

# NEO NEWS

By AlphaSmart™/Renaissance Learning™



September 2008

Your source for news, product upgrades, and more for NEO laptops used in the K–12 classroom.

## Features



Schools nationwide are catching on to why the NEO is the "Better Laptop for Classrooms."

### A Message From Renaissance Learning

**grat·i·tude** (*noun*): A feeling of thankfulness and appreciation.

As we begin the new school year, I want to express my gratitude to you, our NEO customers, for a fantastic 2007-2008 year.

[Read more...](#)

Try the NEO 2 for Accelerated Reader quizzing at **NO CHARGE** for 60 days!  
[Click here for details!](#)

## Product News



### Multiple NEO product enhancements announced

We've been mighty busy over these last few months planning some great new features for the NEO laptops. In fact, there are so many exciting new features coming in the next few months that we couldn't decide on just one to spotlight. So, we're including them all. [Read more...](#)

## NEO Feature Stories

### Domino effect leads class to Script Frenzy...and beyond

Anne Sullivan always planned to be an author someday. But 'someday' always seemed to get pushed out for the Joseph W. Martin Elementary School teacher—until a professional development opportunity prompted her to start writing. What Sullivan didn't expect was the domino effect that her own writing would send her fifth-grade class into a writing frenzy. [Read more...](#)

### NEO 2 laptops give more bang for the technology buck in New Jersey district

Like most districts across the country, Berlin Township School District of West Berlin, New Jersey, did not want to sacrifice technology when faced with inevitable budget cuts. Though seemingly futile, this quandary led Superintendent Brian Betze in search of a practical approach to increase technology for the 600+ students in his district. [Read more...](#)

### An update on the Corliss High School authors

When we last heard from Kelli Rushek, writing workshop teacher at George Henry Corliss High School in Chicago, she and her students were frantically editing away during their book-publishing process. Now that their books are published, Rushek shared how the writing experience using NEOs affected her students. [Read more...](#)

### Need NEOs?

Get access to 25 NEO laptops for your classroom writing project this November! The National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) Young Writers Program is accepting a brief essay from teachers who wish to participate in NaNoWriMo with the help of 25 loaner NEOs. [Read more...](#)

## NEO in the News

### NEO laptop helps autistic girl express her love for hockey

An article from the Los Angeles Daily News shares the story of Isabella Masenga—a 10-year-old child with a form of autism that prohibits her from speaking. Using a NEO laptop, she was able to share her love of hockey for the first time.

[Read more...](#)

## AlphaSmarts for Africa Update

Thanks to help from you, thousands of AlphaSmart laptops have been shipped to Kenya schools in response to AlphaSmarts for Africa. [Read more...](#)

## NEO Best Practice Tips

### How to use NEO's Linked Files feature

Let's say your students are working on a project related to the Summer Olympics in Beijing. You want them to read a story on CNN's web site and answer some questions, but you don't want them getting distracted by other sites on the Internet. What do you do? You use NEO's Linked Files feature. [Read more...](#)

## Professional Development and Conference Appearances

### Attend one of four regional NEO 2 Forums!

Are you looking for an opportunity to explore more deeply the features and functions of NEO 2 that make it the only laptop designed for the classroom that lets you use it all day, every day? Then attend one of our upcoming 2-day NEO 2 Forums. [Read more...](#)

### Conference Appearances

[Click here](#) to see where we're going to be. Stop by and visit us at the Renaissance Learning booth!

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If you are interested in contributing ideas, photographs or articles for use in future issues, please contact us at [answers@renlearn.com](mailto:answers@renlearn.com).

