



# Irving Elementary School



Altoona, PA — Founded in 1997, the McAuliffe Heights Program at Irving Elementary School established a tradition for providing students from throughout the Altoona district with a quality education. Now a new initiative that has enabled the distribution of an iBook computer to every K–6 student and teacher at McAuliffe Heights is further supporting the vision of Dr. Frank Meloy, founder of the program.

Meloy, who is also Altoona’s assistant superintendent for education, foresaw a school of choice in which a rich curriculum would be unveiled to those who sought to learn. With their iBook laptops in hand, students and faculty alike are now free to explore the limitless learning possibilities of the digital domain.

## Advice to Other Districts

- Solicit as much input as possible from teachers and families in identifying your district’s needs and the objectives of your program
- Work closely with your technology vendor to map hardware and software purchases with needs
- Provide frequent, ongoing training for all staff; encourage a high level of communication and collaboration

## Transforming with Technology

At the time that Meloy launched the McAuliffe Heights Program, Irving Elementary students consistently posted the lowest scores on standardized tests in the Altoona District. The fact that the school’s socioeconomic status was also one of the lowest in the area portended an even bleaker future for Irving students. But Meloy brought together a think tank of local educators, school administrators, and community members seeking to bolster the quality of education in the district. Thus the McAuliffe Heights Program was launched, named in honor of the late teacher and astronaut Christa McAuliffe.

Technology has been a key component of the program since its inception. Glimpsing the potential of the Internet and computer-based tools to expand students’ educational horizons, Meloy and his colleagues have since made sure that hardware and software tools are used daily at Irving.

“We’ve always had computer labs at the school,” confirms Pat Labriola, principal at Irving Elementary. “We have 25 iMac computers in our lab and another three systems in every room, and our teachers have been working with CompassLearning for math and language arts integration for the past six years. But with 250 students, each child could get on a computer for only one-half hour a day. We viewed the one-to-one laptop initiative as the next logical step in our technology integration.”

## Profile in Success

McAuliffe Heights Program at Irving Elementary School

## Quick Study

### Challenges

- Deliver computer access to K–6 students without the constraints of scheduling lab time
- Create comprehensive professional development program for staff
- Facilitate faculty and peer group mentoring

### Solution

- 275 wireless iBook computers
- 25 iMac systems
- AppleWorks, iMovie
- 50 days of Apple Professional Development
- CompassLearning\* educational software

### Benefits

- Marked increase in student research and collaboration
- Student enthusiasm at an all-time high
- Staff also collaborating and sharing in innovative ways

## An Important Partnership

Labriola and McAuliffe Heights instructional advisor Norma Biesecker headed up a team that worked closely with Apple to identify the objectives of the laptop program. The partnership was an important one, notes Labriola.

“Our association with Apple was key to the success of this program,” he explains. “The Apple Professional Development people came in, they worked with us to find out what our needs were, and they were with us every step of the way, setting up the training for our teachers and providing technical advice. Apple’s facilitators really helped our students and faculty create a smooth transition into the digital school.”

## Apple Professional Development Ensures Success

Along with approximately 275 wireless iBook systems, McAuliffe Heights purchased 50 days of Apple Professional Development (APD) time, to be used over the next three years. The APD resources, which include leader-led workshops, in-class modeling, and technical support, have helped the school’s teachers learn to use their new technology tools effectively.

“We started the APD classes during the summer of 2002, before we got the iBook laptops,” Labriola says. “Those sessions were extremely helpful in anticipating any challenges we might have, and in letting the teachers share ideas. Now our APD team comes in at least once a month, and they do everything from working directly with the kids to showing our teachers how to use AppleWorks and iMovie.”

## And They’re Off...

The arrival of the wireless laptops immediately provided unique learning opportunities at McAuliffe Heights. In almost no time, says Biesecker, the students using them had far exceeded their teachers’ expectations.

“Once the kids got the iBooks in their hands, they were off and running!” she laughs. “Our teachers had to revise their long-range goals, simply because the students were instantly so far ahead of where we expected them to be. They just have no fear—the students have been raised to consider technology a part of their lives, and their work on the iBook laptops is absolutely remarkable.”

## Student Mentoring Abounds

One of the most intriguing aspects of the iBook initiative has been the way in which Irving’s students have begun to teach each other. Free to take their wireless systems in and out of classrooms, the older students frequently coach the younger ones through new concepts.

For example, the sixth graders recently visited the second-grade classroom, where they mentored the younger students in creating a survey and posting the results on a spreadsheet. The third graders also met with the kindergarten class, helping them pull up information from the web about Native American villages.

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Pat Labriola, Principal  
McAuliffe Heights Program at Irving  
Elementary School

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Bryce Cossitor, Technology Coordinator  
Altoona Area School District

“The kids often help each other in their own classrooms, too. I’ll never forget the time I sat between two kindergarten girls, and one showed the other shortcuts for incorporating clip art into a presentation and reducing the size of the images! It’s simply amazing. We were expecting this to be big stuff to our students, but they just do it,” Labriola marvels.

Comparing this year’s kindergarten class with last year’s, teacher Marlana Miller says, “The students are much more comfortable with the technology now. Last year, many of my students were hesitant to explore a program when given a rare opportunity. This year, exploring independently with confidence is an everyday occurrence.”

#### **Teachers Interacting, Too**

Having their own laptops helps Irving’s teachers collaborate as well. “In one of our in-service sessions, we said, ‘Let’s take what we’ve learned through our peer group tutoring and make sure we’re using it ourselves,’” Labriola reveals. “So now our staff keeps notes on their laptops about how various ideas work, and they’re sharing their success stories. This has helped them start to work as teams across grade levels, and they’re actually visiting each other’s classes to observe and integrate new skills into their own classrooms.”

Bryce Cossitor, technology coordinator for the Altoona Area School District, says, “The process of transforming McAuliffe Heights into a digital school has been a fascinating journey. As teachers and students redefine their roles in the classroom, we’ve begun to see a renewed interest in cooperative learning strategies and higher levels of student engagement across the curriculum.”

#### **“We Get to Do Homework!”**

Of course, having the latest technology tools means little if the students ignore them. But at McAuliffe Heights, that’s hardly the case. In fact, school administrators are in the midst of a phased process that eventually will allow the laptops to go home with the students, extending learning still further beyond the classroom. A delighted sixth-grade class was the first to stash their iBook computers in their backpacks to take home.

“I walked into a classroom that morning, and a student yelled out, ‘Hey, Mr. Labriola, guess what we get to do today?’” Labriola recalls. “They were all so excited! Their first assignment was to write an essay, and their teacher said they could hardly wait to get to it. Now when was the last time you announced a homework assignment, and the kids actually wanted to do it?”

Labriola proudly adds that since McAuliffe Heights’ technology integration, the school has put its low-performing past firmly to rest. In 2001 McAuliffe Heights was designated a Pennsylvania Governor’s School of Excellence for achieving three consecutive years of significant growth on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) standardized tests. In 2002 the school was honored again, signifying four years in a row with major gains on the PSSA. It was the second time that the school was so honored for its academic achievement.

### **Touching the Future**

All of McAuliffe Heights' students and teachers gather for an opening assembly each morning. The staff concludes the session by reciting Christa McAuliffe's pledge: "I touch the future; I teach." The students respond with "We are the future; we learn."

Says Biesecker, "Little did we know, at the inception of the McAuliffe Heights Program, the powerful effect those words would have on our program. With the integration of the digital school, our students and faculty are touching the future every day, and learning in ways we'd never imagined."

### **For More Information**

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