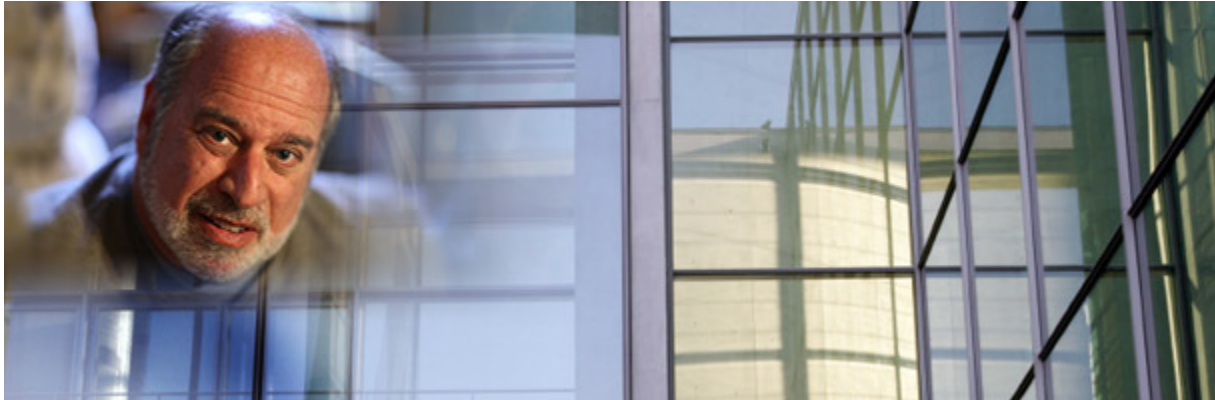


Back to School - Asking Schools about Learning Technology (Sep 15)



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“Schools are investing millions in learning technology, as they probably should. How they use this technology makes a world of difference. Districts love to show off shiny new technology to parents and voters. Make sure they have something meaningful to show besides fancy bells and whistles.”

It's that time again, when the kiddies all go back to school and parents wonder what exactly is going on there. So we ought to take an interest, at least once a year, in how what we do is implemented in that massive industry called public education.

This year, let's focus on what to ask about the implementation of learning technology in the schools. You'd have to have been on the moon for the past decade not to notice the infusion of computing technology in K-12 education. It's clear we're not in the world of filmstrips anymore.

Twelve questions to ask

As professionals in the learning technology field—and as parents and/or members of the community—we can influence how schools apply technology to education. Here are twelve questions you can ask to get started. See how well teachers, administrators, and the school board itself answer these questions. Are the responses well-informed or do the questions make those who have to answer them squirm and stumble a little too much?

1. **Does everyone have access?** What good is it if only some kids, or some teachers, have access to technology? Certainly, the rollout of technology has to be managed carefully, but if it looks like there will be “haves” and “have-nots,” the program is in trouble.
2. **Does the technology work?** School districts might invest in technology—hardware and software—that underperforms or doesn't work at all ([Los Angeles example](#)). This goes directly to the competence of the district's leadership, technology team, and their partners and suppliers, as well as how well those vendors have been vetted and managed.
3. **Is the technology used more for administrative purposes than for teaching and learning?** If the purpose of giving laptops to teachers is only for classroom management, grade reports, communication with parents, etc., you are wasting a precious resource. These tasks are important, of course, but they should not be the only reason for technology deployment.
4. **Are the teachers and administrators trained and supportive in the use of technology for teaching?** Ask this question carefully. It is likely teachers will have end-user training, but do they know how to use it to make a difference in learning? Are they moving to technology kicking and screaming? Don't ask teachers *if* they are using technology; ask them *how* they are using it. What

about administrators? They are the gatekeepers, but if they don't buy in, or don't know what to do, no one else will either. Makes all the difference.

5. **Are the kids really skilled?** Introducing technology in the early grades provides opportunities not just for children to learn how to use it, but how to use it *safely* and *smartly*. Kids may be technology-savvy, but do they know how to use technology to *learn*?
6. **Do parents and the community buy-in? Do they know what to do?** Often overlooked, the role of parents in the educational success of their children is well documented. Parental technology literacy, especially in how it will help their kids learn, is important enough to ask the school district how they plan to support parents in this area.
7. **Is technology appropriately integrated into the instruction and the curriculum?** This goes beyond teacher training, to curriculum design. Is the technology simply replacing pen and paper, or does it fundamentally change the way the class is structured? Does the design of the class play to the technology's strengths as a learning tool?
8. **Does the technology link to resources beyond courses?** Bringing in library resources, the web (with proper monitoring), community resources, etc., expands learning opportunities. Librarians know how to do this; use them.
9. **Are appropriate safeguards in place?** We all know the web can be a rich learning resource and, at the same time, a dangerous place for children. Ask your school district how they will manage the fuzzy line between valid and invalid resources.
10. **What is being done about personal technology?** Today, most kids have their own smartphone and computer. Can they use them? Ask what is being done around "Bring Your Own Device" initiatives.
11. **How do you know the learning technology is making a difference?** Yes, increasing efficiency and cost-effectiveness of schooling is important, especially to taxpayers. So an economic business case is clearly necessary. But if technology does not foster improved learning, if there are no educational gains from the technology, why are you doing it? Asking about evaluation strategies, plans, policies, and capabilities is key.
12. **How will learning technology change the schools?** What happens when learning can take place anytime and anywhere? Do all students learn at the same pace, and, if not, do the same 50-minute periods for every course still make sense? Does everyone have to go to school at the same time and for the same amount of days or years? Ask these paradigm-shifting questions and see if school leaders have thought clearly about these issues (unfortunately, probably not).

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