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### A Message From Renaissance Learning

Greg Wright, Sr. Vice-President and General Manager, Renaissance Electronics Division

**grat·i·tude** (*noun*): A feeling of thankfulness and appreciation.

As we begin the new school year, I want to express my gratitude to you, our NEO customers, for a fantastic 2007-2008 year. As a company, we had a year of great NEO accomplishments:

- Thanks to your generous donations, we recently shipped over 4,000 refurbished AlphaSmart laptops to needy students in Kenya, in partnership with the non-profit agency, The Generation for Change and Growth. The laptops were collected in early 2008 as a way to help improve poor literacy rates in Kenya. Every AlphaSmart we delivered will readily affect 50 students—thanks for helping over 200,000 Kenyan students!
- Our customer satisfaction levels are higher than ever. In our recent semi-annual customer survey, over 50% of you answered “10”, when responding to the question, “On a scale of 1-10, would you recommend NEO to a colleague?” We are extremely proud that so many of you believe so passionately in the NEO’s ability to help students.
- We have shipped more NEOs than ever before, which means that even more students will improve their writing and keyboarding skills than ever before.

Our accomplishments as a company could never be possible without you. Here are some ways you’ve helped us become even better:

- Thank you for sharing your success stories with us. Our mission is to help accelerate learning for all, and hearing your stories demonstrates that our mission is being accomplished. Your stories inspire us, as well as others, knowing that the NEO has helped improve student writing skills, reading skills, or performance in other subject areas.
- Thank you for your feedback and opinions. What you tell us enables us to know what works and what could work better. In fact, we’re excited to announce a number of enhancements to the NEO laptop coming in early 2009. Based on your input, we will be adding Wireless File Transfer capability with Google Docs™, adding MathFacts in a Flash™ support, and developing a Text-to-Speech capability for NEO. You can find out more about these exciting new product enhancements by [clicking here](#).

As always, I welcome your input. Please let me know how I can help you and your students.

Thanks again for a tremendous 2007-2008, and best wishes for an outstanding new year!

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### Domino effect leads class to Script Frenzy...and beyond *Students have new-found interest in writing, thanks to NEO laptops*

Anne Sullivan always planned to be an author someday. But ‘someday’ always seemed to get pushed out for the Joseph W. Martin Elementary School teacher—until a professional development opportunity prompted her to start writing.

What Sullivan didn’t expect was the domino effect that her own writing would send her fifth-grade class from North Attleboro, Massachusetts, into a writing frenzy.

This year, Sullivan discovered Script Frenzy, an international writing event sponsored by non-profit organization The Office of Letters and Light. The event invites writers to create a 100-page script during the month of April. Though there are no prizes involved, participants get the satisfaction of documenting their own script.

Participation in the Script Frenzy competition allowed Sullivan to qualify to use 30 NEO laptops loaned from The Office of Letters & Light for use in its various writing events throughout the year, including Script Frenzy.

Sullivan was thrilled to acquire the NEOs for her class. “I attended an AlphaSmart training session and learned the incredible potential embedded in these powerful tools, ” she said. “It is absolutely necessary to incorporate writing into every concept area, and NEOs provide the essential capabilities of a laptop computer, but keep the students focused on writing.”

Sullivan’s students have since replaced their pencil-and-paper work with the NEOs. “All of a sudden they were thrilled to take notes, bringing their NEOs with them wherever they went. Once they learned how to ‘beam’ one another, they were hooked,” she said of the NEO’s ability to wirelessly send information back and forth to other NEO laptops.

Three of Sullivan’s students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were already familiar with NEOs prior to Script Frenzy, although they were reluctant to use them in the beginning of the year. “Reading their writing was a nearly impossible task,” Sullivan said of their often illegible handwriting. “I soon realized that using these laptops held a stigma for the students—they wanted to be like everyone else, using a pencil and paper.”

After acquiring the NEOs, the class turned to these three students as experts for help in transferring files from the NEO to the classroom computers. “All of a sudden, the reluctant IEP students became the heralded leaders of our classroom,” Sullivan said. “It has empowered them tremendously, and enabled the regular education students to use technology tools effectively.



Sullivan’s fifth-grade class used NEO laptops to participate in Script Frenzy, a month-long writing event with a goal of completing a 100-page script in one month’s time.

