WHAT'S HOT IN *Schools*

Public schools are using the latest in technology to motivate students to learn and providing new opportunities for children in remote locations.

You probably remember your teachers writing on a blackboard with chalk, but these days they are more likely to be using a state-of-the-art interactive whiteboard capable of showing almost anything.

These large, touch-sensitive display panels can be connected to a computer and data projector, allowing a computer image to be projected onto the board. The image can be controlled by touching the whiteboard with fingers or a stylus, or by using a computer mouse or keyboard.

Teachers can show their lesson plans or use the Internet to download web pages onto the whiteboards and print off images.

The NSW State Government announced during the 2007 election that it would spend $66 million by 2011 to provide every NSW public school with an interactive whiteboard to add to the existing stock in schools.

The Dubbo school education director, Ann-Marie Furney, said the technology was "shrinking the world" for teachers and students in remote areas.

"I've been in classrooms where children in outback NSW are looking at fractal ice in Antarctica through a live webcam on Google Earth,"

Groups of students can be linked together by videoconferencing lessons through the whiteboards. This has significantly expanded the subject choice available in more remote public schools – if one school has only two students studying Ancient History for the Higher School Certificate, they can join up with other schools to make up a viable class.

Connected classrooms

Imagine sitting in a classroom and being instructed in a particular subject by a teacher in another classroom – or even another school. This is the vision that the Connected Classes program is delivering.

While this is particularly handy for rural schools, even in suburban Sydney, Connected Classes is giving more options to students. It delivers real-time lessons to students from two or more schools using videoconferencing through interactive whiteboards.

Students at all schools can see and interact with the same learning materials and share brainstorming, discussions and active learning with their peers and teacher. Students have also been linked by the technology with museums, NASA astronauts and university academics.

It's never too early to learn

Since 2000 IBM has donated more than 500 computers and training to preschool teachers in disadvantaged communities across Australia. The IBM KidSmart program was developed to educate young children in the etiquette and evolution of technology. Almost 100 public preschools in NSW have participated in the KidSmart program and more will come onboard in 2008.

Teachers are trained on strategies to stimulate children's interests in computerised learning using play and technology.

The principal of John Brotchie Nursery School in Botany, Rebecca Andrews, says the preschool-aged children quickly become confident computer users.

"The computer is just part of our classroom," she says. "It's just there, set up like the play dough table and the art easel."

Software that's special

Whether it's making music, working on speech difficulties or just making a good old-fashioned ruckus, students with special needs can do it all with "banana keyboards" loaded with specialised software. The keyboard has an ergonomic shape, which can be fitted to a wheelchair or modified so that children with limited use of their limbs can use switches.

The software ranges from standard keyboard sounds to drumbeats, music tracks, sound effects and voice recording and can be used for creativity or to help students undergoing speech therapy.

The kits are provided by the Soundhouse Music Alliance, a not-for-profit organisation that focuses on music and multimedia technology, and are being used by some public schools seeking to provide new opportunities for students with intellectual and physical disabilities.