THE DAILY CLIPS

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Schools may get $4.3M for 6,500 new computers

Plan for updating classroom technology under review

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Gone are the days of a teacher lecturing from a spot before the blackboard at the front of the room.

Instead, keyboards have replaced chalk and Pitt County Schools officials want up-to-date technology in every classroom.

The Pitt County Board of Education is considering a $4.3 million plan to purchase nearly 6,500 computers for schools across the district.

The facilities committee of the school board approved a plan to purchase new computers last week. The plan will go to the finance committee before going to the full board.

If the plan is approved, it would be the first time the school board has purchased computers on a district level. Schools have had to purchase computers with school operating budgets or from PTA fundraisers, pushing some schools ahead of others, said Superintendent Beverly Reep.

The plan, created by a technology task force that included administrators, experts from East Carolina University, Pitt County government officials, principals and the district’s technology director, will begin by getting all schools up to a standard, said Technology Director Jeff Smith.

Most principals support the idea, said W.H. Robinson Principal Cheryl Olmsted, who served on the technology task force.

Olmsted said access to new computers can affect a teacher’s instructional ability. She said technology is needed to engage students who are accustomed to fast moving television shows, using computers at home and playing video games.

"Technology is part of how we teach now. They are used to being given information fast and we have to keep up with them."

Cheryl Olmsted
W.H. Robinson principal

Smith said the first years of the plan, which would put 4,500 new computers in the county’s schools, would bring every school up to speed. After that, the number of computers in every school will increase.

There are more than 3,000 computers in the district operating on Windows 98, a program more than a decade old and some computers are using even older operating systems, Smith said.

Old computers are spread relatively equally throughout the district, Smith said. Under the proposal, the old computers will be gone by the third year.

Under the plan, every teacher will have a computer in the classroom. There would be two student computers in elementary classrooms and one in

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middle and high school classrooms. Every school would have 30 up-to-date computers in a lab available for class use, he said. The estimated price of $955 per computer would likely be lower if the district buys in bulk, Smith said.

He said they plan to phase out notebook computers, which cost more, and will focus on computer labs.

"The catalyst for this is that new schools create a system or a plan to bring everybody to a standard and we want to do that across the district," Reep said.

The plan includes two purchasing options. The first plan would purchase the bulk of needed computers in two years and cost more than $2 million per year.

The second plan would purchase the bulk of computers over three years and cost about $1.4 million per year.

After the initial update, when computers older than three years are replaced, the district would continue to fund computer purchases to keep computers at an age of less than three years across the entire district, Smith said.

New computers, with faster processors, can handle new software and programs available to educators, while old computers struggle to operate, Smith said.

Having a standard across the county would improve technology maintenance since computer technicians would spend less time fixing old computers and more time installing useful classroom software, Smith said.

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Speaker calls on youth

Grandson of former South African President Nelson Mandela, Cezda Dlamini, spoke to about 100 at ECU on Wednesday.

By Jimmy Ryals
The Daily Reflector

Young people have been missing from efforts to help developing countries, a grandson of former South African President Nelson Mandela said Wednesday.

Addressing more than 100 people, mostly students, at East Carolina University on Wednesday, Cezda Dlamini called for youth to take a bigger role in international development.

Dlamini encouraged the students to travel, particularly to Africa, study other cultures and devote themselves to a cause, at home or abroad. Asking how many students in his audience had passports — roughly half raised their hands — Dlamini gave a short geography lesson about his home country. It boasts more than 100 different ethnic groups practicing seven different major religions he said.

"Each one of (the groups) is so proud," said Dlamini, whose appearance was sponsored by the ECU Student Union. "They're so proud of who they are and where they came from."

Given Africa's diversity, Dlamini said it's disheartening to hear Americans talk about his home continent as though it's a monolith, sometimes referring to it as a single country. Africa's problems — hunger, high HIV/AIDS death rates, poor education for children and lack of water among them — are "not a one-size-fits-all situation," he said.

Dlamini, a prince of Swaziland, also talked at length about the United Nations Mil-

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Millennium Development Goals. Ratified in September 2000, the goals set a series of benchmarks for developing countries to reach by 2015. They range from increasing the number of children in school and eliminating poverty, to empowering women and building partnerships with the developed world.

In 2005, Dlamini launched the Ubuntu Institute for Young Social Entrepreneurs, a South African nonprofit agency. The institute sponsors student exchange trips to sub-Saharan Africa and works on four of the U.N. goals: getting more children into schools, fighting HIV/AIDS, eradicating poverty and achieving gender equity.

Much of the group's funding comes from the Ford Foundation, he said.

The group's name comes from a South African word for community, he said.

"It means ... you exist because you belong to a greater whole," he said. "And the way that our family structures are strong in Africa, it allows us to reach beyond just our individual interests."

