

inventing the future

Families That Learn Together

Akron schoolteachers Karen Grindall and John Bennett not only connect their students to the world outside, but to their families down the street.

BY ANTON ZUIKER

When educational technology expert Alan November addressed The Cleveland Foundation's annual community meeting in May, he challenged the educational establishment, and the community, to rethink the classroom. "Our schools were designed to help kids succeed in the industrial economy," he said. They are designed, in other words, to teach students how to follow instructions. But in the new technological economy, said November, people who need to be told what to do will be at a disadvantage; people who know how to figure out what the problem is – and then teach themselves – will be in demand. In fact, it's already happening. And schools are going to have to be rethought – redesigned – to develop that kind of person.

There's something else.

Studies have shown, he said, that family is the most important factor in a student's success, yet U.S. schools are set up in such a way as to exclude parents from the educational process.

Somewhere in his talk, November briefly mentioned a classroom effort in Akron called C5 that is pioneering a way to reconnect parents to the classroom.



Five years ago, it seems, he had given another talk – this time to an Akron audience. Karen Grindall, a teacher at Portage Path Elementary School, who had heard him speak before, urged fellow teacher John Bennett to come along. "John protested that he had a cold, but I threw a box of Kleenex at him and said, 'You're going.'" Bennett left the speech with the idea for C5 – Children Connecting Classroom, Community and Curriculum.

Thirteen years earlier, Portage Path had been one of the first schools in the area to receive classroom computers from Apple Computers. More recently, the statewide SchoolNet program had put even more computers in the classrooms. But access to this technology was still limited to the classroom, indeed to the child's "seat time" in front of the monitor. C5's basic goal was to get students' families at home connected both to the Internet and to the classroom. Time Warner Cable, which had already linked Akron schools to the Internet with its RoadRunner digital cable service, enthusiastically endorsed Bennett's idea.

Learning together with C5: First and fifth graders build relationships while reading and studying together.

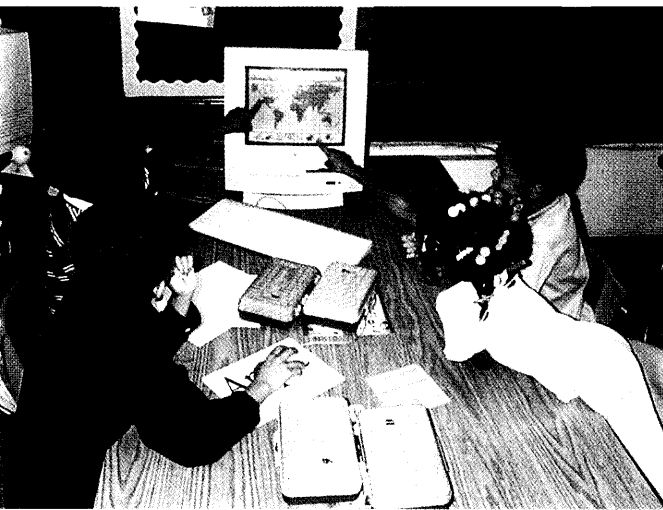
C5 started small and slowly, with Bennett and Grindall and a handful of families. Akron philanthropists Roger and Judy Reed provided mentorship and financial counseling. Judy Reed, as it happened, had been in the first class to graduate from Portage Path school in 1955. Now, the Summit Education Initiative is the primary funder. When a family contributes \$500 to the cost of the computer (families have a choice of an Apple iMac or a Hewlett-Packard PC, and each comes with a printer and software), C5 puts in another \$500. Time Warner provides free RoadRunner Internet service. Eighty percent of students at Portage Path qualify for reduced or free lunches, but half of Grindall's students are now connected to the Internet at home through C5.

