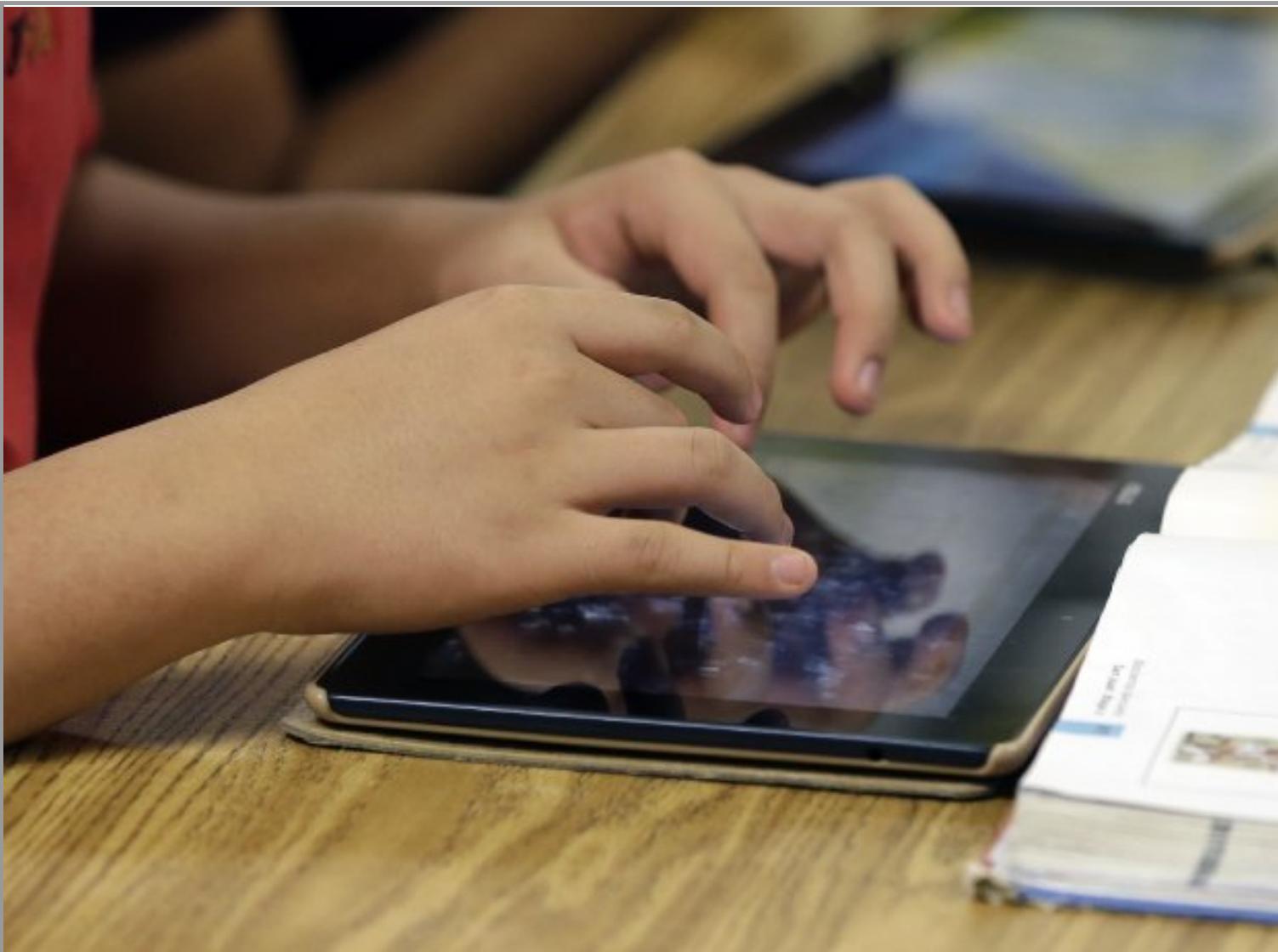


## News: Science and Technology

# Tablets in the classroom push learning, teaching

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A student uses a tablet to follow along with the teacher in an eighth grade Spanish class at Autrey Mill Middle School in Johns Creek, Ga. on Thursday, May 9, 2013. The school is part of a pilot project launched this spring by Amplify, News Corp.'s education technology company, which has tablets in the hands of some 2,500 students at 12 schools across the country. (AP Photo/John Bazemore)

### AP Staff Writer

The Associated Press

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JOHNS CREEK, Ga. (AP) — Time is up for the 13 students in Stephanie Stephens' 8th grade Spanish class.

For the last few minutes they've been conjugating verbs, each typing away on a small tablet when a message pops up on the screen: "Eyes on the Teacher." Stephens, with tablet in hand, asks for "voluntarios o victimas" to come up front, plug their tablet into a projector and share their answers.

This is the classroom of the future.

