

City to create apps for students

By Jessica Van Sack | Sunday, February 20, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | **Technology Coverage**

Those endless waits for the school bus in the dead of winter may soon be a thing of the past in Boston, thanks to a group of brainiacs who have descended on the Hub in pursuit of innovative smartphone apps to make life a little easier.

The city recently won the help of seven technologically sophisticated fellows through “Code for America,” which works similarly to its “Teach for America” namesake, giving yearlong fellowships to young adults.

The group is charged with designing and developing smartphone apps that are useful to public school students and their parents. They’ll also build an open-source platform that will allow outside developers to design their own apps by hooking into systems at Boston Public Schools, Boston Public Library, after-school programs, the MBTA and the Boston Center for Youth & Families.

“We’re bringing some of the lessons of startup culture into City Hall,” said Joel Mahoney, a programmer on the team.

The group — five programmers, a graphic designer and an interface manager — is spending the month of February meeting with hundreds of school officials, parents and city residents to understand their needs and brainstorm.

As part of their fact-finding mission, the mayor had the fellows answer his constituent services hotline to experience the full spectrum of neighborhood needs.

“There’s a directive from the mayor that we need to make sure our technology is letting us connect face-to-face,” said Max Ogden, a developer from Portland, Ore.

After the monthlong reconnaissance, the group will return to their headquarters in San Francisco for months of coding and development until next fall.

Among the ideas for apps that have been floated:

- A program that tracks homework assignments and automatically links to related library books.
- An app that locates school buses and gives an estimated arrival time.
- A way for students to see their library books, community center classes and course schedules on one screen.
- An app that allows parents to change their address with the public schools.

Bill Oates, chief information officer for the city of Boston, said the city’s new application hub is part of a larger effort to put the city on a tech-savvy track.

“The mayor is all over us about using technology,” Oates said. “It’s all about open standards, open source.”



Photo by Ted Fitzgerald

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