Grindall and Bennett don't use Internet filtering software. "We teach responsibility and respect," says Grindall. The teachers recommend parents consult

Internet for Families and Kids, a listing of safe Web sites appropriate for children. Parents are encouraged to place the computer in the kitchen or other open area, and to sit beside their children at the computer. "These kids have so much information bombarding them," says Grindall, "they need help learning to sift." She outlines a class lesson on her Web page, listing the Web links with which students should begin their explorations. Students then must report back to the class on what they found – and learned.

"It helps kids be valued for their thinking and teaches them to respect the other kids," she says. "It also means sometimes having to admit that they didn't look deep enough. And that's what I hear from employers that they want in their workers.

"I've dumped the lessons that weren't effective, so I could find ways for the children to be more active and do more problem-solving." She uses *Funbrain.com*



to give students their quizzes and tests – students take the quiz online, the Web site automatically scores the quizzes and sends Grindall the answers, giving her more time to plan lessons.

At the start of the school year, the class works in a large group setting; by autumn, the children are working in small groups or by themselves. Grindall uses low-tech tools, too: Each student has a portable dry-erase board, so Grindall can give individual instruction throughout the day. "There's a lot of

interaction and 'noise' in the classroom," she says, "and a lot of cooperative learning and collaborative work, with very few disputes."

One day, a white-faced hornet flew into Bennett's classroom. Trapping the hornet in a dish, he aimed an eyeball camera at the bug and projected the image onto a forty-one-inch Sony television screen. His students watched for a long while, counting the legs and antennae and discussing the wings and eyes. The Internet provided lots of follow-up resource material.

Test scores soon began improving. Those of Grindall's fourth-grade students who were connected at home were averaging twenty-five points higher on state aptitude tests; connected fifth graders, twenty-seven points higher.

Grindall and Bennett so successfully integrated the computers and online learning into their curricula – and engaged parents – that other teachers soon wanted in. When school started this past August, C5 had grown to incorporate twenty-eight teachers in two schools; nearly all the teachers at Portage Path participate, and now teachers at Perkins Middle School are involved.

Each teacher, with his or her students, creates and manages a Web page. Students use their home computers for homework and to complete their portions of the Web site, at www.neo.rr.com/C5. (Be sure to capitalize the C.)

The students take strong ownership of their personal online portfolios and collective Web site. (For safety, no last names are used, and the children can't be contacted through the Web site.)

Parents have become more connected to the classroom, even exchanging e-mail with their son or daughter during school hours about assignments and other things. Grindall also finds a community or business leader to be a mentor to each of her students. These role models, she says, regularly e-mail their charges, giving the

kids another authority to learn from. Bennett takes his first-graders every month to visit with senior citizens at Sumner on Merriman. Digital movies of classroom activities produced by the students are shown over Sumner's in-house television network, which provides a rich basis for interaction.

"C5 is unique in the way it organized its partnerships," says Summit Education Initiative Executive Director Barbara Greene, and she's excited that the curriculum will integrate Palm Pilots this year into lessons about environmental sciences. Bennett's students already use *WeatherChannel.com* to learn math, weather and geography. "Teachers are beginning to understand the role of technology in learning," says Greene.

Last year, C5 was singled out as one of sixteen exemplary projects and invited to the Secretary of Education's Conference on Technology in Washington. Bennett took four students along. Working in pairs, they created three movies each about a Washington memorial and the national leader associated with the memorial. You can find them on the C5 Web site. "Watch the Vietnam Memorial movie in particular," says Bennett, "and remember that the students created this by themselves."

The secret to making C5 work, say Grindall and Bennett, is seizing every opportunity to teach and empower students. They also offer evening training sessions for parents. "In our schools, parents are low-entry workers, and many weren't comfortable with learning when they were in school," says Grindall. "This program is helping families feel more comfortable with learning."

The kids have a chance to become teachers, too. One student's mother, who worked at a menial job at a local hospital, used the computer skills she learned from her daughter to win a promotion at the hospital to a better-paying position, entering data into the hospital's computer system. "And then the family moved into a better house," says Grindall. ■

Former editor Anton Zuiker covers the frontiers of technology and change for Live.