

iPads take a place next to crayons in kindergarten

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Kindergartener Lucius Rice, 6, center, demonstrates to Kindergarten teachers Sue larue, left to right, Kelly McCarthy and Amy Himerl, how to uses an iPad as literacy teacher Maurie Dufour, right, looks on, Tuesday, April 12, 2011 in Auburn, Maine. The teachers were given iPads to try out in preparation for next year when nearly 300 kindergartners will be given their own iPad2s. (AP Photo/Joel Page)

Kindergarten classes are supplementing crayons, finger paints and flashcards with iPads, a development that excites supporters but that detractors worry is wasted on pupils too young to appreciate the expense.

Next fall, nearly 300 kindergartners in the central Maine city of Auburn will become the latest batch of youngsters around the country to get iPad2 touchpad tablets to learn the basics about ABCs, 1-2-3s, drawing and even music.

"It's definitely an adventure, and it'll be a journey of learning for teachers and students," said Auburn kindergarten teacher Amy Heimerl, who received an iPad on Tuesday ahead of the full deployment in the fall. "I'm looking forward to seeing where this can take us and our students."

But the \$200,000 that Superintendent Tom Morrill is proposing to spend on iPads - which retail for around \$500 - might be better spent on some other school program, said Sue Millard of Auburn, who has children in the fourth grade and high school. She also questions whether kindergartners are old enough to appreciate the effort.

"I understand you have to keep up with technology, but I think a 5-year old is a little too young to understand," she said.

Maine was the first state to equip students statewide with computers when it distributed Apple laptops to all seventh- and eighth-graders in 2002 and 2003. The program has since expanded, with laptops parceled out to about 50 percent of high school students.

The state Department of [Education](#) says it believes Auburn is the first school district in Maine that will give iPads to kindergartners. The school board last week unanimously approved the plan to give all kindergartners iPads next fall.

The iPad is a powerful education tool with hundreds of teaching applications, Morrill said. With its touchpad screen, it's simple to use and can bring learning to life with imagery and sounds, he said.

"It's a revolution in education," Morrill said.

Apple spokeswoman Trudy Muller declined to comment on how iPads are being used in schools, but dozens of school districts around the

country have been giving iPads to students. Schools in Omaha, Neb.; Columbiana, Ohio; Huntington, W. Va.; Paducah, Ky.; Charleston, S.C.; and Scottsdale, Ariz., are among the places where kindergarten pupils are using them.

Angus King, the former Maine governor who launched the state's laptop program, said the idea of iPads in kindergarten wows him. Anything that holds the attention of pupils will help in the learning process, he said.

"If your students are engaged, you can teach them anything," King said. "If they're bored and looking out the window, you can be Socrates and you're not going to teach them anything. These devices are engaging."

Morrill is convinced that in the end, using iPads to teach kindergarten will lead to improved student proficiency scores.

Heimerl, one of five kindergarten teachers in the district who got iPads on Tuesday, was impressed as she checked out apps for phonics, building words, letter recognition and letter formation.

"The more education teachers have using these tools the better we can enhance children's learning and take them to that next level," said Heimerl, a teacher at Park Avenue Elementary School.

Not everyone is sold. Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University and the author of "Oversold and Underused: Computers in Schools," said there's no proof that computers bring learning benefits to pupils that young.

"There's no evidence in research literature that giving iPads to 5-year-olds will improve their reading scores," he said.

Peter Pizzolongo of the National Association for the Education of

Young Children, based in Washington, said iPads can be an effective supplement to three-dimensional objects, whether they be books or building blocks.

"We can't say whether what the school district in Maine or anywhere else is doing is good or not good, but what we can say is when the iPad or any other technological tool is used appropriately, then it's a good thing for children's learning," he said.

The best use of iPads is probably in elementary and special education classes because the devices are so easy to use, said Nick Sauers of Iowa State University's Center for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education. There are hundreds of education apps to choose from with a touch to the screen.

Sauers expects a boom soon, with most current iPad initiatives being billed as pilot or experimental programs.

"I think next year is when we'll see our first big bubble," Sauers said. "There will be districts next year that implement it school-wide, whether it be at the [high school](#) level or elementary level."

Morrill said most of the criticism has been about the costs during tough economic times - not about whether tablet computers are age-appropriate.

He said he plans to raise the money needed for about 325 iPads and teacher training from foundations, the federal government, the local school department and other sources.

As bullish as he is on the kindergarten [iPad](#), he cautions that it needs to be properly supervised and isn't a panacea.

"I'm not saying they should be on this 24-7," he said. "The students still need to move, get up, dance, socialize."

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