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SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- These days, it's almost unquestioned that college-bound students will tote laptops back to school. For parents of high school and middle school kids, the decision to invest in a laptop is far from given.

But with laptop prices coming down, children's demands heating up and parents' urge to provide all they can to further their child's education, it's likely more families are toying with the idea of buying portable computing devices for their kids.

Some say it makes perfect sense for families who can afford the cost.

"Computers are part of our lives, so we all are going to be faced with a decision on when, where, how. It's an important part of planning your children's education," said Francie Alexander, author of "A Kid's Handbook to the Internet" and chief academic officer at Scholastic Corp., the children's book publisher.

"I think middle school is the first time to think about it," she said. "Definitely by high school, I think a laptop makes all the sense in the world [because sharing one desktop] with a family is not at all possible. They're using it for all their papers, they're using it for everything else."

Others agreed. "The best time to get a laptop is when it's financially feasible for the family to get it," said Joshua Koen, manager of professional development at the Center for Innovation and Engineering in Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken, N.J. The center works with teachers on integrating technology in their lessons.

"There's really no reason to wait until your sophomore or junior year" in high school, Koen said. "There are a lot of fantastic applications that can be applied to any subject."

Laptop-toting students can benefit from anytime access to spreadsheets and word-processing documents, enter data as they're conducting scientific experiments and, the networking gods willing, do online research from anywhere on campus. Plus, relying solely on shared school computers can make accessing work done at school difficult.

But before you rush out to the electronics store, make sure your child's school will support the use of the laptop in classes, and find out whether the student can connect the laptop to the school's network, Koen said.

"If the school's not going to let the kid use it, or there's not a culture they're trying to develop in the school of the child using it, is it really worth the money?" said Douglas Clements, professor of education and co-director of the Center for Educational Technology at University at Buffalo in New York.

"There's no research that [using a laptop] will ramp up academic achievement beyond adequate desktop access at school and at home," he said.

Keep your money

But some say the cost of a laptop is simply not warranted for students that aren't yet college-age.

"I'm all for kids of any age having access to a computer with parental supervision [but] a laptop, even for a high schooler, is money not well spent," said Jeffrey Low, director of information technology at All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit that trains teachers and runs clinics aimed at children encountering problems with school success, in Chapel Hill, N.C.

"Everybody wants their children to be successful in school. We're all looking for the next piece of technology that's going to help with that. I just don't know that a high schooler with a notebook does that," he said, adding that a desktop will cost about half as much and last a similar length of time. Also, he said, theft might be a problem.

Still, Low said, students often benefit from laptops if the school has a cohesive program of distributing laptops to students.

Plenty of schools are doing just that, taking the decision out of parents' hands.

This is the fourth year that Maine will equip all of its 7th and 8th grade public school students with laptops, and districts in other states are also working towards a one-computer-per-student model, though on a more limited basis. Meanwhile, private high schools nationwide often include a laptop in the cost of tuition.

Already, U.S. public schools average about 3.8 students per one computer, and about 17% of the computers on school campuses (kindergarten through 12th grade) are laptops, said Barbara Bichelmeyer, associate professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University.

So why did Maine decide to put a laptop in every middle schooler's backpack?

"The goal was to put the device into the hands of the student at the point of learning as defined by the student, so that it got away from the old model of 'hey kids, let's go to the computer lab so we can use the Internet now. Then we'll go back to the classroom and stop learning with the computer,'" said Jeff Mao, coordinator of educational technology for the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, which administers the laptop program.

The program aims to make students' computer use more like adults' use. "Something occurs to you and you want to look it up, you look it up. Someone throws numbers at you and you want to put them in a spreadsheet, you do it, rather than saying, 'Gee, Miss Johnson, I want to go to the library,'" Mao said.

"Today's kids are totally different. The world they live in is different, and the more we can break down the difference between their life inside the classroom and outside the classroom, the better," he said.

He argues that parents should consider a laptop for their children. "If, as a parent, you bought your student a computer, to some degree you can bring those tools back" into the classroom, he said. "I would encourage people to work with their schools to try to increase that access level," he said. For instance, parents could offer to ensure the laptop has the right antivirus and antispyware software installed.

As well as making sure the school will support your child's laptop, find out why

your kid wants one.

"I would ask my child, what do you want to do with the computer? Why are you so interested in having the computer?" Bichelmeyer said. If the main goal is to download music and play games, you might think again.

"If my child were telling me 'I have plans for this huge science project this year and I'm going to be collecting data every day and inputting it into an Excel spreadsheet over time, then I'd probably be very supportive of that.'"

Got any doubts? Consider Low's solution: He has two desktops at home.