

Comal Independent School District

NEWS RELEASE

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ESL teachers, students thrilled about iPod Project

Smithson Valley Middle ESL (English as Second Language) teacher Consuelo Schmitt had never heard eighth-grade student Martín Camacho speak a word of English in her class.

At least not until the Comal ISD Middle School English Language Learner iPod Project took effect earlier this semester.

The project is one of the first of its kind in the country in which ESL middle school students district-wide receive iPod touch portable media players to use in both the classroom and at home.

To date, thanks to funding from Bond 2008, Comal ISD has given out nearly 100 iPods to students who began their lives speaking a language other than English.

“Martín is a student who is very, very shy,” Schmitt said. “He was always afraid of making mistakes. Within a few weeks of receiving the iPod, I heard him speak his first words of English. When I heard his voice, I started to cry. I was so proud of him.”

What makes the iPod learning experience so unique for ESL students is the fact it comes equipped with so many educational tools that aren't available in an everyday classroom and are almost never available at a child's home.

“The students' textbooks are available on the iPod in an audio format, as are the books they are reading,” said Jennifer Wivagg, Comal ISD instructional media specialist. “A student can read along with the iPod, and then stop and rewind the book if they come to a difficult spot. If they have a word they don't understand, they can look it up on the iPod's dictionary and learn what it means and how to pronounce it.”

Wivagg said perhaps the biggest advantage of students receiving the iPods is the fact they can take them home at night and on the weekends.

“Most of these students aren’t exposed to English at home,” she said. “This is a way to make them read at home. Before, we didn’t have that. Students are given homework assignments where they have to record themselves speaking English every night.”

Canyon Middle ESL teacher Vanessa Brown said the fact she gets to hear each of her students speaking English through their iPod is an invaluable learning tool.

“The confidence this has given them is amazing,” Brown said. “When we first told them they would have to read into the iPod, everyone was scared. They were speaking an average of three or four words each at a time. Now they are reading several paragraphs at a time.”

Schmitt said every one of her 18 ESL students has shown improvement.

“I know most of the students weren’t reading before,” Schmitt said. “I’ve noticed such an increase in motivation in them doing their homework even though I require them to record themselves reading 30 minutes per day.”

The iPods also give the students access to the Internet at home, a luxury many wouldn’t have otherwise.

Students don’t only use the iPods in their English lessons, as the technology makes it easy to download assignments from other classes – such as a power point or educational game about coursework in math or a streaming video that relates to science class.

“The possibilities are endless,” Wivagg said. “We’re so new to this and we feel like our teachers and students are pioneers. We’ve basically given these students computers to take home, and I think that’s awesome.”

Canyon Middle eighth-grade ESL student Gianybel Negrón couldn’t agree more.

“When I found out we were getting iPods, I started screaming,” said Negrón. “I just couldn’t believe it. It helps us so much because we are able to learn about so many subjects on it.”

Comal ISD ESL coordinator Fernando Palos said he hopes this is a program the school district keeps around for a long time to come.

“This is such a big opportunity for our students,” Palos said. “It provides them with the latest technology just like many of the other students have. I can’t get over how much of an impact this has made in such a short period of time. It’s just amazing.”

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IN PHOTO: Canyon Middle ESL (English as Second Language) teacher Vanessa Brown assists eighth-grade student Giannybel Negrón with an iPod assignment recently in class. Thanks to funding from Bond 2008, the Comal ISD Middle School English Language Learner iPod Project has provided nearly 100 iPods to students district-wide.