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A monthly series dedicated to the people and the organizations whose efforts in literacy make Massachusetts a great place to live and learn.



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Each year the Massachusetts Literacy Champions program recognizes and rewards multiple individuals for their work in literacy education.

## Technology Goes Home To Stay

by Lauren Leikin

There is an old joke about the U.S. educational system in which Rip Van Winkle comes back after 200 years to a world he doesn't recognize... until he walks into a building with rows of desks, students with books, and an adult at a blackboard at the front of the room. "Oh," he says happily, "a classroom!"

Our world has changed in a myriad of ways – electricity, technology, cities, the internet – but a 21st century classroom still looks and feels in many ways like an 18th century one. Except when you walk into a classroom at the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Sure, there are still students – 30 percent English language learners, 30 percent special education, 88 percent low-income, and 98 percent students of color – and there are still teachers, fabulous ones, but there aren't, for example, textbooks. Instead, there are laptops. Nobody turns in their homework at the beginning of class; students use "digital drop boxes" to submit their assignments. Teachers post every lesson plan online and do much of their professional development through web-based training seminars. And Principal Deb Socia "g-chats" with parents throughout the day and into the night ("g-chat" is an instant messaging feature of Gmail, Google's email system). The building gleams, the rooms are clean and bright, and a student is literally handing out hugs and Hershey's Kisses in the hallway. This is school?



This is school, transformed. The Frederick Pilot Middle School is the home of a 1:1 Wireless Learning Initiative, which means that every student – all 750 of them – and every teacher, has his or her very own laptop. The computers don't leave the building – they're locked up and charged every night – and, since May 2007, when they were first distributed, the school has not had one laptop lost or stolen. The students love them. And they have learned how to use them – sometimes in ways that keep the teachers and administrators on their technological toes.

But having computers integrated into the students' classrooms begged the question of how to get computers into the students' homes as well. Enter Technology Goes Home (TGH), the 9-year old initiative supported by the Boston Digital Bridge Foundation that serves as a technology-training program for families in the Boston Public School system. TGH's extraordinary opportunities can be found in 27 elementary schools; 4 K-

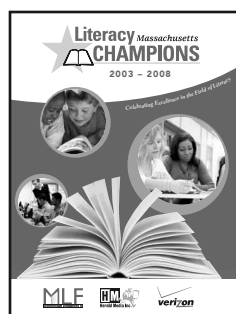
8 schools; 7 middle schools; and 13 high schools – but the program at Frederick Pilot Middle School is particularly special, and not just because it recently won Verizon's National Tech Savvy Award (and the associated \$25,000) at this year's National Family Literacy Conference. Over 450 families completed the TGH program in all of Boston in the 2006-2007 academic year; 72 of those families came from Frederick. This year, a full 200 Frederick Middle School families completed the program, which includes 25 hours of intensive, hands-on training – some in Spanish, some in Somali, some in classes specifically designed for special needs students and their families. Some classes are taught on Saturdays, some on weeknights – but all are taught by teachers and other school staff members who are able to provide a meaningful connection for parents. Instead of refurbished desktops at the end of the sessions, parents receive brand-new ASUS ultra-portable laptops that run on open source Linux software and weigh all of 2 pounds.

The technology part of Technology Goes Home is compelling, and the story of TGH is often told as a tale of bridging the digital divide. Which, of course, it does – and quite successfully. But the real story of Technology Goes Home, according to the teachers and parents who live it, is the story of a different kind of bridge – one not so much digital as human.

"We never expected how deeply it would connect parents to school," says Principal Socia, to a hearty murmur of agreement from her staff. "Or parents to their kids, for that matter." Frederick student Eliezer Andujar, like all TGH participants, worked on a research and PowerPoint project as part of his class. "Me and my father," he says, "we worked on a presentation on the culture of Puerto Rico. We had fun doing it. And when he doesn't understand some things, I help explain it to him." Student Tatyana Belin adds, "I get to spend quality time with my mother. I got to explain some things about what we were doing in school." Belin pauses and smiles shyly. "She was pretty happy about that."

"This is the most powerful program for parent involvement," says Parent Coordinator Andrea Van Wien. "It's the best way to establish a relationship with parents. They feel comfortable, coming into the building and working with their kids, and by the end it's like they've known us forever." Socia nods vigorously and notes that the program has been, for them, "significantly culture-changing."

Some things, of course, may never change – whether it's the 18th century or the 21st. Asked how they use their new computers at home, the students grin sheepishly. "I like to listen to music," says Belin. Her teachers laugh and roll their eyes. "And I do my homework too," she adds quickly. Kids may still be kids – and classrooms may still be classrooms – but at Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School, when technology goes home, it brings change back with it. Even Rip Van Winkle might need a little help figuring out exactly where he is.



**You're invited to celebrate...** 2008 marks the fifth year anniversary of the Massachusetts Literacy Champions Awards. To help celebrate, Debby Goss and Literacy Champions share their innovative work and the beliefs that guide them in a new publication, *Massachusetts Literacy Champions: Celebrating Excellence in the Field of Literacy*. Free copies of the book are available through [www.massliteracy.org](http://www.massliteracy.org), or call 617-619-6556, or email: [Mmcsheffrey@bostonherald.com](mailto:Mmcsheffrey@bostonherald.com).



**Please meet... Debby Goss, Reading Specialist at the Horace Mann Middle School in Franklin, is a quiet leader who inspires both her students and colleagues to shine.**

Some people, particularly those with a thick skin and a good sense of humor, have a knack for middle schoolers, and Debby Goss, a 2007 Literacy Champion who has raised three boys of her own, deserves a special place in that category. The first 6th graders she taught have 6th graders of their own by now, so Goss has seen a good many pre-teens come and go. "They're still the same as always," she says, lightly rolling her eyes. "Goofy and emotional. They want to do well, even though they pretend they don't." Which isn't to say that things around the teens haven't changed over all these years, and Goss is reflective as she talks about that. "The biggest changes," she says, "have been changes in technology. We have SmartBoards and laptops – where it used to be all you had was a blackboard. Now we have information at our fingertips and it's so easy to connect to background knowledge. Kids can make presentations and it's more fun for them. But still," she continues, "the majority of kids don't read as much as they used to. With so many kids spending hours playing video games, there's not as much interaction with language."

It was this realization, in part, that led to Goss' effort, supported by her Literacy Champion Award from Verizon, to train 6th and 7th English and social studies teachers on implementing a "Shared Inquiry" approach to learning using Junior Great Books. (For more information about this program visit [www.massliteracy.org](http://www.massliteracy.org))