The group at Autrey Mill Middle School in suburban Atlanta is part of Amplify, News Corp.'s education technology company, which has tablets at 12 schools across the country including two in Georgia. It's one of

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the evolution of technology in schools and the broader debate on how children learn today and how educators should respond.

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"You saw in class today, the people that were working the hardest were the kids," said Jimmy Zoll, principal at the Fulton County public school. "This is just a tool. You still have to have that excellent instructor as someone planning lessons that are engaging and meaningful for kids. But this is where our students are."

Bringing technology to the classroom is nothing new, but those at Amplify and other major companies are spending time and money rethinking the possibilities. And there's a lot at stake. School districts across the country are weighing the value of continuing to spend money on traditional textbooks as they incorporate more digital experiences.

One of the nation's largest school districts, Los Angeles Unified, recently announced plans to spend \$50 million to provide tablets, install wireless networks and train teachers at nearly four dozen schools in the fall. The eventual goal is to spend \$500 million with help from bond revenue to buy tablets for its more than 600,000 students. In Texas, officials with the Eanes Independent School District in Austin are using bond money to purchase iPads for its 7,700 students in grades K-12.

Some 2,000 schools have partnered with Google to use its lightweight laptops that start at \$199. In Huntsville, Ala., city school officials are touting student gains after moving to an all-digital environment. All of this takes significant investment in infrastructure, ensuring wireless networks are robust and hardware is constantly updated. It also takes buy-in from educators and others who worry technology will become the teacher.

"Without teachers, it's not going to work," said Joel I. Klein, CEO of Amplify and the former chancellor of New York City schools. "If all you do is say to a kid, 'Here's a tablet, go learn,' it may sort of feel good but it's not going to change anything."

Amplify's business model includes partnering with a tablet manufacturer, currently ASUS, and developing its own software for the tablet. Devices come in two forms, one with wireless connectivity for \$299 and another with a data plan currently offered by AT&T Wireless for \$349. The company also offers educators training and access to software developers so they can get help creating lesson plans for the tablets.

The pilot project was free for the school districts and will end soon. Time will tell how the market responds. Fulton County Schools Superintendent Robert M. Avossa said his district has been excited about the pilot and is weighing how to move forward.

"As a district, we know that technology is an important part of the teaching and learning process," Avossa said.

Guilford County Schools, one of the biggest systems in North Carolina, has signed a deal with Amplify to put tablets in the hands of its more than 17,000 middle school students in two phases starting this fall, said Nora Carr, chief of staff for the district. Annual costs could eventually reach \$3.6 million to lease the student tablets.

That kind of money is significant as districts find creative ways to augment budgets still recovering from the recession, such as reaching out to businesses and charities, finding places to trim in their textbook budget or selling off bonds. Guilford County is using part of a \$30 million grant it earned under the federal Race to the Top program to lease the tablets.

The district's decision is partly motivated by concerns about student access to technology, a common worry nationwide. More than half of the students in Guilford County receive free or reduced lunches. Carr said their goal is to eventually have tablets for every one of its 72,000 students.

"Our view is that instructional technology is getting to the point where paper and pencil were a few decades ago," Carr said. "We don't see it as a magic bullet. We see it as the cost of doing business today."

A big question with more digital devices in the classroom is what this means for teachers. School leaders are mindful that some teachers may not be tech-savvy or open to new technology. In Guilford County, district officials plan extensive training, professional development and coaching.

"The kids will get it much more quickly than any of the adults and that's just kind of a given," said Carr.



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"Anytime you do something that is new and different there are going to be bumps in the road."

Back at Autrey Mill Middle School, Stephens keeps close tabs on what students are doing through a special Amplify platform on her tablet. She quickly sees questions and answers submitted by the class and knows immediately if a student has wandered off to search the Internet or check email. Lectures are a thing of the past, replaced by quick polls and Internet searches. Part of what is being learned is how to navigate the sea of information online and how to identify a trusted source. Students are also learning skills they will need after they graduate.

"You're preparing students to enter the workforce in a way that entering the workforce will be seamless to what they learned in school," said Ralph de la Vega, CEO of AT&T Wireless, who has partnered with Amplify on the pilot project. De la Vega said his company is removing computers and cash registers from all of its retail stores and replacing them with tablets. "It's a new way to learn."

As class wraps up for the day, Stephens sends a prompt to the tablets with three emoticons: a smiley face with "Got It," a frown face with "Not Sure," and a sad face with "Confused." The students, in the comfort of tech-anonymity, no longer have to admit in front of their classmates that they just don't get it. It's a remarkable side benefit to more technology in the classroom and educators say it allows them to quickly identify those who are struggling without the added embarrassment.

"It gives us a chance to express ourselves," said student Eunice Min. "Kids who don't like to talk in front of the class, it gives them an opportunity to participate."

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