



Hi, You've Reached Tech Support, This Is Your 12-Year-Old

0 tweet

Share

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.



Photo by Sam Hodgson

Innovation Middle School seventh graders Micah Wells and Tony Tsogtbaatar provide tech support to their classmates as members of the Mouse Squad.

Posted: Tuesday, March 15, 2011 4:04 pm | Updated: 7:27 am, Wed Mar 16, 2011.

By [Emily Alpert](#)

Try telling students to make their own podcasts when microphones won't work. Forget about tapping into the web for lessons if nobody can connect. And typing is a dead end if computer keys skedaddle.

All that could foul up classes at Innovation Middle School in North Clairemont, where every kid has a laptop. But Innovation is trying out a tactic that is, well, innovative. Instead of running to the school district for every broken key, Innovation is teaching kids how to fix their computers themselves.

Middle schoolers run a humming help desk for fellow students for class credit. Innovation is one of three technologically savvy San Diego middle schools that are testing the new class, which teaches kids how computers work and trains them what to do when they don't. They call it the Mouse Squad.

When other kids complain their laptops went kaput, Mouse Squad students pick up the computer from the classroom and enter the problem into an online system that lists what needs fixing. Students jot down the details about computer viruses and error messages. They troubleshoot simple problems and get replacement laptops into the hands of kids waiting for more complicated and lengthy repairs.

"So what exactly is wrong with your computer?" one girl asked a worried classmate whose computer repeatedly shut down. "Does it happen intermittently? Like, only sometimes it happens?"

Some problems are still too advanced for them to solve. Cracked screens, for example, still have to go to the school district to be swapped. But the Mouse Squad acts like a triage team for the professionals. It squashes little bugs and ensures that kids still have

computers to use while adults tackle the big problems. And it saves teachers the time and energy of phoning up the school district to arrange repairs.

Kids are broken up into teams that divide up the work. One kid logs the problem into the computer system. Another checks over the entry. Then teams of other students try to tackle the repairs.

"I set it up exactly like a business. It's not just an exercise," said Frank Carmody, who teaches the class, now in its second year. "If we don't get our work done, we just have more and more and more work."

Mouse Squad is one small stab at a bigger problem. As San Diego Unified gets more computers and less day-to-day funding, repairs are looming. Money from its \$2.1 billion school renovation bond is footing the bill for digital whiteboards, laptops and other technology. But when it finishes installing them in 2014, it expects to spend nearly \$9.7 million annually to keep them running and replace broken parts — a daunting sum for a district that faces an estimated \$120 million deficit for next school year.

San Diego Unified is already struggling to keep up with repairs, and it hasn't yet distributed all the laptops it plans to. Mouse Squad isn't the answer — but it helps.

The class is supposed to be an education for kids, not just free tech support. The curriculum goes far beyond repairs to include internet ethics, customer service and the implications of new technology. Teachers are leery of overstepping the line between hands-on learning and free labor.

"If you have a kid replace 20 hard drives, he might get really good at it," said Lance Larson, the career resource teacher who designed the class. "But after the fourth or fifth hard drive, he really is not learning anything. When are they learning and when are they just doing stuff for the schools?"

To balance practical work with educational rigor, Carmody coaches preteens on designing robots and schools kids about jobs in the tech industry. He weaves in video lessons about printer interfaces and other computer systems. And he has been amazed to see kids who revolt at classroom rules flourishing in Mouse Squad, learning teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking. Students dig it.

"I'd give this class a nine," said eighth grader Ali Al-Baghdadi. "I'm into software coding right now. I did Java coding for a little bit. I like playing video games; I'd like to create my own."

But nobody can deny that Mouse Squad is also a practical solution to a practical problem — a problem that will grow more common in schools as computers do. School district technology chief Darryl LaGace imagines a future with a Mouse Squad in every middle and high school, learning more and more advanced skills.

"We can't rely on the school district to solve our issues with 550 laptops around," Innovation Middle Principal Harlan Klein said. "The students are the best resource we have."

Innovation is confronting the repair problem earlier than other schools because it got technology earlier. San Diego Unified got a grant to jumpstart the technological shift at three new middle schools: Innovation, Millennial Tech Middle and Memorial Prep. Kids there got laptops right away in every grade; other schools are getting laptops only one grade at a time, year by year.

Those same three schools have started Mouse Squads. San Diego Unified spends \$800 annually per school for discounted lessons from Mouse, a nonprofit that trains kids in tech support nationwide.

For Innovation, keeping the computers humming isn't merely a matter of convenience. Technology is a way of life at the Clairemont school, and not just in computer class. Social studies classes share ideas in Google Docs about the battle at Fort McHenry. Math students log into digital notes that kids can add to themselves instead of devoting class time to copying down basics from the board.

And Innovation is the only school in San Diego Unified where kids can take home their computers, equipped so that students can go online almost anywhere. If teachers and kids can't count on working computers, the whole vision could fizzle, bogged down in technical difficulties.

To kids who have grown up with technology, it seems only natural. "If there's a problem with our computer at home," said eighth grader Sarah McFerrin, "my parents come to me to fix it."

Please contact Emily Alpert directly at emily.alpert@voiceofsandiego.org or 619.550.5665 and follow her on Twitter: twitter.com/emilyschoolsyou.

More about [Clairemont](#)

- [How the City Council Was Won, Visualized](#)

© Copyright 2011, voiceofsandiego.org, San Diego, California. Powered by Blox CMS from TownNews.com.