo, chair of strategic planning for computers at St. Joe's. "They're a wonderful way to produce work and it gives the students instant feedback."

Over at Acton High, the plan over the next few years is to rewire their current system, which consists of 90 ICON and IBM computers, and tie into the Halton Board's system.

"The Board's plan is to have a computer for every six students," says Dave Sale, associate head of computers. "We're getting close to that, though a number of our machines (namely the ICONS) are outdated."

Some AHS students are currently working with a United Nations simulation program for debating issues, while creative writing students are in contact with Canadian authors via computer and submitting work to be copy edited and critiqued.

"Students are seeing computers as a tool for their courses rather than an object to be studied in itself," Sale sums up. "I expect quite a change in computers shortly."

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