

Students step in to refurbish computers as school needs rise

Myah Christenson September 11, 2020 4:00 a.m.



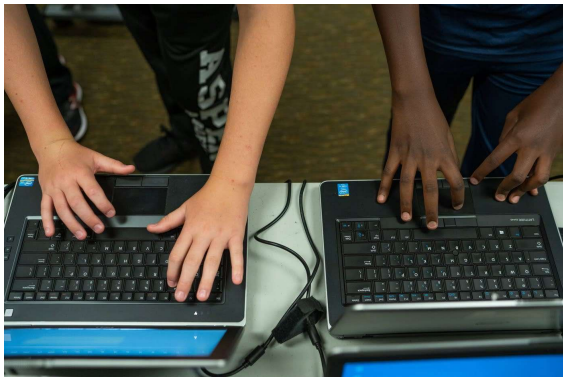
Eleven-year-old Ethan Tinega works on a donated laptop as part of Penguin Corps, a computer club at Aspen Academy, in Savage, Minn., on Wednesday. Evan Frost | MPR News

A middle school IT club has found a way to use their skills to revamp old computers at a time when distance learning has made such technology indispensable.

Penguin Corps is a Linux club at the charter school Aspen Academy in Savage. Linux clubs provide a space for students to learn how to install and use open-source software. The students are using that knowledge to refurbish old computers for their classmates.

With the school opting for hybrid learning, the need for computers skyrocketed.

“These kids very enthusiastically caught the open-source bug and took on the challenge of wanting to help their fellow students,” said Stu Keroff, a social studies teacher who directs the club.



Two Aspen Academy students and members of the Penguin Corps computer club work on donated laptops in Savage, Minn., on Wednesday. The club repairs donated computers for families that need computers for distance learning. Evan Frost | MPR News

Penguin Corps has only been around for one year, yet has given away hundreds of computers.

Sixth grader Cameron Citrowske has been with the club from the start.

“We are helping people that otherwise probably wouldn’t be able to get a computer for a reasonable price and our reasonable

price is free, and so we get to have fun and they get to have something that they couldn’t get without us,” Citrowske said.

Aspen Academy has one of only two Linux clubs in Minnesota. Last spring, the club gave away 60 computers for students during the period of distance learning. This fall, the need for computers is still high.

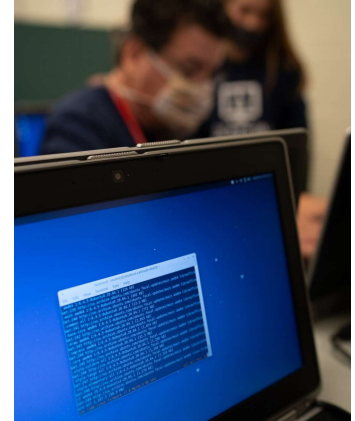
“The night of the open house we gave away 132 computers, and 88 more had been requested at the time when we ran out,” said Keroff.

“Another 30 families said, ‘We’ll take desktop instead.’”

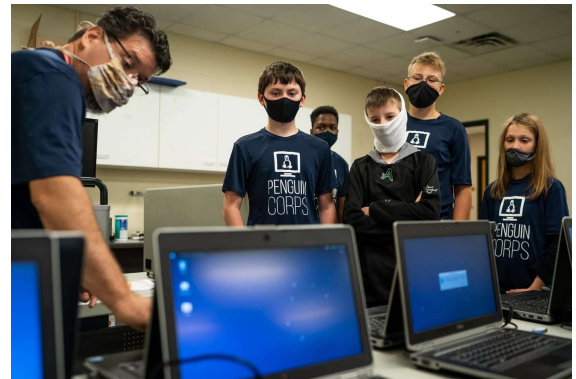
Keroff said Caribou Coffee, Search Leaders, LLC., and Society of St. Vincent de Paul of the Twin Cities each donated computers. The largest donation came from SEH Inc. with a total of 175 laptops.

“Granted not all of them worked, these are used laptops, but enough of them did that it made a huge difference,” Keroff said.

With more donations and requests coming in, the students are continuing to refurbish computers to provide one for each family in need. Keroff said six to seven students dedicated months to help out.



Code appears on a laptop being repaired by the Penguin Corps computer club. Evan Frost | MPR News



Teacher and Penguin Corps club advisor Stu Keroff instructs members of the club on how to use Linux operating system to prepare donated computers for families that need them for distance learning. Evan Frost | MPR News

The club’s membership reached about 24 students last year.

Keroff hopes the enjoyment of helping fellow students will bring in more members over the school year.

Correction (Sept. 11, 2020): A previous headline on this story misidentified the location of the school club.