Dlamini does have North Carolina connections. When he came to the United States for the first time in 2000, he lived in Greensboro for two months. Two of his sisters were attending Bennett College at the time. Dlamini later moved to Boston to attend Tufts University, then to New York for a career in public relations.

Aside from bringing him to the U.S., Dlamini's bloodline influenced his current work. Mandela and King Sobhuza II of Swaziland, his maternal and paternal grandparents, respectively, "played a very, very big role in my life," he said.

"I think the example that they have set and the strong legacy that they have left for us in Africa and really for around the world has been an inspiration to many of us who are young and have inherited a South Africa and a Swaziland that is still really in developmental phases," he said.

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Our Views

For the fund
Capital campaign crucial to ECU

As East Carolina University nears the midway point of its centennial celebration, the school is focused firmly on its service to the region and the state. Funding will be a crucial component of that mission, since more money will mean more scholarships, student services and additional faculty.

That makes the fund drive now under way for East Carolina critical to the university’s future. Success in this endeavor promises to position the school to expand its reach and continue work vital to eastern North Carolina.

For the first time in 15 years, East Carolina will seek to collect money for a capital fund, with a target set at $200 million. The school has already collected nearly $84 million in the private phase of the campaign, which began in 2004. The public phase will begin in March and continue to 2012, giving the school ample time to reach its goal.

The results of this fund drive are vital to the school’s mission. Its $90 million endowment lags far behind those of peer institutions in the state’s university system, and the capital campaign will enable East Carolina to greatly expand its work. The university intends the money to pay for scholarships, fund faculty positions and support the young men and women who choose East Carolina for their academic study.

The centennial celebration provides a unique opportunity to generate the funds needed for those noble goals. After all, East Carolina boasts thousands of alumni and friends with the ability to give back to this institution and help in its mission of service to eastern North Carolina. The campaign channels those intentions toward a common purpose.

So much of East Carolina’s success has been driven by its will to succeed and its independent spirit. This campaign is yet another example, one that must be fruitful for the school’s on-going work.
OUR VIEWS

Scary tactics

Authorities at Elizabeth City State University were careless in staging a drill with a mock gunman, raising needless fears.

The drill was designed to deal with an on-campus shooter, but it turned into a textbook case of how not to stage a mock disaster. Officials at Elizabeth City State University are fortunate that no one panicked or did something rash last Friday. The classroom-intruder exercise they put on was provocative, dangerous and ill-conceived, needlessly placing students and a professor in fear of their lives.

Sure, administrators at ECSU and other branches of the 16-campus University of North Carolina system are right to think about thwarting calamities. Real preparedness, however, requires sharper thinking than was on display at the Elizabeth City campus last week.

In particular, it was unacceptably risky to have an apparent gunman ("played" by a campus police officer who wielded a fake pistol) intrude on an unprepared foreign policy class. The man put the phony gun to assistant professor Jingbin Wang's back and lined the seven students up against a wall. He told a tale of desperation, and threatened mayhem.

"I was prepared to die at that moment," Wang told The N&O's Jerry Allegood. Reportedly, students were ready to jump out the windows. In a nearby classroom, students blocked a door with a table.

It sounds eerily similar to the deadly campus shootings at Virginia Tech last year and, just recently, at Northern Illinois University. So students in ECSU's Moore Hall were understandably alarmed.

Defending the exercise, campus administrators said that a few days beforehand they'd notified students, faculty and staff that "a drill" would take place. It doesn't appear that they gave any particulars, even to say that the drill involved a shooter scenario. On Friday, they issued a specific campus-wide alert, by e-mail and the like. Obviously it failed to forewarn Wang and his class.

Even if there were a benefit in carrying such a drill to the point of taking over a classroom — and that's doubtful — it was terminally careless not to make sure the class knew about it in advance. Did no one think what the effect might be on the "victims"?

Actually, one person interviewed for Allegood's story has thought about it. A spokesman for OpenCarry.org, a gun rights group, rightly noted that if there'd been an armed student in the class — North Carolina campuses are gun-free by law — he or she might have opened up on the intruder. Scratch one "gunman," along with who knows what collateral damage. (As if blind to just such a scenario, OpenCarry thinks an armed student body is a safe student body.)

At least Elizabeth City State dodged that bullet. In planning for disasters, authorities have to remember that the thinking cap goes on before the body armor.
BRIEFS

WAKE COUNTY

Engineering building going up at NCSU

RALEIGH — N.C. State University broke ground on a $103 million engineering building Wednesday, a 248,000-square-foot building slated to open in 2010.

When finished, the building will house the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering and the joint NCSU/UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Biomedical Engineering. It will include 80 laboratories, a wind tunnel and eight classrooms.

This building is the third phase in the plans to move NCSU's engineering program to Centennial Campus, south of Western Boulevard.

