

High-tech school bus extends learning

From staff and wire reports
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Students in the woodsy, working-class Hector School District in Arkansas now can look at more than the Ozark National Forest in the two-plus hours they spend on the school bus each day.

The Pope County district is participating in a new program for rural schools believed to be the first of its kind: It's playing math and science content over ceiling-mounted computer screens during the lengthy bus rides.

"To say we are rural is an understatement," Superintendent Karen Cushman said, noting that more than 60 percent of the 600-student district is located in the Ozark National Forest and that 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The district is working with Vanderbilt University's [Aspirnaut Program](#) to turn the bus into a mobile classroom of sorts. The program, founded by Arkansas native Billy Hudson, works with rural schools in Arkansas and Maine to help educate students in science, technology, engineering, and math.

The project aims to engage students and take advantage of the fact that they're a captive audience with few distractions, Cushman said. "It's hard to get students excited about math and science when a teacher stands up there to lecture," Cushman said.

The upgraded, high-tech bus has five ceiling-mounted screens that show math and science content geared toward different age groups during the long bus rides. Younger students sit toward the front of the bus, and older children sit in the back. Each seat is equipped with headphones for the students. The programming rotates daily and features videos from PBS, NASA, the Discovery Channel, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Officials say that showing educational programs during commutes provides 10 extra hours of learning each week—the equivalent of 12 class periods weekly. Long bus rides are becoming more common in Arkansas and throughout the country as states force tiny school districts and rural schools to consolidate in the hopes of providing a better education for students. While more educational opportunities are available at school, more and more students spend hours on the bus each day getting to campus.

Officials with the Aspirnaut Program estimate that about 200 students in Arkansas now ride buses that can provide educational content. The program began in 2007 in the Sheridan School District, where students were given laptops and iPods for their commutes on a school bus equipped with wireless internet access.



An Arkansas district is increasing student learning opportunities on long bus rides to its rural schools.

So far, Hector officials have noticed one definite difference: The bus rides are a lot quieter.

Bus driver Kenny Bull picks up his first student at 6:42 a.m. each day and has all 50 students dropped off at the school by 8 a.m. He's used to writing up students for bad behavior on the lengthy bus rides, but since the video screens were introduced, he hasn't had to reprimand anyone for acting out.

Younger students really get into the programs, he said, although the math and science content hasn't entirely caught on with high-school students, who are allowed to use their cell phones on the bus.

"They like their iPods and mp3 players better," Bull said.

