

It's high tech cool for the Ash Fork School

Russ Walton/WGCN

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The Ash Fork Joint Unified School District is excited about the possibility of their single multi-grade school facility becoming the most technologically advanced of all three Interstate-40 districts, which includes Williams and Seligman.

Education curriculum consultant Cindy Daniels, of Schoolhouse Solutions Inc., was hired full-time in April by the AFJUSD as assistant superintendent. Since then she has successfully won three federally-funded \$70,000 Comprehensive School Reform grants — a notable accomplishment since only 10 are awarded annually in Arizona.



Ash Fork Joint Unified School District's new assistant superintendent, Cindy Daniels, watches as InterWrite instructor Dave Lucas shows AFJUSD staff how to operate some of its new technology.

With the funding, the district is moving at break-neck speed to make numerous improvements, one of which is instituting the most advanced learning technology available. “One of our goals is that we want to make it (AFJUSD) the most technologically outfitted school in the state of Arizona,” Daniels said. “What we’ve done in order to do that is pursue a lot of competitive funding that became available in the spring that typically isn’t available in the spring.”

With the help of the district's new full-time IT Director Mark Stringer, that technology includes surround sound speaker systems tied into headset microphones teachers can use to overcome the audio distractions of a typical classroom, at least six computer workstations with Internet in each classroom, and a new 20-station computer lab.

"The class (computer lab) will be made up of probably 20 kids, but all studying different things," Stringer explained. "So if the student wants to do web design, it will be tailored to that, if a student wants to do computer animation, they can do that. Eventually the students will be able to get internationally recognized IT certifications."

In addition, all grades — kindergarten through 12 — get an InterWrite Schoolboard in each classroom as well. The InterWrite boards — similar to Smart Boards already used in select Williams classrooms — are large chalkboard-sized touch-sensitive computer screens teachers can use for easier and simpler displays of curriculum. Each student is given a wireless electronic question/answer pad that has remote access to both the InterWrite board and the teacher's computer workstation. This allows the teacher to check student assignments and make assessments at anytime during the lesson.

The teacher also gets a wireless writeable pad that they can use to teach and illustrate lessons with from anywhere in the room. The advantage of such technology is fourfold. Not only are teachers able to more effectively present material, but such technology hooks the students by peaking interest, prepares them for the technology that waits them after graduation, and makes it easier for the district to attract quality staff.

All of those gizmos should be up and running by the time school is back in session in August, but Daniels says there's a lot more coming. Long-range plans for technology improvements include wireless Internet in the entire facility, installing web cams for interactive video distance learning across several districts, installing indoor/outdoor video security surveillance and broadcasting a signal from the school to allow the entire Ash Fork community access to wireless Internet.

The district's new school board, new superintendent — Gary Spiker — and new staff are also planning other improvements, such as constructing an entirely new sports facility complex around the school, instituting a culinary arts class, and using the facility as a community meeting place and community learning center.

Daniels said that in a town the size of Ash Fork, it is common to have things revolve around the school. “There is no reason why the school couldn’t be the center of the community,” Daniels says. “People are excited about this administration and what’s coming. We are establishing much more trust within the community.” She also explained that because of all the improvements, the students themselves have a new sense of pride, evidenced by how clean the school is during session — even the restrooms are spotless.

The Ash Fork school is relatively new, having been constructed with funding from the state’s School Facilities Board in 2004, and serves about 210 students in grades K-12. The reason the AFJUSD is able to secure such funding in a seemingly easier manner than say, the Williams district, is due to the low student count combined with the community’s considerable poverty level.

State and federal laws dictate that communities in those situations score higher in terms of funding needs than other districts. That’s also the reason why the AFJUSD is currently able to offer the highest base salary for teachers in the entire state of Arizona — over \$35,000 for starting staff, which is nearly \$10,000 more than what’s offered in Williams.

Unfortunately for the Williams Unified School District and its students, a few WUSD teachers are already tendering resignations in favor of moving to Ash Fork, despite news of possible funding increases for Williams. In the meantime, since the AFJUSD works on a four-day week, Daniels will continue as a Schoolhouse Solutions consultant for area districts on a more scaled-back level. In addition to getting the three CSR grants for the Ash Fork school technology, Daniels was also able to secure one \$70,000 CSR grant for the Williams High School to use in technology acquisition as well.

A public meeting about the new sports facility will be held on June 23 at the school and AFJUSD governing board meetings have rescheduled to take place on the third Thursday of each month at 6:30 p.m. For more information, call the Ash Fork school at (928) 637-2561.