

## Group Aims to Fine Tune Wired Schools

By REBECCA S. WEINER

Over the past five years, NetDay, a California based nonprofit group, has helped to wire hundreds of schools for Internet access. Now, they are moving to help teachers harness what travels through those wires.

Julie Evans, the chief executive officer of NetDay, said the California-based group has a clear opportunity as educators' changing attitudes about technology more closely parallel the group's focus on integrating the Internet into curricula.

"We were in a unique place," Evans said of the group's emphasis, when it was founded in 1996, on wiring schools. "We were in a position to expand those connections. We're still doing the connections, but in a different way."

The nonprofit organization issued a survey late last week detailing teachers' attitudes toward the Internet and its use in the classroom to lay a foundation for NetDay's future work.

While 87 percent of teachers surveyed said they feel comfortable using the Internet, and 97 percent reported having online access in their schools, 73 percent said they feel no pressure to use the technology for classroom instruction. The biggest barrier to using the Internet, 78 percent of the teachers said, is a lack of time.

The results were not completely surprising to Evans or the researchers commissioned to do the study. They do, however, provide a basis from which to promote a new initiative aimed at educating school administrators about the importance of integrating the Internet into classroom activities.

"The real challenge is how to help teachers use the Internet," Evans said. Teachers "were not receiving leadership or advice on different ways to use the Internet. There really needs to be a new dialogue with the leadership . . . so they can be more understanding of what the time issue means."

NetDay -- which recently marked its fifth anniversary -- is building on the experience of working with educators and community leaders to tap into the learning potential of what travels over wires and into classrooms. The shift is a challenge for NetDay, which has traditionally focused on helping schools build physical infrastructure.

Early on "it was easy," Evans said. "You take the blue cable, run it through the wall and presto change-o. Just having the connection was a good first step. [Today], it's got to be more than 'the Internet is available.'"

Evans added that building community support, an easy task when NetDay was focused on wiring schools, has become more challenging now that the focus has turned to how the technology should be used.

"It's definitely more difficult for the average community member to come and say you should use the Internet for social studies," she said. Still, she said community support remains important.

In Mercedes, Texas, located in the Rio Grande Valley, Barbara Hinojosa, the Kennedy Elementary School principal, said NetDay's involvement has helped the 5,000-student school district leverage better

contracts with computer and software companies. When purchasing a new software package, Hinojosa said, the district now requires the company to send a representative to spend 10 days in the schools showing teachers how to take full advantage of the product.

"They've taught us to form partnerships," said Hinojosa, whose school district is one of five chosen by NetDay for its initiative to help bridge the divide between school technology haves and have nots.

NetDay also plans to use its survey findings and the schools and districts involved in its efforts as proving grounds for establishing new models for integrating the Internet into curriculum. Evans said the districts the group works with have administrators who understand that teachers need time and resources to fully integrate the Internet into their teaching. She is hoping NetDay can use its brand identity and its experience working with different stakeholders to expand those practices.

"We're working closely with five selected communities where the principal, district administrators and superintendent have a clear understanding of what it takes," she said. "They're able to provide time. Where I am not seeing that happen is where they are not demonstrating that leadership."

NetDay launched an online clearinghouse of education-technology information last fall to help educators share information about what is working and where to go to find help if it is not.

"There's a place for NetDay to be an awareness-generator," Evans said. "We need to share leadership models. Schools have started down this path and they may have every school wired. The value proposition is there, but they don't know how to move to that next level of sophistication."