Sullivan said the experience of participating in Script Frenzy has ignited a passion for writing in her students. "It has opened so many doors for me and my students. They are now extremely active learners, thrilled at every moment that they were able to participate in Script Frenzy," she said. "They were so enthused, without any reward at the culmination other than the thrill of accomplishing the endeavor."

Sullivan, now affectionately dubbed the "techie-geek" by her principal, is currently working with other staff members on a grant to acquire a SmartOption Mobile Lab, a cart of 30 NEOs for the school, after seeing the positive effects Script Frenzy had on the students.

"My students on IEPs became leaders, and as they saw it, 'know-it-alls' in the world of NEOs. No longer are they reluctant to use the tools of technology available to them," Sullivan said. "As far as the rest of the class is concerned, their attitude toward school is far more productive and inquisitive than ever before."

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### NEO 2 laptops give more bang for the technology buck in New Jersey District

Like most districts across the country, Berlin Township School District of West Berlin, New Jersey, did not want to sacrifice technology when faced with inevitable budget cuts. Though seemingly futile, this quandary led Superintendent Brian Betze in search of a practical approach to increase technology for the 600+ students in his district. Best of all, Betze's solution capitalized on existing resources—by adding NEO 2 laptops.

"The main reason we purchased NEO 2s was to allow our students the opportunity to take Accelerated Reader quizzes from other areas of school," Betze said. "This frees up our computer labs and classroom computers for other things. With increased accessibility for AR quizzing comes more books read."



Since the district added the NEO 2 laptops into its technology mix, students are now able to take AR quizzes right at their desks.

The SmartOption MobileLab, a cart of 30 NEO 2s, can easily move from one classroom to the next for AR quizzing and word-processing—activities that previously ate up precious computer lab time. "The NEO 2 carts have made it possible to not only bring a computer lab into every classroom, they have infused technology into teacher instruction as well," he said.

Because the NEO 2s offer classroom response system capabilities, staff can instantly gauge student comprehension with responses displayed overhead on the 2Know! Toolbar, allowing for on-the-fly changes to instruction. "The teachers can now individualize instruction based on feedback they obtain using the responder feature," Betze said.

When using the NEO 2's classroom responder function, students respond anonymously, and everyone participates because no one is embarrassed about giving wrong answers. "To be a successful teacher, you need classroom engagement," he said. "That's now more easily attainable due to the responder feature of NEO 2."

After its debut in fall 2007, NEO's popularity spread like wildfire throughout the district's schools. "Our students and teachers love these devices. We've had teachers take NEO 2s to places I never expected!" Betze said. "The potential is really limitless: voting for student council, field trip reports, and use by school board members at meetings."

Betze sees the NEO 2s as a strategic investment in his district's future. "Our students are now thoroughly engaged in the learning process and have become active participants in their own education because of NEO 2s."

Comparatively, acquiring NEO 2s for Berlin Township was like adding a double-shot of espresso to the district's already-buzzing AR program—and for Betze, it made perfect sense.

"Perfect practice makes perfect. If you keep practicing the wrong way or the poor way of doing something, you'll never get better," he said. "AR supports reading practice and celebrates success on an individual level. NEO 2s support AR

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## An update on the Corliss High School students who wrote novels in one month

### *Nine writers get novels written on NEOs published*

*When we last heard from Kelli Rushek, writing workshop teacher at George Henry Corliss High School in Chicago, she and her students were frantically editing away during their book-publishing process ([click here](#) to see the article from the [March 2008 issue](#)). Now that their National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) project is complete, Rushek shared how this writing experience using NEOs affected her students.*

It all started in the fall of 2007: Rushek received an email from the director of NaNoWriMo regarding an opportunity to use a cart of 30 NEOs during the month of November. "I had wanted to be a part of NaNoWriMo with my students the year before, but we couldn't participate due to lack of technology." After winning the use of 30 NEOs for the month, Rushek's class attempted to write a 50,000-word novel in one month—and to her surprise, many of her students achieved their goals.

