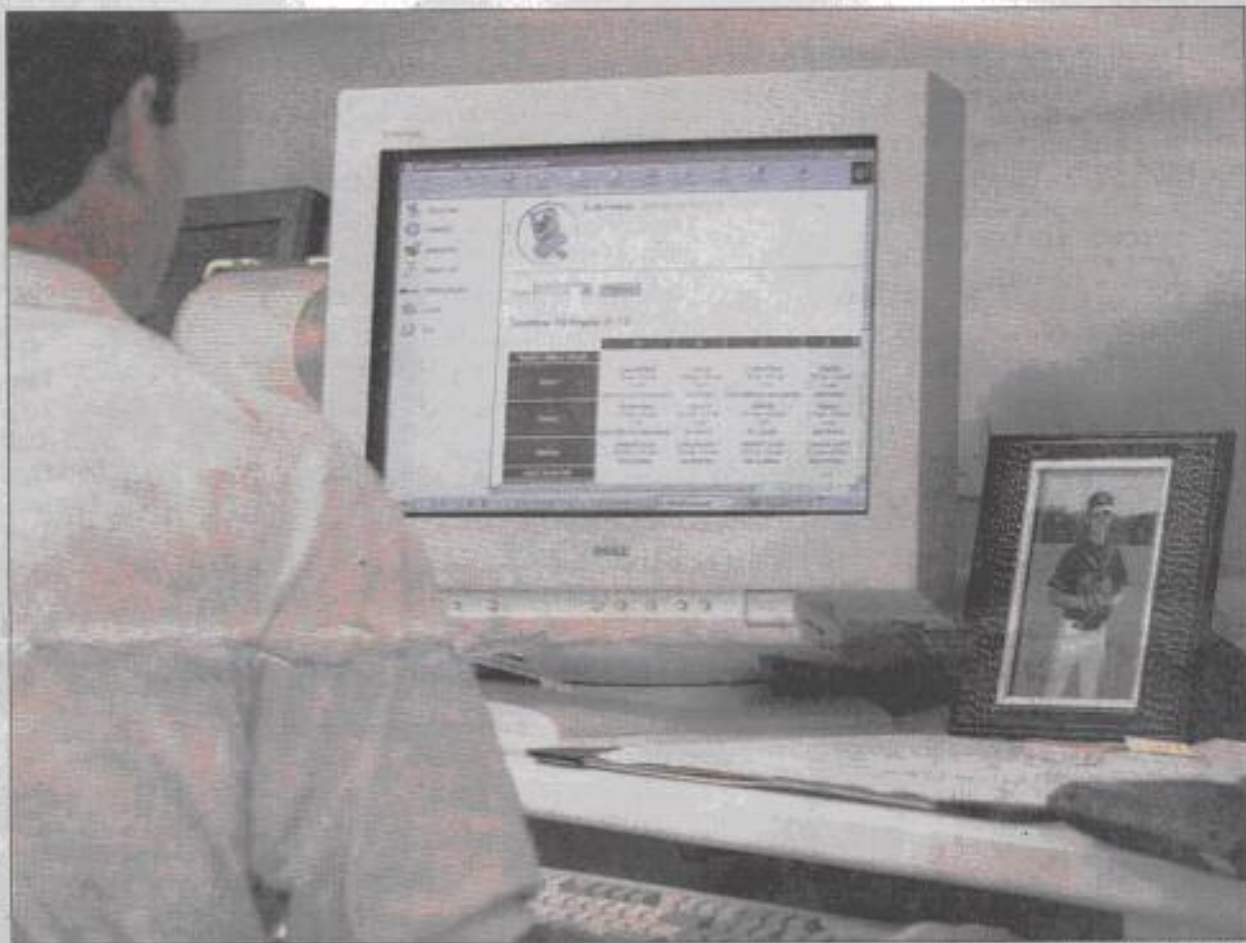


Gary Feskens checks his home computer to find out how his son Scott is doing at Oaks Christian School. On the school's Web site, parents can check their children's homework assignments, grades and sports schedules. "Sometimes when kids get older, they don't always tell you everything, or you want to double-check," Gary Feskens says.



Juan Carlo / Star staff

Web site opens communication

Westlake school posts information online

By Jean Cowden Moore

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When Gary Feskens wants to find out what his son is doing in school, he goes no further than his home computer. There he can look up homework assignments, check grades, even find his son's baseball schedule.

