

# In Some Schools, iPods Are Required Listening



At José Martí Middle School in Union City, Stephanie Rojas, left, and Bryan Belancourt use iPods in class, with help from Wendy Garcia, a teacher's aide.

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UNION CITY, N.J., Oct. 8 — A ban on iPods is so strictly enforced at José Martí Middle School that as many as three a week are confiscated from students — and returned only to their parents.

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Sylwia Kapuscinski for The New York Times  
Jorge Flores, 15, uses a Spanish-to-English dictionary to look up words from the song he is listening to on his iPod.

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Sylwia Kapuscinski for The New York Times  
Dictionaries and iPods are paired in some English classes.

considering allowing students in those classes to use iPods that they have brought from home.

“It’s an innovation,” said Frank Belluscio, a spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, which selected Union City educators to speak about the iPod classes at the group’s annual conference in Atlantic City Oct. 24-26. “Most people think of the iPod as just entertainment.”

At José Martí, the silver iPods, with built-in video screens, cost about \$250 each and are passed out at the beginning of class along with headsets and Spanish-to-English dictionaries. The iPods are collected at the end of class, and school officials said that none have disappeared or been broken.

In one recent class, eighth-grade students mouthed the words to the rock song “Hey There Delilah” by the Plain White T’s as they played the tune on the iPods over and over again. The braver ones sang out loud.

“It speaks to me,” said Stephanie Rojas, 13, who moved here last year from Puerto Rico and now prefers to sing in English. “I take a long time in the shower because I’m singing, and my brothers are like, ‘Hurry up!’”

Pedro Noguera, a sociology professor at [New York University](#) who studies urban schools, said that more districts were using new technologies like iPods to connect with students. For instance, he said, teachers have designed video games around history lessons and assigned students to re-enact novels and plays on YouTube.

“You know the No. 1 complaint about school is that it’s boring because the traditional way it’s taught relies on passive learning,” Mr. Noguera said. “It’s not interactive enough.”

In many affluent communities, iPods have evolved into an essential accessory for students. In 2004, [Duke University](#) led the way by outfitting its entire freshman class with iPods that were preloaded with orientation information and even the Duke fight song. While Duke no longer gives away iPods, it maintains a pool of them that are lent to students for classes. Last spring, 93 of the 2,000 or so courses at Duke required iPods.

The Brearley School, a private girls school on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, has used iPods to supplement foreign-language textbooks and its music, drama and English classes. Every Brearley student in seventh through ninth grades is required to buy or rent an iPod.

Here in Union City, the iPods are a splurge for many of the immigrant families who live in this densely packed urban center, once known for its embroidery factories. About 94 percent of the district’s 11,000 students qualify for free or reduced lunches.

The Union City district, which has a \$197 million annual budget, places a priority on bilingual classes because more than one-quarter of its students are learning basic English skills. District officials said the stakes are high; 4 of the district’s 12 schools have been identified as needing improvement under the federal [No Child Left Behind](#) law, largely because not enough bilingual students have passed the state reading and math tests.

Grace Poli, a media specialist at José Martí, said that she approached district officials about buying 23 iPods for an after-school bilingual program in 2004 after being struck by students’ passion for them. Spanish-speaking students seemed bored by their English-language textbooks, she said, which they found outdated and irrelevant.

The program became so popular that it was added to the regular school schedule the following year, and in 2006, Ms. Poli received 60 more iPods. Last May, the district decided to buy 300 iPods to expand the program to other schools this fall.

Ms. Poli scoured the music charts for songs that appealed to students, compiling an eclectic mix of tunes by Shania Twain, Barry White, [U2](#) and the Black Eyed Peas. She downloaded their songs to the iPods and typed out the lyrics. Then she deleted all the nouns — and in turn, the verbs and adjectives — forcing the students to fill in the missing words and learn their meaning.

In class, they sing or recite the completed lyrics back to her.

“A lot of our bilingual kids are very shy, and they feel like outsiders,” said Ms. Poli, whose parents immigrated from Ecuador. “You have kids who never said a word in English, and now they’re singing Black Eyed Peas. It was a lot of work, but it was worth it.”

Ms. Poli has also downloaded audio books, including the [Harry Potter](#) series, and added recording devices to the iPods so that students can listen to their pronunciation as they read poetry or talk with one another.

While the iPods have been used mainly in bilingual classes, the district plans to try them with students who have learning disabilities and behavioral problems as part of the program’s expansion, which is set to begin next month. Last year, Ms. Poli helped an alternative education class create podcasts of test-taking tips that were shared with the entire school.

Ms. Poli said her Spanish-speaking students — known around the school as Pod People — have been able to move out of bilingual classes after just a year of using the digital devices, compared with an average of four to six years for most bilingual students.

Geri Perez, the principal at José Martí, said parents have requested that their children be enrolled in the iPod-equipped classes. Ms. Perez, who does not speak Spanish, said that bilingual students who once shied away from talking to her have gained self-confidence and now come up to her in the hallways.

Dianelis Cano, 13, who moved here from Cuba less than two years ago, said that she had learned so much English that her mother, a saleswoman in a clothing store, bought her an iPod over the summer as a reward for good grades. Dianelis loads her own songs onto the iPod to practice English outside school, though she also includes Spanish music.

“I’m going to check your iPod to make sure there is English music there,” Ms. Poli teased her. “I’m going to make home visits.”

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