



Freedom to Learn Evaluation Report: 2003 Project Implementation Executive Summary

Prepared for Michigan Virtual University by

The Center for Teaching and Technology
Michigan State University

Mark Urban-Lurain
Director of Instructional Technology Research and Development
Division of Science and Mathematics Education

Yong Zhao, Ph.D.
Director of Center for Teaching and Technology
College of Education

January 14, 2004

Executive Summary

This document contains findings from the evaluation of the Freedom to Learn (formerly Learning without Limits) program in the State of Michigan. The FTL program is Michigan's statewide one-to-one wireless technology program designed to engage the state's K-12 students and their teachers with the goal of improving student achievement in core academic subjects. During the 2002-2003 academic year, through a competitive granting process, a total of \$7,499,388 was awarded to 15 school districts, intermediate school districts (ISDs), independent schools, or consortia of schools in three categories: Demonstration, Showcase, and Program Application.

A systematic evaluation program was carried out by the Center for Teaching and Technology at Michigan State University. The goals of the evaluation include: a) assess the impact of FTL students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the public; b) evaluate the implementation of FTL; c) gather baseline data about the implementation context for future FTL deployment; and d) develop a long-term evaluation strategy and necessary instruments.

Evaluation data were collected toward the 2002-2003 academic year. The data this report is based on came from surveys of teachers, principals, technology coordinators, parents, and students and the grant proposals submitted by schools. Response rates vary by school and respondents category but in general are around 50%. Major findings are summarized below, organized in four categories.

1. Overall Impact of FTL

Because the program has only been implemented for a short period of time (most schools started distributing FTL equipment in the spring semester of 2003), it is impossible to assess the long-term effects of the program. However, we were able to assess the initial impact, anticipated impact, and reactions to the program.

Initial Impact

The initial impact of the program is in general very positive. As a result of FTL:

- **Students are spending more time on their homework and come to class better prepared.** 66% of teachers believe that students are spending more time on their homework and coming to class better prepared; 82% indicate that FTL will help transition students to become more independent learners; 80% think FTL will not distract students from preparing for the MEAP.
- **Parents are more involved in their children's learning.** 66% of teachers recognize that students' parents are more involved with their children's schooling.
- **Teachers use computers more and more often.** Over 60% of the teachers reported using computers more than 10 hours a week after FTL, while about 30% of the teachers reported this level of use prior to FTL.

- **Teachers' technology proficiency has improved.** 74% of the teachers reported that their technology proficiency has improved and the PD portion of the program has helped them use the equipment effectively in their classroom activities (85%).
- **Parents are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the program.** 92% are excited about the FTL program; 80% believe that FTL will help make their children better students; 60% do not believe that the FTL funds would be better spent on other school programs and 70% disagree that schools would be better focusing on the basics than computers. 80% agree that their children prefer to use the FTL equipment to do their schoolwork.

Expected Impact

Teachers, administrators, and technology support staff all anticipate that FTL will have positive impact on teaching and learning. Specifically,

- **Improved student motivation.** Over 63% of principals and technology coordinators believe FTL will have a positive or very positive impact on student motivation. About 65% of parents think their children will enjoy school more if the teachers use the computers more, that FTL will help improve the quality of their child's work and that using the FTL equipment helps their children understand their classes better.
- **Improved student learning.** The majority of the teachers believe that the program will improve their students' achievement in reading (88%), writing (91%), and math (88%). Nearly 70% of principals and technology coordinators anticipate positive or very positive impact on student learning.
- **Improved teaching.** Over 50% of principals and technology coordinators anticipate positive or very positive impact on instructional practices.

However, the principals and technology coordinators do not necessarily anticipate strong impact in the following areas:

- **MEAP scores.** Only 32% of principals and 47% technology coordinators anticipate positive or very positive impact on MEAP scores.
- **Criteria used to evaluate teaching performances.** Just 20% of principals and 34% of technology coordinators believe that FTL will have a positive or very positive impact on evaluation criteria for teaching performances.

