THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS HERE

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You'll be hard-pressed to find chalk at Brescia House School. You'll also be hardpressed to find someone who isn't updating their Facebook status or firing off a tweet during the break – all piggybacking on the school's wi-fi network.

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PICTURES: CHRIS COLLINGRIDGE

Brescia House's atrium is not just a place to eat a sandwich and take a break. It's wired up and ready for internet action by pupils like Lehlonolo Jamnda, who is in Grade 9, and head girl Nyaradzo Muzembe.

That's because the Bryanston school went digital four years ago, becoming a hub for e-learning. It ditched the chalkboards and embraced the reality that in a modern society e-learning and, yes, even social media at school are bang on hi-tech trends.

Head girl Nyaradzo Muzembe shows off the school's atrium, an indoor gathering area for the girls. Among the patterned scatter cushions there are groups of girls enjoying break. Most are peering into their laptops that are pimped with blingy stickers. Against the wall is a huge flat-screen TV that does duty as a digital notice board. It keeps updating, much like an airport arrivals and departures board.

"Sure, there are a lot of the girls who put all sorts of decorations on their laptops," says Nyaradzo. "It's like how we decorated our school files when we had to lug those around instead of our laptops."

A couple of girls show off screensavers that include collages of holiday photographs and striking pin-ups of Justin Bieber and Jaden Smith.

Nyaradzo was in the class of girls with whomthe school launched its digital migration programme in 2009.

"My laptop has lasted all these years. Thankfully I haven't dropped it yet and it still works fine," she says.

Her assignments, class presentations and note-taking are all done digitally, while most of her textbooks are digital. After class she hooks into the school's server for the teacher's notes and, of course, she also has the world wide web at her fingertips for reference.

Teacher and ICT co-ordinator Lyneth Crighton says each high school child has some kind of portable electronic device, under a "bring your own device" (BYOD) plan. The school recommends a range of computers with certain specifications and parents pay for the device.

"This way we could work out deals with different providers so we got computers that are more rugged and have a longer battery life. We even worked out a special kind of insurance. The laptops go for about R6 500," says Crighton.

She says it is part of a digital vision that the school believes needs to be in place to respond to the global shift in the way children are taught.

And the school starts the children young. In Grade R the children may be dressed as Snow White and Dr Seuss for their dress-up day, but they are being put through their paces clicking and dragging items across a computer screen and trying to wrap small hands around adult-sized computer mouses.

The Grade 6s' digital showpiece is the first of its kind in Africa – the Promethean Active Table. It's an oversized table-top tablet-like device. Six children can work on the table at any one time. The interactive games help hone the girls' skills in collaborating while giving them individual tasks to complete. It allows them to make creative choices with a multimedia twist.

Teacher Sue Hardie also connects up a tablet and an e-board, which become a screen for a group of other Grade 6s to "play" a game of crashing planes into common nouns, proper nouns, adjectives and other building blocks of sentences.

"We're not just giving the children knowledge – these days they can get that off the internet – we are given them the tools to interpret and apply information," says Hardie.

In this school of the future all the children have security cards on lanyards that gives them access to security doors, library books, printing facilities and even their tuck shop credit.

It's perfect, says Kirsten Everett, a Grade 9 pupil who is a selfconfessed digital junkie and has published her own e-book,

Eclipse Child.

"This system does mean your parents can get a list of all the things you've bought at the tuck shop, but it also means no one has to bring cash to school and that is safer," she says.

Kirsten jokes that she has a pen and she uses it, especially since the final exams in Grade 12 must be written with ink and pen.

But she shows off why her computer is her all-in-one tool.

On it she's created a movie clip for a project to produce a commercial; she pulls up notes easily and uses a variety of tools, programs and apps to merge notes, highlight summaries and to pair them up with her e-textbooks. She can also dock her laptop on to a central docking system on the teacher's desk so her presentations and assignments can be shared and viewed by the whole class.

Says Crighton: "We did have some parents who didn't think that this was such a good idea at first, but they've come to recognise its benefits. We even had a story of a mom who was stuck in traffic with her daughter for three hours, but by the time they got out of the traffic her daughter had finished all her homework on her laptop."

Crighton adds that it's critical to have good back-end support. Brescia House has its own on-site ICT support centre outsourced to computer problem fixers, Dial-A-Nerd, which also helped set up the school's tech backbone.

On-site support means teachers and students can bring in their laptops for upgrades and repairs, even over the school holidays. It allows the e-learning environment to function with as few hiccups as possible, although it does come with a price tag.

Sidney McGee, key account manager with Dial-A-Nerd, says: "It's no longer an option for schools to be neglecting IT because of how the world is moving."

But McGee acknowledges that forking out for a digital overhaul is not a cheap exercise. As a first step, McGee says, schools should have a reliable, high-speed internet connection. For about 500 pupils to access the internet at the same time should cost about R10 000 a month, he says.

Another model is a mobile computer lab type set-up with entrylevel laptops and mobile charging stations. It would cost R250 000 for about 30 laptops and two mobile chargers.

Something is better than nothing when it comes to going digital for schools. McGee cautions that Moore's Law holds true and that technology becomes outdated so quickly that sometimes it's wiser to make a bigger investment upfront.

"The benefit of any initial set-up is that it does make a school realise the potential and the benefits of going digital," he says.

Crighton is fully aware of how rapidly technology reaches its sell-by date.

"Going digital means you're constantly learning because the technology changes so quickly. We are involved with a lot of webinars and actual seminars, and in setting up we visited the US and Australia to get an idea of how countries at the forefront of e-learning were making it happen in their schools."

Crighton adds that the school didn't go hi-tech out of a "fear of missing out" syndrome. It's about the right tools for the right jobs and the right environment, she says.

"We have to be able to give children the skills and tools to cope and thrive so that they aren't left behind in a world in which technology is critical," says Crighton.