

By Bill Terry

In the next few weeks school will be starting and students will be returning to their classes. In a recent interview with Comfort Independent School District Superintendent Leslie Vann he talked about keeping up in the rapid paced digital age and preparing the students for college and the working world.

This fall the Comfort school board approved a one-to-one technology initiative for the students of the district.

“Every student in grades six through twelve will receive a laptop. Students in grades three through five will receive an I-pad and those in kindergarten thru grade two will have a pad so that every child will have access to a tablet,” Vann said. “On August 17 we will start having student and parent meetings to prepare everyone to use the cloud for all of the transmission of classroom work. Training of teachers has already begun on several of the programs that the teachers will use for the transmission of student's work electronically.”

The ultimate goal is to have students send their work and tests electronically using cloud technology.

“This is what they do at the college level; this is what they do in the business world,” Vann said. We're already doing a lot of things in the administration office electronically and that is the direction we're heading for the classroom. This summer we've provided computer training for every teacher in the district. We had training in June and July and we're having more training on using the computer in the class room. Now we're focusing on the day-to-day use of tablets; that includes managing student data, providing lesson plans and using testing modules for things such as a pop quiz. Students can go directly to the link provided and take the test. The test is immediately graded and students get instant results. It speeds up the process. The teacher no longer needs to go home and grade papers.”

There are other distinct advantages to using technology in a learning environment.

“As an example; if the kids are studying the war of 1812, they can click on a picture and it turns into a video,” said Vann. “They get to see the whole process, that is where we're headed with technology. Text books will always be here. But students will have access to the text electronically through links to a web site. One of the upsides to this is that history books will no longer be out of date. They can be kept up to date electronically. Tomorrow, a printed text book could be out of date.”

Vann knows the transition to digital learning can be difficult for some.

“Right now we have the capacity to handle everything,” he said. “We know there will be bumps in the road. At some point in time, computers may go down. We have systems for that in place. It has also required a change of mind set for some of our staff and even more so for some of our parents who have not been in the college world. College is not the same as it use to be.”

Vann talked about the changes in the size of the district's graduating high school class.

“This past graduation we had 98 to cross the stage. Last year we had 106 students in the sixth grade class and served 1240 students in the entire district. This year we're predicting we will have 65 students graduating.”

The district is adding dual credits to its curriculum offerings.

“We'll be adding a few dual credit classes this year in history and advanced Placement English,” he said. “In the Placement English, if a student scores 3 to 5 they have college credit. Dual credits are taught through the university level by teachers who have masters degrees. It's best for students to stay at or below 27 credit hours to be able to enter college academically as an acknowledged freshman. That way students are eligible for freshman scholarships; it's better

financially for the student. It is also a greater challenge for students coming out of high school when a student enters as a sophomore.” In those cases the expectations of the university are much greater according to Vann.

Keeping parents informed about the curriculum is a high priority.

“We are putting together a curriculum management plan so that the public can see the courses we have available and understand the direction in which we’re going. That plan includes the expectations for staff and students so that parents are aware of our focus. It lays it all out. It’s a communication tool.”

Vann talked about changes in the focus of education.

“Academics is our primary focus,” he said. “But less than 40 percent of students go to college. The other 60 percent learn a trade. We want our students who are going to college be prepared; we also want to prepare those who are going into the work force. I think education missed the boat several years back when its focus was only on preparing students for college. We now need welders and pumpers. In the area of career technology we have Ag classes. We also offer safety training, multimedia training, floral design, culinary classes, vet tech preparation and more. In health occupations training we now offer computerized tomography training. We have strong support from the community in this regard.”

Education prepares students to enter the workforce, with or without a college degree, according to the superintendent.

“We want to train our students for the world outside of education,” he said. “As I visit with business owners they are more interested in the soft skills rather than the trained skills; these include showing up on time and being able to think on your own while working on a project. With these skills they can be trained according to the needs of a particular job. So you can see that homework serves the purpose of helping students learn to complete a project on time. We’re preparing students for the world outside of here.”

Vann talked about the district’s facilities.

“We are currently working to complete the facility assessment report,” he said. “We are currently in the end of a 25-year plan. It’s time for us to analyze the facilities and their capabilities for the next 25 years. The report will give us an idea of the condition of our existing facilities. It will show us the estimated cost of repairs, current capacity, the ability to meet future needs, and assess the lighting and ventilation systems. It will consider anticipated future growth. We should receive that report during September or October.”

Vann believes that the increased use of technology in the classroom is merely a reflection of the world we live in.

“It’s a global society,” he said. “We’re no longer tied to just the local library. You no longer have to live where your job is. You can use the computer screen from your home.”