

BISD emphasizes computer learning

By KAREN MCINTOSH
Reporter

Last summer, kids could be found packed in dark, noisy, video game rooms. They were dropping the last quarter of their week's allowance into a Pac-Man or a Donkey-Kong machine so they could play just one more game before it was time to go home.

But now that the interest in video games is waning, children are waiting in lines to put their floppy disks into personal computers and play more challenging games involving programming, spelling and mathematics.

Children begin learning about computers when they enter their first elementary school classroom.

In kindergarten, children are learning how to work with computers.

In the Bryan Independent School District students are learning from computers every day.

Sue Ann Lambert, supervisor of computer education in the Bryan Independent School District, says computers are now in every classroom. And students are learning to use all aspects of the computers.

Lambert says computer-assisted instructional programs have been used in Bryan schools since the 1980-81 school year.

Doris Ruffino, principal of Bonham Elementary in Bryan, says computers have become a valuable teaching tool in today's technologically-oriented society.

"Our children today are very sophisticated," Ruffino says. "They have VCR's and video games at home. . . . The computer attracts and keeps their attention."

She says that although the computer is a learning tool it does require more student participation.

"The children can't be passive with the computer," she says. "They have to tell it what to do."

Lambert says students at all grade levels are using the computers.

Kindergartners learn to recognize letters and numbers using the LOGO program.

LOGO was developed by Texas Instruments and is designed to help teach young children, Lambert says.

Older students are using a word processor program to write assignments.

This program helps the student become better organized and provides a bonus for teachers.

"It makes it easier to grade and correct papers," Lambert says.

The computer also can teach the

child to spell and tell time, teachers say.

And using a program called print shop, Ruffino says, students can print Christmas cards, notecards and notepads.

"The program uses their higher-level thinking skills," Ruffino says.

And in the remedial and special education classes, students are improving thinking skills by working with computers, Lambert says.

"They really get a good feeling about themselves if they can operate a computer," she says.

Sylvia Colwell, the remedial math

teacher at Henderson Elementary, uses the computer for drills and re-enforcement of skills previously learned.

"They work on the computer for 20-30 minutes every other day," she says.

Colwell says her classes are a self-paced format and students have access to four microcomputers.

Lambert says computers have been very successful in special education classes and a lot of software has been written for those students.

But the computer has been successful in regular classes also, Lambert says.

She says the computer has been particularly helpful in helping children work with numbers — so helpful that the computers are used every day in fifth and sixth grade classes.

"There are five computers in every math classroom," she says.

"We've purchased software that is used for review, practice, re-enforcement and enrichment."

But computers are not being used only to teach children the three R's. Dr. R.D. Zelner, head of education technology at Texas A&M, says elementary school students can use a computer creatively.

"There are programs that lead kids into short-story writing," Zelner says. "The teacher can program the steps the children should follow."

Another program helps children write their own music, Zelner says.

All these programs are valuable to the student, Zelner says, and simply working on a computer helps a child by improving hand-eye coordination.

Along with learning how to use a computer, students also are learning when and where to use a computer.

Lambert says the school district is teaching a unit on the appropriate uses of a computer in society.

"If someone has written a program," Lambert says, "the children are being taught they do not have a right to mess that program up."

The State Board of Education now requires that students exhibit a mastery of the essential elements for computer literacy by the eighth grade.

The rule forced teachers to educate themselves about computers.

Lambert says the district is helping by offering computer workshops during the spring and summer.

"They (workshops) are strictly voluntary," she says, "and we have had tremendous turnouts."

Lambert says the students are not the only ones to benefit from contact with computers.

"Our children today are very sophisticated. They have VCR's and video games at home. . . . The computer attracts and keeps their attention." — Doris Ruffino, principal of Bonham Elementary.

Some teachers have really taken an interest in computers and have enrolled in courses at A&M.

Ruffino says that most of the teachers have 15 hours of computer classes, but not everyone is enthusiastic.

"Some of them just will not have anything to do with computers," she says.

And how do computers compare with humans in the teaching category?

Zelner says that, according to students, teachers and computers are neck and neck.

Zelner says students rated the computer and the teacher as equal, while in the fairness category the computer won out.

He says students feel warmth in the friendly greetings, figures and beeps of the computer.

And Zelner says teachers lost in the fairness category because students feel the computer is not biased.

But Zelner says he does not want the computer to replace the teacher. He says the computer is merely a teaching tool.

Zelner says, "The computer frees the teacher to have more time and higher quality contact with students."

Lambert says the parents love the computers.

"They'd like for us to have one for every student," she says.

The Bryan ISD is seeking to get parents involved in the computer learning program through a project called VIPS, Volunteers in Public Schools.

"Parents and grandparents use the computers with the students on several of the campuses," Lambert says. "We have no trouble getting parents to volunteer."

Carol Frosch is in charge of the volunteers at Johnson Elementary School.

"I got involved because I used to be a math teacher," Frosch says. "This is my first year in Bryan. I called and asked what kind of help they needed and this is what they signed me up for."

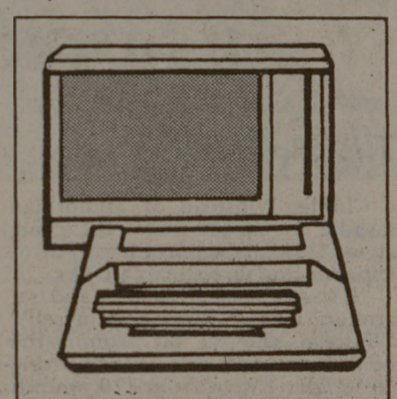
Frosch says the children are excited about the computers and have fun while they are learning.

"It's good to see them gain in knowledge and experience as the year goes on," she says.

Lambert says computers have brought a new dimension to the classroom and in future years students will advance to higher levels of computer literacy.

"We will be doing at the lower grade levels what the seventh and eighth graders are doing now," she says.

The districts overall plan for the computer education program in elementary schools is to produce individuals who can function in the new computer society.



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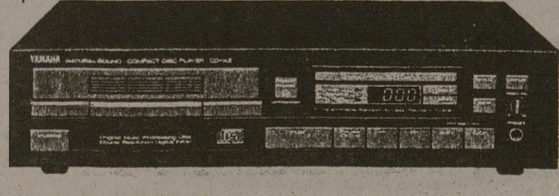
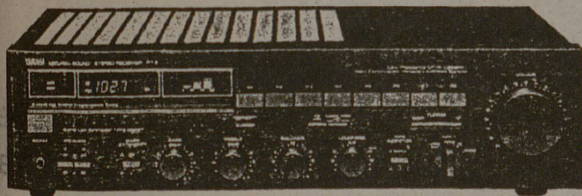
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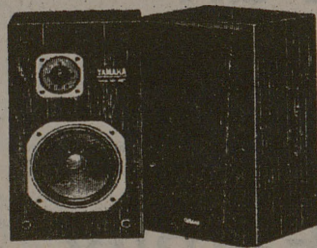
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