

Andover Townsman, Andover, MA

June 10, 2010

Ecoutez! Language lab present now open

ACE donation, grant pay for addition to AHS curriculum

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Teacher Christopher Krueger stands in front of his Spanish 5 class, rattling off instructions in rapid Spanish. Students, each sitting in front of a computer screen, put on pairs of headphones. A buzz of conversation, en espanol, fills the room.

So begins a lesson using Andover High School's new foreign language lab, installed this spring and funded entirely by donations. The volunteer and nonprofit Andover Coalition for Education combined money from its fundraising efforts with a grant from the Horne Family Foundation to cover the lab's \$128,000 price tag.

With high-tech computer and audio equipment, the lab allows students to converse with their classmates, instructor, or native speakers and language students around the globe, via the Internet.

"It gives them all more speaking opportunities," says Krueger, as students, randomly paired by the lab's computer, speak Spanish to one another through microphones and headphones. "There's just a limited amount of conversations you can have (in the classroom), and you're going to lose engagement."

ACE raised money for two years, sending a letter to every Andover household soliciting donations. A group of families also created a "matching pool," doubling the campaign's proceeds, said Tina Girdwood, ACE member. The lab is product of a partnership between the AHS foreign language department, school administration and ACE.

Students in all of the language classes offered at AHS - Spanish, French, Latin, German, Mandarin Chinese and American Sign Language - will use the lab. Since foreign language is required, most every student who attends AHS will make use of the lab.

"This is a huge difference from the old lab," said senior Mike Levenson during a recent Spanish lesson before Monday's graduation. "It's a lot easier to learn this way, and people get way more into it."

Levenson's classmate, junior Danielle DiCenzo, agreed the lab gives students much more time to speak a language, instead of waiting to be called on in the classroom.

Classes can use the lab for everything from dubbing a foreign language film or e-mailing pen-pals in another country to recording spoken answers to a quiz.

At the front of the room, the teacher can see what is on all the student's screens and listen to or talk to any

student in the room.

To move from exercise to exercise in his Spanish 5 class, Krueger used a setting where he spoke into his own microphone, and the entire class heard him in their headphones.

The new lab replaces the department's existing, long-outdated lab, which relied on cassette tape recorders. To record something, a teacher would have students press "record" on their cassette players at the same time, which easily lead to mix-ups.

Teachers would be taking home bags full of cassette tapes to listen to and grade, said Krueger, if they even had a cassette player at home. The old lab's inefficiency lead to disuse, he said.

Now, an oral quiz that would have taken an entire class period, pulling students into the hall to quiz one-on-one, takes minutes to record students simultaneously. The teacher saves the recordings to a small flash drive, and can listen to and grade the recordings on any computer.

"This is a much more efficient use of time," said Krueger, who is in his ninth year teaching Spanish in Andover. "What could have used a whole block now uses five minutes in the lab."

The lab, which was originally expected to be installed during February vacation, was met with a few delays and came online in early May. An open house for the public was held March 31, before the lab was fully operational.

All of the 16 language teachers at AHS were trained in the lab in May, and classes have been using it for roughly one month.

In an age of ipods and Facebook, there has been a short learning curve for students to become comfortable with the lab, said Krueger.

"It allows us to combine technology with language instruction, and that's tremendous for students," he said. "It teaches self-guided study and to be an independent learner."