After NaNoWriMo was over, Rushek collaborated with Open Books, a non-profit bookstore, literacy community center, volunteer corps, and independent publisher in Chicago, to get some of her students' works published. Nine became published authors from the NaNoWriMo experience.

"The editors from Open Books came once a week from February to May," Rushek said. "We then had to edit all of our work, keep writing (some of us), get back to our editors, make television appearances, and keep chugging along, no matter what our schedules were!"

After the students' stories were downloaded from their NEOs, most of the communication with Open Books was through email and Word Comments. "This was good for the kids to see real-world technological applications."

With the final manuscript deadline in May, Rushek was busy with the finishing touches before publication. "I did the last round of edits, and then Stacy Ratner at Open Books did all of the layouts, formatting, and the final crisping edit."

Open Books' corps of volunteer illustrators designed covers for each of the students' books. "Many of the students were excited to see their covers for the first time when the Website launched."

Looking back on the whirlwind experience of the novel writing process, Rushek will definitely participate in NaNoWriMo again after the positive effects she saw in her students. "They feel like writers! And that is the greatest gift any teacher



Nine authors from Corliss High School in Chicago got their books written during NaNoWriMo published.

(from left to right) **Back row:** Corliss High School teacher Kelli Rushek; Stacy Ratner, Erin Walter, both of Open Books; Tonedalle Edwards, Corliss High School student.

**Front Row:** Chynicca Perry, Bianca Nelson, Corliss High School students.

could give her writing students," she said. "When I decided that I was a writer, the world was opened up to me, and now these students, along with all of my students who participated in NaNoWriMo, feel like true writers. This sort of confidence will bridge any essay type or writing-to-learn assignment."

Rushek is proud of how her students look at published text in a whole new light, now that they are published authors. "They are examining the classics—or any text that they come across—as writers, and they are reflecting on their own craft through reading more," she said. "I had one student that became excellent with characterization and her character's body movements after reading someone else's work, and realizing that 'she didn't have much of that' in her novel. Her creative written work—after her novel—was three or four grade levels higher than before, in my opinion."

Most of the nine novelists are also talking about writing their second novels. "Besides these nine students, tons of other students wanted to write a book after they saw something of this magnitude was possible," Rushek said.

Rushek has since moved to TEAM Englewood, a new performance school on the South Side of Chicago, but she hopes that NaNoWriMo will continue at Corliss. "I had a lot of sophomores come up to me at the end of last year and tell me they knew what they were going to write their novel about, or that they were excited to write their own book, which was really sad since I'm not going to be there to watch their goals come to fruition."

Though she is not teaching a writing course this year, Rushek hopes to continue the NaNoWriMo tradition with an after-school club during the month of November. Rushek herself experienced the ups-and-downs of the writing and editing process while "in the trenches" with her students during NaNoWriMo, and happily reports that she, too, is now a published author.

"I personally love the NaNoWriMo experience," she said. "I wish that more teachers would be able to drop test prep for a little while to engage their students in such a monumental and justified experience with writing."

To learn more about the nine Corliss High School published authors and their books, visit these additional resources:

- The Corliss High School Published Authors: <http://www.open-books-press.org/>
- Corliss authors interviewed on TV: <http://blip.tv/file/928171>
- [The March 2008 issue of NEO News feature on Corliss High School](#) (see page 8)

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### Get access to 25 NEO laptops for your classroom writing projects this November

The National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) Young Writers Program is accepting a brief essay from teachers who wish to participate in NaNoWriMo with the help of 25 loaner NEOs.



**nanowrimo's  
young writers program**

NaNoWriMo's Young Writers Program is a fun, free writing adventure for both teacher-lead student groups and young solo scribes. On the YWP site at <http://ywp.nanowrimo.org>, these brave young writers and their teachers will find all the resources they need for an unforgettable month of novel-writing and creative exploration.

