

\$117,000 for Marin special ed students gives voice to the voiceless

By Janis Mara , *Marin Independent Journal*

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Seventeen Chromebooks/tablets, 13 desktop computers, 54 iPads and more are the gifts to Marin's special education teachers announced this month.

Dedication to Special Education, a 19-year-old all-volunteer Marin parent group, is awarding \$117,000 in funding to teachers and giving \$15,000 to the Technology Resource Center of Marin, the group said.

"The iPad has opened up doors and windows like crazy," said Susan Wilkinson, a special ed teacher at Marindale School in San Rafael. "It's amazing how excited kids will get. They will be off doing other things and they will see an iPad and they will stand in line and wait to do" an app that helps them spell their names, she said.

In addition to iPads, tablets and computers, the money will purchase dozens of software programs for children with special needs, portable memory keyboards, listening stations for audio books, dozens of audio and computer-based books and a plethora of other materials.

"A classroom budget is about \$200 per year, and that includes everything. There is no way \$200 is going to provide the specialized tools and materials our kids need," said Sarah King, the organization's co-chair. "With much of special education remaining mandated by law yet unfunded from any government source, we parents had to step in."

An example: The iPad Wilkinson is getting, which will replace an antiquated model, costs in the \$700 range, the teacher said.

"My kids have a severe speech and language delay, or autistic-like behaviors, or both," said Wilkinson. "They are 3 to 5 years old."

One of the apps Wilkinson uses is GoTalk, which helps nonverbal students communicate.

"There's one student who always brings an apple and a yogurt for his snack," Wilkinson said. "I took a photo of those items and uploaded it. With GoTalk, when he touches the picture of the apple on the screen with his finger, the computer says, 'Apple,' and we give him the apple."

The app also helps students learn words.

"He was completely nonverbal. Now, he is beginning to say, 'I want this,' and his name," Wilkinson said.

"I take videos of the kids and send them to their parents. Some of them cannot tell their parents what happened in the classroom (because they don't have the ability to speak)," Wilkinson said. "I take a photo when Santa comes so they can show their parents the photo."

Concerned parents founded Dedication to Special Education in 1997 in partnership with the Marin County Office of Education, under the leadership of Superintendent of Schools Mary Jane Burke.

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"We are the PTA for special ed. Historically, PTAs take care of their schools, but there was nobody watching out for special needs kids," said Betty Lituano, one of the parents involved with the organization.

The parents also created the Technology Resource Center.

The group raises money to invest in equipment and materials for classrooms. Every year, the parents raffle off a car donated by Toyota Marin, netting about \$50,000; they also hold an annual golf tournament and sell engravings. These efforts, along with private donations and Schools Rule, the Marin educational funding effort, provide the money.

“There are 4,000 kids in the county with special education needs, and (Dedication to Special Education) has raised millions of dollars for them,” said Burke. “What’s particularly amazing about these families is that they work not just on behalf of their own children, but other people’s children as well.”

Wilkinson described the members of the group as “a group of dedicated parents like I’ve never seen.

“It’s an exciting time to be an educator and I can’t say enough about Dedication to Special Education and what they offer to teachers,” Wilkinson said. “What they do for kids throughout the county is a special gift.”



Janis Mara

Janis Mara covers education for the Marin IJ. She has worked at the Oakland Tribune, the Contra Costa Times and Adweek, winning awards for business coverage, live-blogging and investigative work. Reach the author at jmara@marinij.com or follow Janis on Twitter: [@jmara](https://twitter.com/jmara).

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