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North Schuylkill honored for technology planning

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FOUNTAIN SPRINGS – Planning today for tomorrow’s innovations is not an easy thing to do, but it’s a task the North Schuylkill School District has taken on for the benefit of its students and faculty so well that the school district has received national recognition.

According to Paul Caputo, the district’s supervisor of curriculum, technology and federal programs, North Schuylkill’s formula for technology planning recently received national attention when it was named a Speak Up 100 School by Project Tomorrow, formerly NetDay, (www.tomorrow.org), a national education nonprofit group dedicated to the innovative uses of math, science and technology in the nation’s K-12 classrooms.

Caputo said Speak Up 100 schools are a collection of top schools working to encourage and involve student, parent and teacher voices in education planning and decision making. These schools are selected for this national distinction from the 10,000 schools nationwide that have participated in the annual Speak Up surveys since 2003. There were 1,492 North Schuylkill students (71 percent) who participated in the survey during the 2006-07 school year.

“The Speak Up 100 schools offer powerful examples of the ways in which educators are using stakeholder input to drive new ideas and innovation in education and technology within their schools and districts. I am inspired and impressed by the multiple ways in which these educational institutions are leveraging student views in their planning process and improving the learning environment,” said Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow, in making the announcement of North Schuylkill’s top 100 placing.

When it comes to technical expertise, North Schuylkill students in the 21st century are not only more savvy when it comes to computers and other electronic media, they also learn differently than their counterparts in the last century, according to the NetDay survey.

“The data makes it clear that today’s students learn differently than ‘we’ did and that technology is a major force in their lives,” Caputo said.

The knowledge gained from the surveys provide valuable data to school district planners on how to most effectively address the needs of the students.

“We are presently drafting our six-year strategic plan,” Caputo said. “This will be submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Education in September. We are using our survey data to help formulate action plans regarding lesson plan development and district curricula. We are encouraging teachers to experiment with blogs, mp3 files and other innovative ways, including gaming, to enhance communication and deliver content to our students. The survey has shown these are communication tools and online resources commonly used by our students.”

North Schuylkill also used survey data in submitting its Classrooms for the Future grant application. Classrooms for the Future is an initiative sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to put interactive whiteboards, laptops and other technology into Pennsylvania’s high schools.

“The NetDay survey has shown these are tools wanted by our students and our data will be used to build our case for this funding,” Caputo said.

“The survey helped our board of education better understand our schools’ changing technology needs,” said school board director Edward Balkiewicz.

Some highlights from the NetDay survey are:

- 57 percent of North Schuylkill students in grades 6 to 12 maintain a MySpace account (or a similar site).
- 30 percent of students in grades 3 to 5 report communicating with someone they never met face-to-face.
- 22 percent of students in kindergarten through grade 2 and 51 percent of students in grades 3 to 5 report using cell phones on a weekly basis.
- “Allowing students to use cell phones (and instant messaging and e-mail)” was the most popular reply among students in grades 6 to 12 as being the one thing they would change if they were principal.

“As far as this information is concerned, we are looking at this as an opportunity and not as a problem,” Caputo said. “For example, we are taking the position that MySpace can help students develop HTML skills and communication skills, as well as help them gain a sense of identity and improved self-esteem.

“The survey results have shown that we need to incorporate lessons regarding responsible online conduct into grades 3 to 5 curricula,” he said. “We want to nurture the skills they are learning online however we understand we must take measures to ensure that our students are acting responsibly when online. We will also increase our efforts to educate

the students in grades 6 to 12, as well as the kindergarten through grade 12 parents and staff.”

In the future, the district is anticipating “providing laptops that they can take home” to be the top answer.

“We as a district need to revisit our cell phone policies. While we most likely will continue restrictions on their use during the school day, the survey has allowed us to realize this is a K-12 issue and not limited to our secondary students,” Caputo said.

NetDay survey results can be found on North Schuylkill’s Web site at www.northschuylkill.net/NS%20Web%20Page_files/page0001.htm.