



Watching a demonstration by library media specialist Elaine Shanley are Mayor Joseph Polise-na, Johnston Town Council President Robert Russo, JHS Principal Dr. Elizabeth Mantelli and Rep. Deborah Fellela, who presented a legislative grant to the school to help pay for the new technology, called Destiny RICAT. (*Sun Rise photo by Beth Hurd*)

JHS library catches up with latest technology

(Thu, Dec 06 07) - Contributed by HURD, BETH - Last Updated ()

By BETH HURD

In 2000, when Johnston High School was put on five-year probation by New England Association of Schools & Colleges, the high school's library was also deemed inadequate.

Due to hard work by the school administrators, teachers and students in addressing the list of deficiencies, the school was taken off probation in March of 2006. Progress has also been made in efforts to bring the school's library up to current standards with new technology.

Helping to pay for the new technology is a legislative grant in the amount of \$2,100. The check was presented by Rep. Deb Fellela to the school's library media specialist Elaine Shanley and Principal Elizabeth Mantelli on Thursday, Nov. 29. Mayor Joseph Polisena and Town Council President Robert Russo were also on hand to get a sneak peek at the technology.

During a demonstration of Destiny/RICAT, an Internet-based automation software developed by the Follett Software Company, the group marveled at the information made available by a few keystrokes. On the screen read "Welcome to the Johnston High School Library."

The information links the resources of the school's libraries with other high school and public libraries around the state.

"What this does is put our catalog online. If we don't have a book, students can search all the other schools' resources," said Shanley.

Teachers, administrators and librarians, as well as students, can save lists of books and Web site URLs for future use and teachers can make their lists public, available for viewing by their students, as suggested reading and project links.

"This has been a long time coming, the culmination of a five-year process," said Shanley.

The information can also be accessed from home, as each student and teacher will have a unique password.

"When a student logs in, his or her name comes right up," said Shanley.

The technology also has some non-English options, including Spanish and French.

"We have a couple of ESL [English as a Second Language] students [and] it helps, especially if they're at home," she said. "It's easy to use, and it's well worth it."

The start-up fees totaled \$4,000, some of which were paid through other grant money.

System hardware and software maintenance, backups and training are all provided by Rhode Island Library Information Network for Kids. Software upgrades are all done at the central site and are immediately available to all users. The data includes the catalogs of all the high schools

– about 20, thus far – that participate in RICAT. The participants also include private collections, elementary and middle school libraries and public libraries, which link through Ocean State Libraries, formerly CLAN.

"The annual fees are less than we had to pay before," Shanley said of the Web-based technology. "Through our membership to RILINK, we get a group price. Everybody talks about consolidation, about sharing costs. The books are delivered by a commercial delivery service, which comes out of our tax dollars, part of the state library system."

After the first year, annual costs for Destiny/RICAT are approximately \$1,100 per site.

"There are other benefits to belonging to RICAT, including group purchasing of databases, 'World Book On-Line' and periodicals through the EBSCO host, which is like the 'Readers' Guide to Periodic Literature' on steroids," she continued.

Shanley is also still working on the school's homepage, one of the NEASC requirements in 2000.

"It's a work in progress...I'm kind of feeling my way through," she said.

The school will be up for accreditation once again in 2010 and expects to be ready.

"When NEASC was here in 2000, we were severely criticized about our lack of technology, that all has changed," said Mantelli.

This news of the grant comes only a week after \$1 million – funds that had been earmarked for the school's capital improvements – was "found" in the town coffers.

"It took me a while to get information on it, and find out if we could still use it," said Polisena of the \$1,097,000, which had been in an interest-bearing account. "A few years ago, [as a senator] I had passed legislation regarding the tipping fees at the landfill [that made sure] the money would be put into a restricted fund. The first check was for \$234,000 for the first six months. Macera used it to plug a hole in the budget."

Polisena said he had to write a letter to the bond company to make sure it was usable for the purpose intended.

"Dr. Mantelli and her staff did their job, the teachers did their job, the students did their job – now it's up to the elected officials to do their jobs," he said. "We owe a lot to Dr. Mantelli. She took a ship that was sunk and brought it back, now I call it the luxury liner of schools."

The improvements covered by the money include computer labs and furnishings for the "upper library" and improvements to the media center in the "lower library." The funds will also pay for the replacement of a boiler to the Ferri Middle School and renovations to the upper level of the high school auditorium area to meet fire code, plus new equipment in the school's science labs.

"I went before the Town Council and brought a listing of the bids that went out last spring," said Melissa Devine, business manager for the school department.

The items listed included many of the NEASC recommendations. There is also the possibility that the town will get some of the money back. Polisen, a 1972 graduate of JHS, said Devine can put in for a 30 percent reimbursement from the state when the work is complete and that money will be put in a special schools account.

"At least there's a light at the end of the tunnel, this makes it easier," he said of the reclaimed money.

The news also comes a month after a study done by Johns Hopkins University named Johnston High School to its list of "drop out factories." The university's research found 12 percent of all schools, about 1,700 total, graduated less than 60 percent of their total freshman. Five Rhode Island high schools were named, including Central and Mount Pleasant in Providence, West Warwick High School, Tolman in Pawtucket and Johnston High.

Margaret Iacovelli, school superintendent for the district, addressed the situation at a school committee meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 13.

"'Drop out factory' is not a label any school would want to be associated with, and Johnston High School is no exception," she said, calling the research "flawed." "In compiling data from 13,748 schools, the Johns Hopkins researchers took short cuts that are unconscionable when one considers the negative impact on the schools, staffs and students when the tag 'drop out factory' is applied to a school."

The numbers used by Johns Hopkins were derived by taking the total number of students who entered in the freshman year and subtracting the number who graduated four years later. Therefore, if a school started with a freshman class of 200 and ended with a graduating class of 150, it was given a 75 percent graduation rate. Any school with less than 60 percent of the freshman class graduating was deemed a "drop-out factory."

Iacovelli proposed several explanations for the decrease in numbers.

"In Rhode Island, students seeking career preparation education may opt to do so in their sophomore year," she said. "Johnston students [seeking a career track] must transfer to the Career Center located in Cranston. During the years covered in the study, more than 100 Johnston students attended Cranston West – after their freshman year at Johnston."

Johnston, Iacovelli said, also loses a number of freshman students to Moses Brown, La Salle and area parochial schools. Parents with the financial means to do so frequently send their children to private schools, which may offer a broader range of programs or Division I sports teams – critical for students looking to go to college on an athletic scholarship.

"Exacerbating the transfer issue, Johnston High, during the years addressed by the study, was suffering from a threat of loss of NEASC accreditation and low performance ratings from the Rhode Island Department of Education," she said, indicating those issues may have boosted the number of students transferring to other schools.

"Using RIDE data, Johnston High School

had an 83 percentage graduation rate," Iacovelli said. "Granted, a 17 percent drop-out rate is nothing to be proud of [but] the hard-working staff and students at Johnston High School should never have been maligned as they were."

Johnston

High School has since been fully accredited by NEASC and was recently commended by the RIDE for its students' test results. Iacovelli also said programs have been put in place to identify early on those students at risk of dropping out.