Online curricula for teachers and virtual workbooks for kids are available for participation in NaNoWriMo. You'll find extensive creative-writing curricula in three tracks—elementary, middle school, and high school—to help kids through this seat-of-your-pants, fiction-writing adventure. The curriculum includes tips, lesson plans, and worksheets to prepare students for NaNoWriMo, to keep them writing during November, and to make sure that their novels aren't forgotten after the event is over.

If you believe that your class of novelists could benefit from the use of these 25 loaner NEOs, please send a request directly to [Tavia@nanowrimo.org](mailto:Tavia@nanowrimo.org). In the email, please include your name, the name of your school or library, and an explanation of why the NEOs would be helpful to your classroom.

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### Following your AlphaSmart for Africa donations ... from your hands into the hands of Kenyan students

As you read this, the AlphaSmart laptops you donated in winter 2008 are being distributed to students in Kenya. In July, in preparation for their delivery, Dr. Ali Mahamud of the Generation for Change and Growth, our partner in distributing the laptops, visited schools in Kenya and gave teachers and students a preview of what was to come, as well as instruction how to use the laptops. Here's an excerpt of some of his experiences:

*It has been quite an experience for me to jump from one bus to another to go and talk to a few select schools. As I write to you, I am in Garissa now and have visited and spoke to students and staff in Garissa High School last evening. I have also been to Wajir and Mandera and talked to the entire student body and staff. There is a lot of excitement and anticipation for the 'Alpha-babies'. To quote one of the Garissa Tech teachers, "Computers for us are not going to be pictures in books anymore...we will have a real computer and everyone will have the experience of writing on a computer."*

*The student leader also stated, "We are making a landmark breakthrough by getting a break from the constant note writing with paper and pen. We want to use the keyboard ... I am truly elated."*



Dr. Ali Mahamud shows several female students how to use the AlphaSmart laptop. For many Kenyan students, the AlphaSmart laptop will be the first piece of technology they can actually use. Most have only seen photographs of computers in their books.



*Things here are a lot different than we are used to. Turnaround time, coordination, infrastructure...a lot of things that make our lives easier and are taken for granted in America are not here. So, we have to 'dust our faces' and move on to deliver. Very soon, our donors and all the stakeholders will have a big smile...*

See more pictures taken by Dr. Mahamud by visiting [www.renlearn.com/neo/helpachild/images.asp](http://www.renlearn.com/neo/helpachild/images.asp)

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## How to use NEO's Linked Files feature

Let's say your students are working on a project related to the Summer Olympics in Beijing. You want them to read a story on CNN's web site and answer some questions, but you don't want them getting distracted by other sites on the Internet. What do you do? You use NEO's Linked Files feature.



Start by copying and pasting the content from the web page into a Send File in AlphaSmart Manager 2. Then, electronically link the questions you want them to answer to their reading assignment. Finally, send the assignment with its linked file to their NEOs. Sound simple? It really is. Here are the steps:

### First, let's create the reading assignment:

1. Connect your computer to the SmartOption Mobile Lab and launch AlphaSmart Manager 2. Verify that the NEOs in the lab are connected.
2. Click AlphaWord Plus Files to Send and select a file space.
3. Copy the text from the web page and paste it in the AlphaWord Files to Send window.
4. Press Enter to create a new line.

### Next, let's create the linked file containing the questions:

1. Click Rubrics.
2. Select Create My Own from the pull down menu.
3. Click Insert a Checkbox.
4. Enter your question next to the checkbox.
5. Press the enter key.
6. Repeat steps #3–4 until you have entered all the questions you want.

### Finally, let's send the assignment and its linked file to your students' NEOs:

1. Click the Send List tab to see your send list.
2. Click the Send button.
3. Students retrieve their NEOs, read the article you sent, and then press ctrl - L to see the question they need to answer.

It's that easy. With NEO's Linked Files feature you can easily attach electronic checklists, rubrics, task lists, Internet content, and more to student assignments.

