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Maine Laptop Funding Threatened

By [Katie Dean](#)

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2:00 a.m. May 30, 2002 PDT

A \$180-million budget shortfall in Maine is threatening a statewide laptop program for middle schools, just as teachers are seeing initial success with their students.

In December, the state signed a four-year, \$37.2-million contract with Apple Computer to provide wireless iBooks to all seventh- and eighth-grade students and teachers in Maine.

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Governor Angus King spearheaded the controversial program, considered the largest educational technology purchase by a state.

But with the shortfall, some legislators believe that money for the laptop program would be better spent elsewhere.

King will meet with legislative leaders this summer to figure out whether a meeting of the whole legislature is necessary to address

the budget shortfall.

"I don't think the budget shortfall will affect the implementation of the plan," King

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said. "It may be that the legislature will pull some of that future money that's sitting in the bank."

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"It would be very shortsighted to undermine a project of this long-term value because of a one-year budget problem," he said.

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The state's legislature-approved, \$25-million [Maine Learning Technology Endowment](#) will pay for the Apple contract along with funds from the Maine School and Library Network.

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Some legislators are eyeing the \$25 million to cover other state expenses.

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"Now what I'm hearing from a number of legislators -- who were supportive of the laptop program -- is that they are withdrawing their support from keeping the endowment," said Maine Senate President [Richard Bennett](#) (R-Norway).

Bennett agreed that a laptop can be a "very powerful tool for learning."

"My concerns over the plan are mainly fiscal," he said.

Bennett said that an alternative to the endowment is implementing a "pay-as-you-go" system for the laptop program.

Tony Sprague, a spokesman for the governor, said that all programs could be considered if and when the legislature meets.

He said King may have to use his curtailment authority, which allows the governor to make reductions in general fund spending.

To make up the \$180 million, the cut in spending would be around 7 percent across the board.

In the meantime, laptop proponents hope the program will be rolled out to all seventh-graders and their teachers this fall.

Nine middle schools have already received their laptops and are serving as demonstration schools for the rest of the state.

King recently visited Pembroke Elementary -- the most rural of the demonstration

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schools, located in an economically depressed area -- and saw results of the laptop implementation.

"The success is just unbelievable," King said.

King said the program has all the benefits that laptop proponents predicted: Students are becoming more comfortable with technology and have access to tools they need to learn.

And pilot schools are having fewer problems with attendance and discipline, which is an unexpected benefit.

"What teachers are seeing more than anything is engagement," King said. "You don't see the looking out the window and giggling and stuff."

School administrators are thrilled with what they have seen so far.

"We have nothing but success stories here," said Paula Smith, principal of Pembroke Elementary school, whose 25 seventh-graders are part of the pilot program. "I haven't had a student in the office since the laptops."

"This is the one way we're equal to every other seventh-grade in the state," Smith said. Students "have a real appreciation of what doors it's opened for them."

If students don't get their laptops as planned, "it's really going to be detrimental," Smith said.

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