LAPTOPS KEEP FALLING ON MY HEAD

Maine's great laptop experiment should not be picked at, but applauded

In September, every seventh grader in Maine—and their teachers—will be given their own iBook and free 24/7 Internet access. The following year, every eighth grader will get an iBook. Two years ago, Maine Gov. Angus King caused an eruption of debate when he proposed this laptop plan. At the time there was little if any legislative support. Today, it's the law of the land. King hopes this initiative will serve as a catalyst for reinventing public education and as a means for maintaining his state's quality of life.

The majority of children, teachers and taxpayers support the idea.

While a bit of nervous anticipation is expected on the part of Maine teachers, the American education computing community seems to be in a state of panic. At every education computing conference one can overhear gossip about Maine. Some of the buzz is supportive, but a great deal of discussion suggests that the laptop rollout is a bad idea. There hasn't been this much hysteria since kids were given their own floppy disks.

An autoimmune response triggers the instant some members of the ed-tech intelligensia hears of Maine's plans. "I hope they get the professional development right!" I respond by asking, "Do you mean the two-hour afterschool workshop or the three-hour workshop?" Are the P.D. addicts suggesting the imposition of one-size-fits-all training statewide? Educators should be focused on making the learning environment richer for kids. Professional well-educated adults should figure out what to do with their laptop.

To many, the primary goal of professional development is to produce the elusive "buy-in" among teachers who have yet to notice the presence of computers in everyday life. The great thing about Maine is that the "buy-in" battle has been won. If you teach seventh graders, every one of your students will be wired ... in the good way. The laptops will be falling from the sky.

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I suggest the "failure" of computers to "deliver" in schools is based on there being too few computers rather than too many. Maine offers the chance to finally test this hypothesis.

ED-TECH'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET The dirty little secret is that despite a substantial investment in hardware and software, many kids never use a computer at school and many more never enjoy the experience of doing something powerful with a school computer. Few American "laptop schools" have embraced personal computing as a vehicle for radical learner-centered school reform nor have they embraced ubiquitous computing as a vehicle for social justice as advocated by King. In far too many schools, laptops are a marketing tool, like a mascot or high standardized test scores.

We pay a lot of lip service to concerns about the digital divide. Yet, when Maine eradicates that divide by entrusting every kid with a personal laptop to use at home and school, we shake our heads. Some suggest using laptop funds to reduce class-size. Even if that were a priority in rural Maine, lowering class size does little to produce models of new classroom practice.

Why would computer-using educators be opposed to democratizing computer use? How could it be bad for all kids to have access to a world of ideas and a computer for creating a few of their own?

One answer may be economic. We don't employ pencil coordinators and may not need tech coordinators when the schools have professionally installed wireless networks, laptops with great repair contracts and high expectations for staff. You won't need computer literacy workbooks when kids have actual computers. National standards for technology use become irrelevant in one fell swoop.

Another cause for alarm could be more Freudian in nature. You may no longer be the district's one and only computer expert. The focus of schools can shift away from developing teachers to developing children.

Peers suggest that Maine's laptop investment will be a disaster. I just don't see it. How could closing the digital divide and treating children like responsible members of a learning community be a bad idea? Experience throughout the world teaches us that teachers with laptops see themselves as more professional. It would be a disaster indeed if we as professional educators did not learn all we can from Maine's bold leadership. We might even wish to help them invent a better future for us all. **D**

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