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Life in the tech lane

Chili, laptops and digital whiteboards — it's a strange grouping, but the Superior school district is hoping the mish-mash of technology and spicy cuisine will act as a lure.

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Chili, laptops and digital whiteboards — it's a strange grouping, but the Superior school district is hoping the mish-mash of technology and spicy cuisine will act as a lure.

The school district wades into new territory Thursday with a Tech-Fusion night at Cooper Elementary School. The event runs from 4-7 p.m. and is free to attend. All community members are welcome.

"It's a chance for them to come in and really see a day in the lives of what their kids are using and what's out there," said Sharon Correll, parent involvement coordinator at Cooper Elementary School.

The technology expo covers a wide range of topics, from online job searching to cyber-bullying. The event also caters to technology users of all ages, with a "Google for Grandma" demonstration as well as an e-reader presentation by Barnes and Noble. Presentation will also cover topics like online banking and digital photography. Organizers are even hoping to have a station set up to Skype with Mayor Bruce Hagen.

"In the community, we want schools to be seen as a place of education for all ages, not just for the kids that go there," said Terri Harings, a technology coach for the district. "So you'll see 'Google for Grandma,' and we're going to have childcare. We'll have police liaison providing something for the children and then also something for the parents for online safety."

Those who attend will also be eligible for prize drawings. Prizes range from backstage passes to the Guthrie Theatre to an Amazon Kindle e-reader.

The technology night then concludes with a chili cook-off, which attendees will be asked to judge.

Both mild and spicy chilies will be served, Harings said, and she also expects a heart-healthy variety and vegetarian blend to turn up among the pots of chili.

The community event is an offshoot of the Building Community Capacity through Broadband project, in which Superior is a partner.

Correll and Harings formed the idea for the Tech-Fusion night when brainstorming for a literacy night at Cooper. The discussion turned to technology, and soon the two women were lining up volunteers to give presentations and taking calls from local businesses and organizations offering to donate prizes.

"I've really had such a good response from the community and from the businesses in town," Correll said. "I'm just really excited to see the district and the businesses come together as one community. Even from the other schools, the parents and staff, it's just been wonderful."

The Tech-Fusion night has a dual purpose. For those looking to brush up on their technology skills, it provides an environment to learn with others. For those curious about the Superior school district's use of technology, it offers a first-hand look at some of the technology children use in class.

Among the series of 20-minute presentations planned for Thursday is a brief demonstration of the interactive whiteboards — ActivBoards — installed in many district classrooms.

Principal Brett Brodeen says Cooper Elementary School has about a dozen ActivBoards in the building. They're used at every grade level, including four-year-old kindergarten and in special education resource rooms.

"As I walk through the building, I see it used a ton of different ways," Brodeen said. "Sometimes it's the classroom teacher and they're doing instruction; other times its students up there explaining; and other times it's a center with students rotating through. So the sky's the limit on the ways the ActivBoard can be used."

Across the district, technology has become more and more common in the classroom.

Northern Lights Elementary School has a mobile ActivBoard, and both the middle school and high school have carts of laptops that can be used for everything from podcasting and creating digital stories online.

At Great Lakes Elementary School, kindergarten students use a learner response system called ActiVote for weekly assessments.

Each student is given a small, egg-shaped device used to vote on the answer to a question. Teachers receive instant feedback on how the class voted, and from there they can decide if more time should be dedicated to a lesson.

For older children, technology can transform a bland term paper into a project fit for the 21st century.

A class at Cooper Elementary School, for example, recently worked with library media specialist Dave Williams to create non-fiction, informational texts about the water cycle. The students used the elementary school's collection of five iPads to design and publish their texts, with some even going so far as to embed videos and photographs in their work.

"The big idea that I'm trying to get across with the iPad use is that it's an instructional tool, not a toy or a game," Brodeen said.

In every classroom, Brodeen said, technology is only used when it enhances learning.

For Correll and Harings, that point is one they hope will come across at Thursday's event.

"I've seen shy kids in the classroom who will speak up because of the technology," Correll said. "You get all the kids engaged in the learning."

"We hope it drives parents to say, 'Wow, we need that technology in every single classroom,'" Harings said. "It's creating for parents a view of what's going on with their child at school."