

Jefferson, Brandon, Evansville and Osakis high schools will share in a \$333,008 federal grant to upgrade interactive video technology equipment used in Distance Learning.

During a news conference at Osakis High School last Thursday, Colleen Landkamer, state director of USDA Rural Development, awarded a Distance Learning grant to 10 area school districts – they're all part of a group called Central Minnesota Educational Telecommunications System (CMETS).

"This will open many more doors for students," Landkamer said Thursday.

Distance Learning connects 10 school districts in the area with videoconferencing technology in a traditional classroom setting.

During the school day, students go to a classroom in their school building, but they interact with teachers and students from other schools via monitors, cameras and audio equipment.

For example, Distance Learning gives 16 students in Evansville and Osakis an opportunity to tune in and take a Tech Prep math class that's taught at Brandon High School. Last year, an engineering and design class was taught in Alexandria and broadcast to students at area schools.

Angie Pederson, technology coordinator for Brandon Schools, said, "Before, Distance Learning mainly provided college level classes, but now, with the grant, we can invest in portable systems and offer non-college level classes that other students can take."

Alexandria Schools Superintendent Terry Quist was at last week's news conference and he said, "I'm pleased with the opportunities that this brings. Students have more courses to choose from, and with districts working together, we can include staff development opportunities, as well. There are a variety of things for all of us to learn."

School districts will use the grant funds to update the interactive equipment used for Distance Learning. It is a matching grant, meaning school districts will have to financially match their portion of the grant.

The updated technology broadens the use of the equipment even further than traditional classrooms. The funding allows districts to offer things like gifted and talented programs, special education updates, staff development, administrative meetings, homebound services, virtual fieldtrips and online courses.

During Thursday's news conference, Landkamer told students, "With opportunities like Distance Learning, you'll be able to make that much more of a difference. Hopefully you'll come back to rural communities and continue to make a difference."

Representatives from the following offices were also represented at the news conference at Osakis High School Thursday: Congressman Collin Peterson, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, Senator Amy Klobuchar and Senator Al Franken.

By Amy Chaffins, Alexandria Echo Press

Source: echopress.com