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## Multiple NEO product enhancements announced

The Research and Development group at Renaissance Learning has been mighty busy over these last few months planning some great new features. In fact, there are so many exciting enhancements coming in the next few months that we couldn't decide on just one to spotlight. So, we're including them all.



### Short Answer Question Types

NEO 2 already functions like a classroom response system, allowing teachers to quickly determine if their students understand the material being taught. To date, teachers could use true/false, multiple choice, yes/no and numeric question types to assess student knowledge. With the next release of the NEO 2 suite in October, teachers can add short answer question types to their assessment toolbox. Here are just two examples of how you could use this new function. Imagine the possibilities!

- You've just finished teaching a science unit on the structures of the cell. You want to ensure that students have their facts straight before you deliver the end-of-unit test. So, you launch the 2Know! Toolbar and ask students to turn on their NEO 2s. You ask, "Which structure is the powerhouse of the cell?" Using NEO 2's full size keyboard, the students type the word "mitochondria" and press enter to submit. Within seconds you can see if your students know the answer *and* the proper spelling.
- Your students have been busy learning a new set of vocabulary words this week. It's Friday and time to see how they've progressed. You start by creating a vocabulary test in AccelTest using the short answer question type. Students turn on their NEO 2s and connect to your AccelTest session. They read the definition and then type the word that corresponds. Within seconds of finishing, you have their vocabulary tests graded and the results available for you students.

Look for this new feature in October 2008.

### Wireless document transfer from NEO 2 to Google Docs™

Talk about cool. With this new feature, students can wirelessly transfer their writing projects and other documents to Google Docs, Google's™ document, spreadsheet, and presentation program. Why is this cool? Here are just a couple of reasons:

- At the end of a class period, students can transfer their drafts from their NEO 2s to Google Docs, enabling access to their documents later from any web-enabled computer. This will make it easier for students to continue working on their writing assignments at home or another classroom at school.
- Teachers can easily monitor the progress students are making on their drafts when they use the sharing feature in Google Docs.



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**NEO 2 Forums Coming to a Location Near You**

Are you looking for an opportunity to explore more deeply the features and functions of NEO 2 that make it the only laptop designed for the classroom that let’s you use it all day, every day? Then attend one of our upcoming two-day NEO 2 Forums. Spend your first day enjoying the sights and sounds of the host city with your Renaissance Learning representatives. Then, spend Day 2 learning how NEO 2 can make a difference in the way your teachers teach and your students learn.

**NEO 2 Forums are currently scheduled for:**

Location	Dates	Events
Savannah, GA	September 21–23, 2008	Enjoy a ghost tour of historic Savannah followed by dinner at the Lady & Sons restaurant.
Cleveland, OH	October 16–17, 2008	Join us at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame followed by dinner at Morton’s.
Boston, MA	October 26–27, 2008	Enjoy the fall colors during a Fall Foliage Tour followed by dinner at Legal Sea Foods.
Minneapolis, MN	December 7–8, 2008	Finish your holiday shopping at the Mall of America, tour the famous James J. Hill House, and enjoy the holiday lights along historic Summit Avenue.

To learn more about the Forums and how you can attend, visit our [web page](#) or call 866-391-5336 or 866-391-5344.

**Conference Appearances**

Stop by and visit us at the Renaissance Learning booth.

Name	Dates	City	State
National Council of Teachers of English Conference	October 15–18, 2008	San Antonio	TX
Closing the Gap Conference	November 21–23, 2008	Minneapolis	MN

National Middle School Association Conference	October 30-November 1, 2008	Denver	CO
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### Accelerated Reader on NEO 2 Promotion

Customers using Accelerated Reader and Renaissance Place have a special opportunity to try NEO 2 for Accelerated Reader quizzing in their schools at no charge for 60 days.



For details, please call 800-338-4204 and ask about the AR on NEO 2 promotion.

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