



Scott Brune, president and CEO of Wright & Hunter, in the Troy school district computer center. | LINDA RADIN

School projects sustain tech firm

BY CHRISTOPHER SCRIBNER
oakland@mbizreview.com

At Wright & Hunter, a technology consultant and design firm in Troy, technology and education go hand in hand.

"You look at kids today on their cell phones, texting and answering an e-mail all at once," said Scott Brune, president and CEO of Wright & Hunter. "If you don't have that quick-paced instruction in school, you can imagine that their interest or attention level might diminish."

Many Oakland County school districts such as Troy, Rochester, Avondale, Clarkston and Birmingham agree. Those districts consulted Wright & Hunter to design and manage technology upgrades in their schools.

The firm's business model relies primarily on K-12 school districts and their periodic bond issues every seven to 10 years for major capital improvements such as roof repairs, new windows and what Brune calls "the more exciting things." That being technology.

Districts can spend anywhere from \$1 million to \$30 million upgrading telephone systems, computer equipment, video surveillance and wireless networks, Brune said, depending on the district's size and the willingness of its citizens to shoulder additional taxes.

But the challenge is to get the schools the most "bang for their buck," Brune said, which means finding the best, longest-lasting equipment to fit their budget and needs. "Not something you buy from Best Buy."

"It really is trying to get (districts) to understand what's out in the market, help them and guide them," and point out potential pitfalls, Brune said. "Because we do that every day, we can share that knowledge whereas they have these projects every 10 years."

Brune wouldn't disclose Wright & Hunt-

er's revenue, but said that the company - which fluctuates from three to 12 employees depending on demand - is currently involved in 15 projects, which can take three to five years to complete and yield four- to seven-figure fees each.

"My reputation is everything," Brune said. "People in education talk."

The Troy School District, since its 2004 budget issue, has invested about \$22 million in technology improvements in its schools, said the district's director of technology, Scott Bryan.

Wright & Hunter has worked with the district for the past six or seven years, Bryan said. It helped write and currently manages a bid project to update the district's laptop computers. "We're rolling out 1,400 laptops this summer," Bryan said, an increase of over 40 percent. "They are going to be directly available for kids and teachers in the classroom in all of our buildings."

That hardware will supplement the 4,500 desktop computers Wright & Hunter helped update previously. That's a total of 5,900 computers in a district that educates about 12,000 students - one computer for about every two students. The goal is to get that ratio down to one-to-one once the district gets more funding.

"It really is today's reality," Bryan said. "And it gets (students) the idea that there's much more to the world than the classroom and the text book."

"If (students) don't have the latest technology, then when they leave high school, or if they go onto a job immediately or are getting a college degree, they're going to be exposed to the latest technology," Brune added. "If they're not exposed to it already, they come out with a disadvantage."

Wright & Hunter also managed a refresh-

ing of all network printers and designed video security systems for the Troy School District.

The district has paid Wright & Hunter \$200,000 - \$250,000 for its consulting services since the 2004 bond issue, Bryan said, adding that the district consults other firms, too.

Keeping up with the latest technology in schools not only benefits students, but also homeowners who see increased property values, Brune figures. His reasoning: Good schools attract homebuyers.

But the willingness of citizens to reach deeper into their pockets to fund more than the bare necessities has waned.

With less and less bond issues, less and less funding by the state, the jobs are diminishing," Brune said.

To hedge the business, Wright & Hunter partner with architects and electrical engineers on building projects, designing technology directly into buildings. It also consults for higher education, private education and government institutions.

The company recently teamed up with the Wayne State University College of Engineering on an expansion project and with Cranbrook for a new all girls school.

By having that diversity in your client base, you're not depending on one to keep you working," Brune said.

■ Christopher Scribner is a freelance writer.