"The cutting-edge research conducted in this building will help bring more high-tech jobs to our state," Louis Martin-Vega, dean of the College of Engineering, said in a news release. "This facility will benefit our students, faculty and the people of North Carolina."
E.L. Doctorow to visit UNC

FROM STAFF REPORTS

CHAPEL HILL — Award-winning novelist E.L. Doctorow will give a free public lecture at 6:30 p.m. March 27 on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus.

Doctorow’s most recent novel, “The March,” had its genesis in the history “The March to the Sea and Beyond” by Joseph Glatthaar, a UNC-CH historian. The book is set during Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s Civil War march through Georgia and the Carolinas. “The March” won the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

The talk will take place in the auditorium of Hanes Art Center, on South Columbia Street near Franklin Street. Before Doctorow’s talk, there will be a book signing and sale at 5:30 p.m.

Limited parking is available on campus in the Swain, Morehead and Ramsey lots; commercial parking is available on Rosemary Street.

The school will co-lead a program with Jackson State University in Jackson, Miss., to study emergency preparedness. The Center of Excellence for Natural Disasters, Coast Infrastructure and Emergency Management will focus on preparing people and property for natural disasters.

UNC-Chapel Hill is in the congressional district of U.S. Rep. David Price, a Democrat and chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that funds the Department of Homeland Security.

By staff writers Benjamin Niolet, Ryan Teague Beckwith, Lynn Bonner and Barbara Barrett. David Ingram of The Charlotte Observer contributed to this report. ben.niolet@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-4521

UNC-CH designated

UNC-Chapel Hill has just been named a "Center of Excellence" by
Now, a question for Friday, Spangler, Bowies

Marcia Schulken

There's no mistaking what Dick Spangler thinks about the University of North Carolina at Charlotte kicking off a football program.

"I fear that football will damage the university's academic position," Spangler, the UNC system's president from 1986-97, told those gathered at a faculty meeting last week.

The reason? Money.

Public universities lean hard on private money to support their missions. There's only so much to go around: if sports fundraising sucks it up, academics suffer. Spangler and former UNC president Bill Friday made an unusual joint visit to campus last week to get that point across.

Those two are distinguished North Carolinians, and their perspective carries weight. Yet hearing that particular message from these particular men struck the wrong chord with many UNC supporters.

The reason? Money.

Decades of disparities

Here's how Amy Morris of Charlotte put it in an e-mail: "If they (Friday and Spangler) are truly concerned about the money UNCC has or does not have, then why were we number 16 and number 13 over the last two years in money allotted to us from the state decision makers (we are the 4th largest university in the system)?"

And this from Bill Dye, a 1991 graduate of UNCC from Unionville:

"... UNCC Charlotte has been short-changed by the state for decades (13th of 16 campuses in funding per student and last in square footage per student). A system-sponsored study even pointed this out a couple years ago. In theory, UNC Charlotte should at least be the fourth highest funded in the system, since it is one of five that grant doctoral degrees, which are more expensive to administer. This is in addition to being the fourth largest school in the system and the fastest growing."

Football aside, the statistics Morris and Dye cite are accurate. Longstanding disparities in state funding mean that some UNC campuses get more money than others in just about every respect. One of the campuses that fares the worst is UNCC. Others include UNC Wilmington, East Carolina University and Appalachian State, which have under every UNC system president ranked at the bottom of 16 campuses in state funding.

Morris and Dye -- and others like them -- have a question for former presidents Friday and Spangler: If you're so worried about academics, why the funding disparities?

A system problem

Some might dismiss the issue as parochial, but that's not the case. This is not a UNC problem. It's a UNC system problem. It began when there were two flagship universities -- UNC Chapel Hill and N.C. State -- a women's college (now UNC Greensboro) and the rest of the pack. As campuses such as UNCC and ECU have matured into research institutions and taken on broader missions, the university system has not altered its formula for funding to reflect what those missions really cost.

Funding disparities mean very specific things for students.

• Students at campuses such as UNCC pay a higher percentage of the cost of their education through tuition and fees than do students at campuses such as UNC Chapel Hill.
• Students attend larger classes and have fewer advisers to help them when they confront difficulties with college.

Those things directly affect the value a student gets in return for the money spent on an education at a UNC campus.

They also affect the value taxpayers get. Key priorities don't line up with money. Here's one example:

UNC system President Bowies and the UNC Board of Governors have firmly set training more teachers as the system's top goal, mirroring what most argue is the state's most urgent need. Four of the 16 campuses consistently produce more than half of the teaching graduates each year -- and improve those numbers annually. Yet those are the same four campuses that rank at the bottom of the system in state funding by almost every measure, from per student appropriation to building space per student.

Bowies inherited the issue of funding disparities, along with the duty to address it. So far, he's opted out. Which leads us to another question: When will it change?

Mary C.

Schulken