Feskens is taking advantage of a new Web site offered through Oaks Christian School, which allows him to stay abreast of

his son's education even though he commutes from his home in Oak Park to St. Louis, Mo., every week.

"Sometimes when kids get older, they don't always tell you everything, or you want to double-check," said Feskens, whose son is a junior at the private school in Westlake Village. "This way, you can get specifics. It's kind of a nifty thing."

Throughout the state, school districts are considering similar sites, allowing

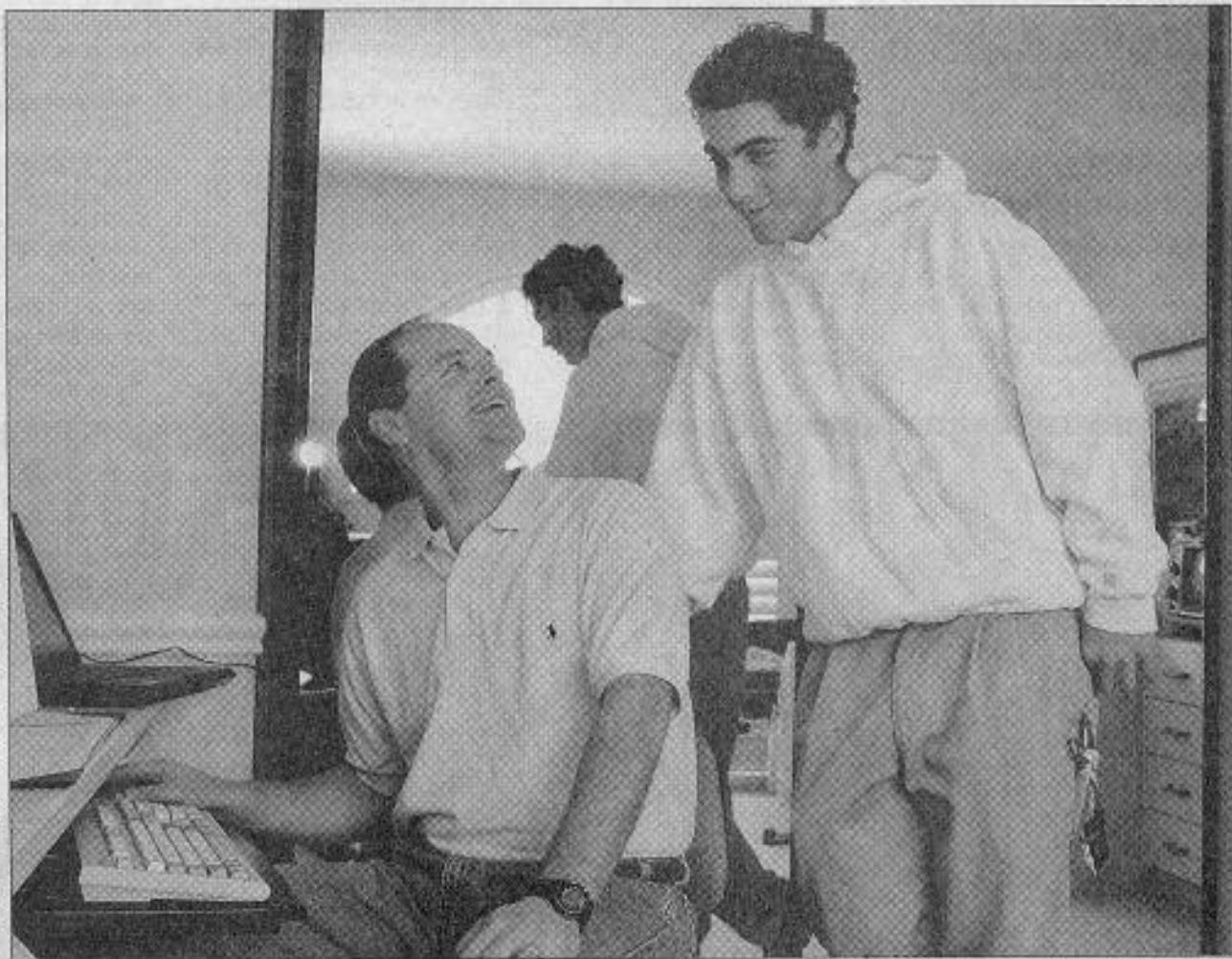
parents to use their home computer to track their children's grades, check their attendance or print a transcript.

