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MOREHEAD CITY — Using a laptop computer, Morehead City Middle School seventh-grader Adam Eckert created a PowerPoint presentation Thursday comparing two books by the same author.

He then had to search on the Internet for artwork that reflected his feelings about the author's books and merge them into his presentation.

His English language arts classmates were working on the same project, and each had a laptop to complete their presentation.

The students were excited about interacting with each other and their teacher, but they were protective of their computers – with good reason.

The students helped earn the money to pay for them.

Morehead City Middle School's PTO agreed to raise money to lease 24 laptops so their students would have better access to state-of-the-art technology.

"There was so much we wanted to do and we felt technology had taken a back seat for so long," said technology facilitator Lisa Raines. "In order for students to compete, the computers are absolutely needed."

"We've got to keep up with the technology, and we couldn't wait another two or three years. That's another group of kids that's not getting the education they need," she said.

Advisory council member Stephanie McIntyre agreed.

"Coming from a county where the school system provided up-to-date technology, it's sad that we have to do things like this to get it," she said. "I hate that the school system doesn't have the funds to pay for it. We're getting behind other school systems."

"They (students) are just not using books anymore like we did in school. They use technology."

The estimated cost for a three-year lease agreement is \$35,000, and students and parents have been raising money since September to make the first year's payment.

"It's not been easy," said PTO president Gilda Parsons. "It's like pulling teeth to fund raise at the middle school level. But we've made it. We're hoping the county will partly fund the lease."

Several other projects were put on the back burner at the school to provide the laptops, according to Ms. Parsons.

She added that she understood the county and school system face many needs, but technology is essential for students to be ready for a global marketplace.

"If the county doesn't have the money I understand, but if they have it they need to see what it's used for and that we need it," Ms. Parsons said.

Ms. Raines said a lease agreement has advantages. If computers breakdown, the company provides the tech support. And the school can upgrade out-of-date technology in the future.

Ms. Parsons said the only way the PTO could afford to get the computers was through a lease agreement.

"It would have taken us three years to raise the money to buy the laptops," she said.

The laptops are transported on a cart from classroom to classroom.

Ms. Raines said the mobile cart and laptops have several advantages, with the biggest being a savings on space.

"We had a need for another computer lab, but no space to put it," she said. "Now we have a third lab without using up the space."

Laptops provide easy access to students in the classroom, according to English language arts teacher Dega Lancaster.

"It's much more flexible being able to stay in the classroom and move and interact with the kids," said Ms. Lancaster. "The kids are much more energetic and enthusiastic about learning."

The wireless laptops create flexibility for outside projects, said Ms. Raines. For example students can take them outside for a science class.

Students got their first opportunity to use the laptops three weeks ago.

"That first day I saw the excitement for learning, and the energy," said principal Sue Kreiser. "It gave me goose bumps. They have such pride in these laptops because they helped earn the money. The kids feel ownership."

Student Adam Eckert agreed.

"It makes me feel really good because it's something we worked for. We really earned it," he said. "We just didn't come to school and use them."