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Families urged to embrace computer technology

NEW YORK—Anthony M. Belcher is owner of Computer Network Solutions, located on Classon Avenue, in Brooklyn, one block from Eastern Parkway. After working in the computer industry for 14 years, he scraped together enough cash to open his own business. For three years now, he has sold computers and taught computer literacy classes to neighborhood children and adults.

He enjoys the work and proudly points to a picture of a young girl who he has worked with for two-and-a-half-years. Her grades have soared upward and he credits exposure to computers with feeding her success.

He points to another little girl busily clicking a mouse and computer keys. Her mother pays every week for five lessons in advance, noted Mr. Belcher.

But he also sees problems, when it comes to some parents understanding the importance of technology and making the right choices for children.

A grandmother, who didn't know anything about computers, brought in a used one she got from her boss that Mr. Belcher retooled. The woman also brought in her granddaughter for computer lessons. The girl shows progress with her ability to surf the Internet and became more focused in school. Then the child's mother brought her expensive sneakers, which Mr. Belcher calls a distraction.

While the grandmother would struggle to pay \$6-an-hour for computer lessons, the mother spent enough money for over 25 hours of lessons on sneakers, he pointed out.

"The grandmother and I had an understanding, so I didn't bother her about the \$6, but what are the mother's priorities ... sneakers over computer lessons?" he asks.

Experts at the 3rd Annual National Black Family Technology Week, held Feb. 2-10, in New York City, asked the same question, saying the digital divide on Black-white Internet and computer usage was once caused by the high cost of computers.

Today, they argue, the market has become saturated and cost is no longer the main issue. The issue now is understanding the importance of technology and making better decisions on how to spend money, said panelists during a session to kick-off the week-long events.

"We need to make choices in terms of what is important to our progress as a people," said Lloyd Grant, publisher of the Kip Business Report. "Are you going to buy a \$600 jacket or a \$600 computer?" he asked.

He and others argued buying a computer for families should be a priority and is vital to future opportunities for children—their education, future job prospects and entrepreneurial opportunities.

"Too many people think entertainment and basketball are the way out of their existence rather than starting a business," offered Lynne D. Johnson, technology editor for blackplanet.com. "I blame the low interest in computers on the many entertainers and sports figures who glorify only quick money and flashy clothes," Ms. Johnson added.

The panel suggested that Blacks increase their technology awareness by taking more math courses and pursuing careers in fields such as engineering.

The technology week workshops also included "E-training and E-commerce;" "Introduction to the Internet in English and Spanish;" "How to build a PC;" "How to network a PC;" "Parenting in cyberspace" and "How to build a web page."

The National Society of Black Engineers, National Black MBA Association, the New York Chapter of Black Data Processors and One Hundred Black Men, Inc., sponsored the conference, which included workshops and discussions in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Only 14 percent of Blacks and 13 percent of Latinos have computers at home, compared to 40 percent of whites, according to a Congressional Black Caucus report released in 1999.

The Department of Labor estimates 75 percent of all new jobs today require technological skills. By the year 2005, computer-related fields will be one of the fastest growing segments of service-industry jobs added to the economy.

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