Reactions to the Program

Reactions to the program have been in general positive. Specifically,

- Most of the written comments provided by parents, students, and teachers have been positive and enthusiastic.

- **Support for the program is strong.** Over 90% of parents, principals, and teachers would like to continue or expand the program. About 28% of parents would like to raise taxes to expand FTL to all schools.
- **Competing priorities are recognized.** However, parents, teachers, administrators, and technology directors all raised concerns over spending on FTL in relation to other educational needs. When asked to rank school spending, all agree that the top priority is to reduce class size. Technology coordinator ranked FTL the 3rd, just above sports programs. Parents placed FTL in the middle, below textbooks and above sports.

2. The Implementation

Teachers are in general satisfied with the deployment aspects of FTL. 81% of teachers think that the FTL program provided adequate hardware and 75% are confident that FTL will also choose appropriate hardware. Over 75% of teachers believe that FTL provides enough and appropriate software.

Teachers are in general satisfied with the quality and availability of technical support they needed. About 70% of teachers rated technical support as good, very good, or excellent. About 60% of teachers reported that technical support is frequently, mostly, or always available.

However, instructional support, both in terms of quality and availability, needs improvement. Only 28% of teachers reported that instructional support is mostly or always available. About 35% rated the quality of instructional support as “very good” or “excellent,” although an additional 33% rated “good.”

Principals (95%) and technology coordinators (96%) affirmed that their schools are doing relatively well in providing PD to teachers.

Parents are involved. 88% of principals and 79% of technology coordinators reported that they have involved parents in the program and provided information regarding FTL equipment to them.

Laptops are preferred to PDAs. There is more support for FTL from sites that used laptop computers than sites that used either a combination of laptops and PDAs or only PDAs.

3. Areas of Concern and Suggestions for the Future

The findings also point out some areas of concern that need attending to in order to improve future FTL programs.

Organizational

- **Schools in general lack a unifying vision with regard to the FTL program.** Principals (68%) and 57% of technical coordinators indicated that their schools do NOT have a technology vision statement regarding the potential impact of FTL. To better take advantage of this tremendous investment, schools should spend more time working together to systematically investigate how the program can be best implemented.
- **There exists a general confusion about who the technology innovation leader is in schools.** Principals, teachers and technical coordinators were asked which group has taken the greatest lead in computer technology adoption. The three groups have different perceptions about who takes the lead. While principals believe that teachers are the primary leaders (48%), the teachers (43%) and technical coordinators (49%) believe that the technical coordinators provide leadership in technology adoption, with less than 1/4 of the principals believing that the technical coordinators provide the leadership. About 1/3 of the principals and technical coordinators believe that the administration provides the leadership while only 13% of the teachers feel this way.
- **New policy and procedures may be needed with regard to technology uses.** We were surprised to find that nearly half of the schools do NOT allow students to use email, which is supposedly one of the simplest ways to support communication, a goal of FTL. This policy and others (e.g., allowing student use of equipment in the summer) may need to be reexamined to maximize the benefit of the program.

Teachers

- **Teachers need time to learn how to integrate the FTL technology.** Currently 95% of the teachers claim that their workload this year is “busy “or “overwhelmed.” So schools should find a way to allow teachers to experiment with the technology.

Technology infrastructure

- **Current school technology infrastructure may need to be upgraded.** Almost all of the schools report some type of file servers in their infrastructure (95%). Most have print and Internet servers. Only half have a mail server. To take advantage of the program, schools may need to add other types of communication

servers to support and manage student communication.

- **More content-specific educational software is needed.** Currently schools have adequate generic productivity software but there is a strong need for educational software for specific subject matter content. Most schools have subject-specific software available on only about 1/4 of their computers.
- **Teachers need to be more involved in software selection.** Only 36% of teachers reported that the schools/FTL program did a good or excellent job engaging them in decisions about software purchases.

Technology support staff

- **FTL has significantly increased workload for the technology support staff.**
To continue this program, schools may need to systematically examine the staffing situation.