

# Grant takes M'town by surprise

## Plans for new technologies, staff, training

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Times Herald-Record

■ SOME MIDDLE AND high school students in the Middletown School District wore big smiles on Tuesday. It wasn't just because Middletown had just won \$20 million in grants in the federal Race to the Top district competition, which was reason enough. For them, part of the thrill was that part of the award will be used to buy 5,000 tablets like iPads for their own instructional use.

"I was just excited, because we don't normally have a lot of stuff like this in our area," said Monhagen Middle School eighth-grader Zachary Sanchez, 13. "Some kids don't have online access and now they'll be able to do research at home."

His classmate, Melissa Greve, 13, explained that the news took them all by surprise.

"We feel proud that we were given this opportunity," she said.

Perhaps no one was more surprised than Superintendent Ken Eastwood, after learning that Middletown was the only district in New York to win the nationwide race, beating out the state's only other finalist, New York City. A total of \$400 million in awards was up for grabs to districts that could develop innovative plans to personalize student learning. Middletown was one of 16 winning districts selected by the U.S. Department of Education from 61 national finalists.

"Everyone wanted to know why I don't look ecstatic and to put it bluntly, it's that I'm stunned," Eastwood said. "I'm thinking about everything that's sitting in front of us over



JOHN DeSANTO/Times Herald-Record

**Race to the Top** challenged districts to develop innovative plans to personalize learning. Nicole Grimaldi teaches sixth-grade students Tuesday at Twin Towers Middle School. Students were excited when they found out the money would be used to buy tablets like iPads.

the next four years and it's going to be a big program."

In addition to buying new technology, some of the grant money will be used to hire additional staff, provide teacher training and expand programs for the 7,200 enrolled students, Eastwood said. Programs include a two-year kindergarten for students who are not considered "kindergarten-ready" as well as free college courses for disadvantaged high school students. The high poverty district's dramatic turnaround in student performance and attendance over the past several years impressed Sen. Chuck Schumer, who recommended Middletown for the award.

According to Eastwood, the district will receive the entire

\$20 million early next year, but the money is to be spent gradually over four years.

"We will spend the grant as we roll it out, but we'll be spending the next four to six months planning," he said. Rather than buy the new tablets at once, Eastwood explained they plan to buy 1,000 each year and take it one grade at a time.

To educators, including Monhagen Principal Tracey Sorrentino, who was born, raised, educated and has taught in the district, the award is "incredibly exciting." "For me, this is the top of the mountain," she said. "Seeing the district through different eyes, I couldn't be prouder of where we are today."

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## SPENDING PLANS

### Uses for \$20 million include:

- Introduce a two-year kindergarten program to assist new students in the district who are not "kindergarten-ready."
- One-to-one technology initiative. Students in grades six to 12 will receive tablets like iPads for classroom use. District officials want to buy about 5,000 tablets their students.
- Use of software to study each student's individual learning style in order to teach them more effectively.
- Syracuse University Project

Advance. The district plans to offer 26 credits worth of college level courses through Syracuse University to qualified juniors and seniors by next September. Students who receive free or discounted lunch can take the classes for free.

■ Creation of software that will simulate a year in the life of a teacher or school administrator by researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Va. The district plans to make the simulators available for free to anyone who is interested.