

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

September 26, 2001

Bill Schlotter

SCHOOLLINK PROJECT CONNECTS SANTA PAULA TEACHERS WITH UC SANTA BARBARA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

When teachers returned to their classes at Santa Paula's Grace Thille and Glen City elementary schools in August, they resumed building an Internet link with UC Santa Barbara designed to help them educate children who are learning to speak English.

Called SchoolLink, the project -- which one day might become a statewide effort-- connects by computer teachers, administrators, parents and others to each other and to UCSB's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education.

The project's aim is to solve educational problems and to help teachers develop an archive of problems and solutions based on real cases relevant to their students.

Such archives can be of use to teachers and in teacher training.

"SchoolLink helps to bring together all the knowledge the teachers have, along with what the university provides, by way of media technology," said project developer Michael Gerber, a professor in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education.

"The university is trying to make its resources usable to people in the schools, and I think this project is pioneering a new way of doing that."

The project began a year ago with a gift from the Verizon Foundation and has been supplemented by a \$500,000 three-year grant from the Office for Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, U.S. Department of Education. The project's first year was devoted to organizing, acquiring technology, and developing technology systems -- such as building a project website.

SchoolLink now moves to the implementation phase, during which the principals and teachers in the two elementary schools will learn how to use and contribute to the new system.

Gerber said SchoolLink should work something like this:

Say teachers in a school agree that it is very difficult for them to teach reading to students who are still learning to speak English.

With technical assistance from SchoolLink, all of the critical information about the problem will be recorded and put on the SchoolLink website, including video clip examples of students' performance in class, teachers' observations and professional opinions, and summaries of relevant research.

Video interviews with experts may be added.

The result is a multimedia collection of resources for addressing the problem.

Teachers then work in small teams with the principal to share their views of the collected information and to plan solutions to the problem.

Teams would meet together but they also would be able to work independently and communicate in special "chat rooms" and through e-mail.

"Everybody has some knowledge that bears on these problems," Gerber said.

"SchoolLink provides them with a way of using all of this knowledge, to learn from one another, to form a consensus of what is known about the problem and what information they still need to acquire."

At this point in the process, the group may use SchoolLink to tap resources at UCSB, Gerber said.

"Their search is helped by information that UCSB faculty and doctoral students add to the SchoolLink site," Gerber said.

"Also, because the information they can retrieve will be far more than one person can digest, teachers and principals will learn to operate as a team."

They also will learn a process of solving big and important teaching problems, and that every strategy and solution can be improved over time.

The problem, process and resolution all become part of an archive stored at UCSB, available to teachers facing similar situations and to those striving to be better teachers.

"I'm really excited about this because it provides the school with all the benefits of having contact with the university and all the university's knowledge, but it empowers the people at the school and encourages them to be responsible for their own students and their own professional development," Gerber said.

Gerber hopes that one day, SchoolLink might help schools throughout California solve the gamut of educational problems.

For now, he is content to try to help two predominantly Latino Santa Paula schools better educate children struggling to learn basic skills while also attempting to learn English.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.