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## Some hardware for homework

**J.P. Morgan Chase is giving free computers to sixth-graders at one Tampa school. By 2006, every child in the school should have one.**

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TAMPA - They aren't getting free cars from Oprah Winfrey, but they're getting something many youths consider almost as good.

Computers.

Every sixth-grader at Sligh Middle School is being offered a free desktop computer - installed in their home - through a partnership between the school and J.P. Morgan Chase.

Sligh will become the first public school in Hillsborough County, and one of only a few nationwide, where the entire student body will have home computers. The practice is more common in private schools, though some public schools in Maine, Massachusetts, Virginia and Georgia have loaned students laptops to carry home.

Volunteers from J.P. Morgan Chase will begin installing 170 of the Hewlett Packard computers Saturday, duplicating a program it began in 1999 at Ditmas Middle School in Brooklyn, N.Y. The families also receive 10 hours of free Internet service a month through NetZero, free e-mail service through beehive.org, and free technical assistance as long as the children are at Sligh.

The computers come loaded with Microsoft XP software, including programs that filter pornographic sites from young eyes. The families even get a table to put the computer on. (Printers are not included.)

"At first I thought this is too good to be true," said Plant City's Miriam Davis, 40, whose daughter Kaleigh goes to Sligh and is in line for the technology. "When I learned more, I was one of the first to sign up."

The company plans to give each sixth-grader a computer during each of the next three years. By 2006, every child in the school will have a home PC. The computers are theirs to keep.

The gift of technology doesn't stop with the students. All school employees - from teachers to custodians - are being given laptops.

It's an investment of more than \$1-million, said Sligh principal Juanita Underwood, who still can't believe her school's good fortune.

"This is the greatest gift you could give my students and faculty," she said.

The company's goal is to erode what is commonly called the digital divide between the rich and the poor.

"A couple of dozen families already had computers," said Mary Ann Fullerton, education initiatives coordinator for J.P. Morgan Chase. "But by and large, most did not."

Eight of every 10 children at the school on Sligh Avenue near 22nd Avenue qualify for free or reduced-price meals because of low family income. Most of the 960 students are minorities.

So far, Underwood said, two-thirds of the school's 300 sixth-graders' families have completed the required training.

"I'm still working on the other 33 percent," she said. "When I tell them they're free, they're like, 'What else do I have to do? When's the bill coming?'"

"I'm reaching out to people who say nobody gives us anything for free."

A second round of installation will begin in January for the holdouts, but no one will be forced to accept a computer.

"We want this to work," Underwood said.

The computers are free but they come with a couple of strings attached.

Parents must attend a six-hour training session on how to use the computer. If they move and take their child out of Sligh before they finish middle school, they are supposed to return the computer.

The same rule applies to employees, who agree that if the computer is damaged, vandalized or stolen, they are responsible.

First-year teacher Carmyn Evans said she chose Sligh over another school partly because of the free computers.

"In education, the big push is technology, technology, technology," she said. "It's needed. This is a tool that's preparing them more for high school and college."

She plans her classes on her computers, and puts together Power Point presentations for her students. She also frequently reads the school's online bulletin board for teachers, which keeps her informed of what's going on across the campus.

Head custodian Norman Bacon turned down a computer, for now, because he worried it might get stolen. But classroom aide Felecia Anderson accepted hers and uses it to pay bills online and take notes for her classes at Hillsborough Community College.

"The only thing I want to do is download solitaire," she said, laughing.

Crystal Covert, J.P. Morgan's vice president of community and public relations, said Sligh was chosen for its high poverty rate and its principal's passion.

The company wanted to duplicate the program it started at the Brooklyn school, which showed a decreased detention rate, increased attendance and more family involvement in the years after the

computers were installed.

Tampa is J.P. Morgan's fourth-largest employee hub, with about 5,000 workers.

"Our company believes in giving back to the community where our employees live and work," Covert said.

Underwood said she hopes children use the computers for classroom research and presentations and their parents use them to e-mail teachers and check homework assignments online.

Last year's pilot installation in about 60 homes went well.

One recipient, Edward Harris, 13, turned in an application as soon as he got it. He now uses the computer to look up math definitions and to research science projects. He plays games, too.

"I use it almost every day," said Harris, now a seventh-grader. The computer is in his room.

His family had a computer but it was joint property, used by his mother and his sister. "Now I don't have to wait for them," he said.

Underwood said a few of Sligh's older students and their parents are jealous about being left out of the computer giveaway. But she said she is just following the rules of the grant from J.P. Morgan.

She even had one mother who asked the unthinkable, to keep her child back in the sixth grade so he could get a computer this year.

"I just smiled," Underwood said. "I will not open that Pandora's box."

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