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Sixth-graders earn computers through Elevate Miami

BY SABINE LOUISSAINT

Like most kids his age, 12-year-old Miami student Andres Castro likes to surf the Internet to research school assignments or check up on the stats of his favorite baseball player, David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox. But without a personal computer at home, the sixth-grader from Shenandoah Middle School had to take numerous trips to the Downtown Miami Library or use his school's media lab.

That all changed in April, when Andres was among 600 sixth-graders from 12 Miami-Dade County middle schools who earned a personal computer through the Elevate Miami Rites of Passage Initiative.

"More than ever, students need access to computers and the Internet, but students from low-income families have a disadvantage," said Mercy Ortiz, business teacher at Shenandoah Middle.

The City of Miami Education Compact launched the initiative in an attempt to keep Miami students globally competitive and to address the digital divide between those with Internet access and those without. It plans to continue the program this school year.

"Elevate Miami is great because it gives kids whose parents cannot afford to buy them computers the chance to have one," Ortiz said. "It is very helpful because as teachers, we cannot give too many computer assignments when so many students do not have access to computers."

STRICT REQUIREMENTS

Sixth-graders from low-income families earn the personal computers by meeting some strict requirements.

Dontae Cobb, 12, of Citrus Grove Middle School was not at all dissuaded by the program's extensive demands, which include maintaining a grade of C or better in all subjects, as well as having good personal conduct throughout the year. The program also asks students to complete two special projects for each class as assigned by their teachers.

"I knew I was going to get a computer because I like to study and I usually get As and Bs," Dontae said. "I did not mind doing the assignments because they were fun and I learned a lot."

The students receive Dell computers with Pentium 4 processors, 512 RAM MB, a floppy disk

drive, CD-ROM, USB ports, color monitor, cable DSL ready, speakers, anti-virus software, Windows XP professional, a one-year warranty and lifetime bilingual toll-free tech support.

The computers were purchased with funding from the City of Miami and grants from the Knight Foundation. Microsoft also provided software. PerScholas, a company that refurbishes and provides computers for low-income families, reduced the price of their computers and provided the shipping and handling. AT&T also donated \$125,000 for Internet access for the families.

PARENT PARTICIPATION

Winning the computer was a collaborative effort between Cobb and his mother, Detra Bryant, because Elevate Miami also requires participation from parents. Parents have to attend two mandatory Rites of Passage workshops, where they learn about computers.

"I feel great he was able to accomplish this goal," Bryant said. "It was a great opportunity for him to earn a computer while having fun and learning. I wish more kids [would] take advantage of this opportunity."

While mandatory participation from parents is laudable, it does put parents who work odd hours or have two jobs at a disadvantage, said Ortiz at Shenandoah Middle. The workshops were offered several times throughout the year on weeknights and weekends.

Still, "there were many students who had the grades and who had completed the assignments, but could not receive the computers because their parents were not able to attend the workshops," Ortiz said.

However, most parents and students were pleased with the program. The benefits go beyond just winning a computer, they said.

"With or without the computers, this was a very good experience," Bryant said. "It gave students more responsibility and accountability. They had to complete tasks, research and learn about new things, and turn it in on time. My son appreciates the computer even more because he knows he worked hard for it. He earned it and deserves it, along with the other students in the program."

David thinks the program also encourages students to have a better work ethic.

"It helps students who slack off," he said. "It made them endure. Even though they thought studying was hard, it made them see the reward at the end. It gave them endurance and they saw that studying wasn't so bad."