Belding Middle School seventh-graders, from left to right, Amber Palethorpe, Leah Lindsey, Lacy Bannister and Holly Hostetler check out an iMovie that Lindsey made for her final technology lab project.
Eric Spicer doesn’t teach a typical computer class. His Belding Middle School students aren’t working on how many words per minute they can type or spending countless hours on word processing and data entry on computers almost half their age.

Instead, they’re burning compact discs (CDs), editing movies, doing live broadcasts and having fun.

"I find it very enjoyable," said seventh-grader Max Cook.

Spicer, who began instructing the class three years ago, wanted to revamp the middle school’s technology lab. The equipment was old and out of date. To edit videos, students were using two videocassette recorders (VCRs) and broadcasts were taped on cassette tapes.

"Nobody edits video that way anymore," Spicer said. "Nobody uses tapes anymore either. They use CDs. What the kids were using were all obsolete."

Even the students knew they needed better equipment.

So in conjunction with his master’s degree program at Michigan State University, where Spicer had to do a project on how to improve the technology at his school, the transformation from an out-of-date technology lab to a top-of-the-line facility began.

During the 2001-2002 school year, Belding students were given a small sample of the technology that could be available to them. One iMac computer was set up with audiovisual programs and was used during classes. With it, the students were able to create movies and video announcements.

"The kids love it and I just get more excited about it," Spicer said. "If the kids are excited and I'm excited isn't that what we want?"

After that, Spicer discovered a program through Apple where the Belding school district could lease 11 iMac computers, a laserjet printer, two digital cameras, a server to network the computers online and all the accessory cord, software, training, technical support and more for three years for a cost of just less than $10,000 a year.

With the approval of the school board, the middle school entered into the lease, which can be broken at any time. At the lease’s end the district can buy all the equipment for $1 or renew the lease with new equipment.

"The old computers were fossils," Cook said. "The iMacs are a big upgrade."

SEE PLAYGROUND, PAGE 2
Eighth-graders Tomisha Nelson and Travis Andresen do the morning announcements for Belding Middle School. Through the technology lab, students are able to air live broadcasts of the announcements for the entire school to watch.

PLAYGROUND

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The money for the computers came from internal funding within the middle school. No additional district funds were used to pay for the lease.

"We went through a lot of bugs getting everything ready and under way," said middle school principal Mike Wallace. "Now that it's rolling it's doing very well. The students love it and they're all able to do all sorts of computer projects on them."

"So far I'm very happy with it," he said. "It's been a great start to what we envision to be a wonderful program over the next few years."

The lab is an electronic playground for the middle school students to explore.

"I wanted to expose the kids to as much out there as I could," Spicer said. "It gets boring if you have all these things here and the kids can't explore it. I give them a project and they figure it out on their own."

The future is this - computers and knowing how to use them. In addition to learning how to use the computer and programs, students also are given projects that tie into the curriculum used in other classes and to explore careers.

The students create commercials, experiment with graphic design, do live broadcasts for the morning announcements and learn some Web design. If you get good enough at this stuff you can make some extra money." Spicer said. "If you know about computers you're going to go far in life."

The semester's first project is creating a compilation CD from compact discs that the students already own. Spicer also incorporates a discussion on the ethics and legality of taking music from the Internet.

"The compilation CD gets them used to the computer," he said. "It's a fun project to get them used to using the computer."

The project is one of the students' favorites.

"I like all the freedom he gives us," said seventh-grader Jay Congdon. "We can do pretty much whatever we want to with these computers."

The class is offered at each middle school grade level. Students taking the course each year will learn progressively more advanced techniques and complete more advanced projects.

Because the computers are networked together, the students can e-mail and instant message each other. This teaches them typing and e-mail skills that they will need in the future, but in a regulated environment so there are no safety concerns about who they might be talking to online.

"I've learned a lot," said seventh-grader Greg Behrens. "I wasn't all that good with computers."

The classroom also is used by adult education students and fifth- and sixth-graders from St. Joseph Catholic School, who share time with their fielding Middle School counterparts. Spicer and Wallace would like to open up the lab to community members in the future.

"We're working toward that right now," Wallace said.

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