

Maine expanding school laptop program with Apple

March 13 2009, By DAVID SHARP , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Despite the economic turmoil, Maine is expanding its program to provide laptop computers to students.

Maine started its first-in-the-nation program by distributing more than 30,000 computers to each seventh- and eighth-grader in all of the state's public schools in 2002 and 2003. Now the goal is to provide a laptop to every public school student in grades 7-12 by the fall.

About 30 high schools already have laptops that they obtained outside the scope of the original program. But now all 120 of Maine's high schools, along with 241 middle schools, will have new laptops under the same program, at a cost of about \$242 per computer per year, said Education Commissioner Susan Gendron.

Education Department officials announced this week that they're negotiating a four-year lease with [Apple](#) Inc. for 100,000 [Apple MacBook](#) laptops.

Gov. John Baldacci said in his State of the State address Tuesday night that revamping the laptop computer program would turn it "into a powerful tool for the entire family."

"Every night when students in seventh through 12th grade bring those computers home, they'll connect the whole family to new opportunities and new resources," Baldacci said. The computers would come with software to connect to the state's career centers, he added.

The state hasn't yet completed its negotiations with Apple, but it's expected that the new lease will cost the state about \$25 million per year, said David Connerty-Marin, an Education Department spokesman.

An Apple spokesman in Cupertino, Calif., referred questions to the governor's office.

The state currently pays about \$13 million per year to provide [Apple laptops](#) to 37,000 middle-schoolers and about 10,000 middle school and [high school teachers](#) and administrators. The expansion would add 53,000 high schoolers to the program.

At a time when state lawmakers are facing a two-year [budget shortfall](#) of more than \$800 million, Baldacci pointed out that the program expansion is being done within existing resources and won't require additional taxes.

School administrators say the laptop program, aimed at eliminating the so-called "digital divide" between wealthy and poor students, has been a success. A study released in 2007 by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern Maine indicated writing scores improved after laptops were introduced.

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