"It's on everybody's to-do list or their wish list," said James Morante, spokesman for the California School Boards Association. "However, the wanting to do it and the ability to do it are two different things."

While proponents tout the sites as a way to improve communication between schools and parents, the innovation comes

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Gary Feskens and his son Scott check out Scott's grades online at Oaks Christian School's Web site. Other school districts would like to offer similar services. "However, the wanting to do it and the ability to do it are two different things," says James Morante, a spokesman for the California School Boards Association.



Juan Carlo / Star staff

Web site lets parents check on students

Web site lets parents check on students

SCHOOLS ONLINE

From A1

at a time when California is facing its worst budget crisis in years, with Gov. Gray Davis proposing cuts of \$1.5 billion in schools during the next six months.

But if these sites work the way educators envision, they will save time and money, as well as provide a quick, easy way for parents and students to get information they need, proponents say.

If parents can look up their children's report cards online, then districts don't have to spend thousands of dollars mailing them. If they can print a copy of their children's transcripts, the counseling office saves a few minutes finding and then copying it. If they can find when and where the track meet will be, someone else saves a few minutes on the phone.

"It allows parents to have a timely and easy-to-use window into their student's school experience," said Tom Konjoyan, director of development at Oaks Christian. "And it allows schools to communicate with parents in an inexpensive, fast way — right to their desktops, rather than through the mail."

Still, many administrators are proceeding cautiously, partly because such Web sites can be time-consuming to maintain, and in some cases

expensive to launch.

Many are also worried about security issues. They want to make sure outsiders can't access and change student records kept by the district. And they want to guarantee that parents and students can check only their own records and no one else's.

To guard against those possibilities, schools that now have Web sites require parents to sign in with a password and user ID. Sites for parents are not directly linked to the district's records, so outsiders can't get to them.

"That would be my biggest concern: someone getting access to a student's information inappropriately," said Douglas Campbell, a software specialist for the Oxnard Union High School District, which is considering such sites but doesn't plan to launch any soon.

Cost can also be an issue, though many school districts already have the capacity to offer such services. For those that don't, the sites could end up paying for themselves if they prove sufficiently popular that districts can cut down on postage costs, administrators said.

While the new technology might be a more efficient way to get information out, some students have misgivings, saying parents shouldn't be constantly checking up on their children as they approach college.

"With juniors and seniors, it should be more the student's responsibility to get the work done," said Christina Cochran, 18, a senior at Oaks Christian. "But I also see the parents' point of view, where they want them to get into a good college. It really depends on the kid."

Some teachers have mixed feelings, too.

While many already post homework assignments either on a Web site they've created or on a school site, others hesitate to give up time they could devote to lessons or family.

"Teachers are OK with it, if it's voluntary, but it shouldn't be mandated," said Susan Falk, president of the Conejo Valley teachers union. "It's not that teachers don't want to stay in contact with parents, but it's just one more thing added onto the list of all the things they already have to do."

Still, such sites can prove popular with parents. At Oaks Christian, almost half the parents signed on to the site within the first few weeks it was offered. And most of those have checked back several times.

On that site, called Passport, parents can track their children's current grades in any class; attendance records, including how many times they've been tardy; and even how often they've talked with college representatives visiting campus.

They can also tailor the

program to e-mail them with reminders on topics that interest them specifically — when college representatives are coming to campus, for example, or when the next swim meet is.

They can even find maps and directions to schools where upcoming games or other events will be held.

Among public school districts, Ventura Unified introduced a similar site this fall for parents, one of the first in the county. While the information available varies by school, parents can look up report cards, transcripts, standardized test scores and campus news, as well as other basic information.

About 10 percent of the district's parents have used the system so far, said Ted Malos, director of technology.

A few local districts are trying out similar sites at a couple of campuses before offering them at every school. Agoura High School plans to have a site for parents up by next month. Two Conejo Valley schools — Newbury Park High and Sequoia Middle School — will launch their sites in time to post first-semester grades in late January.

"We'll see what people actually do with it," said Richard Simpson, assistant superintendent for Conejo Valley schools. "We have to see if it works as well as we think it will."