

Why Technology in School is Important
by Dr. Cameron M. McCune, Superintendent

The challenge of education continues to be to engage all learners in a meaningful curriculum and encourage every student to reach his/her own ultimate potential. This has been my vision since I entered public education, vowing to do what I could to make certain that learning is meaningful and maximized for each child. Research shows that powerful learning today depends upon a learning environment that is as engaging and intellectually stimulating as it can be. They are growing up as digital natives while most of the teachers and parents are digital immigrants. It is my goal to help teachers and students truly maximize and enjoy their educational experience and to ensure all are prepared for the digital world of today as well as tomorrow.

One of the most recent exciting advances in the classroom I've witnessed during my career is one that the District has replicated in four locations in the Fullerton School District. This innovative approach to accessing core curriculum involves utilizing the Internet throughout the school day and at home by teachers and students.

In the Fullerton School District, these four pilot programs, regardless of the economic capabilities of the parent (over half of all participants come from economically disadvantaged homes), all participating students have equal access to the same relevant and current worldwide resources. Many children with learning disabilities are able to compete on a level playing field and not only compete successfully with their peers, but are able to develop the same quality products that their peers are able to produce. I have witnessed students engaged in their own education in a manner that I have never observed before. Attendance is higher, student and teacher satisfaction are greater, and the overall quality of student projects has increased tremendously. In similar programs in other states, significant increases in student achievement have already been documented. While many current tests do not measure technological skills, colleges and employers all agree that they are critical.

Recently information regarding Fullerton School District's technology initiative to support Learning has been shared with the public. However, in many cases the information shared has been incomplete or inaccurate. I would like to take this opportunity to ensure that there is greater understanding of the technology initiative to support education in Fullerton, including why we have implemented the program and why, in many cases, we have asked parents and community to support this program by helping to lease, purchase or fund-raise to provide our children with appropriate 21st century technology including laptops.

Because of current State funding and legal constraints, many parents and educators have recognized that in order to offer our students opportunities that enhance and enrich the core curriculum, outside sources of funding are required. Indeed, most parents who can afford to fund school enrichment programs have been more than willing to do so to support their child's education; only a handful of parents have refused to participate, while acknowledging that they can afford the expense, but electing not to fund it because they believe it is the responsibility of the district, state or federal government to do so equally for all children.

As an educator in California for over thirty-eight years, I have witnessed a sharp decrease in the economic support of public education by our State. Economic support

has now dropped to somewhere between 44th and 48th, among the lowest of 50 states. Fullerton School District receives approximately \$6,619 per student. In contrast, the average level of support in Maine is \$10,961! This is by no means as high as some other states. Based on the cost of living in Orange County, staff needs to be paid a competitive wage, and due to years of added legislative constraints districts are unable to participate in many cost savings proposed by our critics. We are dictated class size, staffing ratios, credential requirements, and extensive labor constraints. New unfunded mandates are continually added, and even funded mandates are not being reimbursed by the State until years later.

Each year I have been the Superintendent of Fullerton School District we have been forced to cut our budget due to State cutbacks. This year we will be forced to cut another two million dollars out of an already decimated budget. As the "Education Community," Fullerton still aspires to provide a quality education in spite of a lack of State resources. Staff and the Board have continually strived to improve instruction in spite of diminishing resources and additional legislative constraints. State scores have continued to rise, and many of the Fullerton schools have been recognized as either California Distinguished Schools or National Blue Ribbon Schools in spite of diminishing resources and added legislative constraints.

Because of low State funding of education, and with no major change in sight, most parents still believe that their children deserve a quality public education regardless of what our State legislators have been willing to fund. While a number of other states have provided laptop computers to their students (Maine, West Virginia and Texas) in an effort to meet the challenges of providing a 21st century education, Fullerton and other California districts do not have the resources to pay for appropriate technology out of their current budgets. Fortunately, many parents have expressed and demonstrated their willingness to contribute to their child's education and have also been willing to help other parents who do not have the means to pay for a laptop which costs approximately \$485 per year (for three years), and can be paid for monthly, quarterly or in full at the start with a discount. This includes insurance, annual upgrades and on-going maintenance. At the end of three years, the computer belongs to the child. Some children are able to borrow a computer, due to categorical funding, but this student will never own it. We are working to assure that as many students as possible become owners.

It has been clearly communicated to all parents that students who come from homes with economic concerns that do not allow for any or all of the annual fee to be supported by the family, have the right to fully participate at a reduced cost or even no cost to the parents. When we began making the option of a laptop available at the original three schools, we committed to making certain that no child would be denied the opportunity to participate due to lack of resources to pay for a laptop. A number of generous donors and businesses (i.e., Fullerton Community Bank) in the Fullerton community have also stepped up to help students who are not able to fund a computer.

When we initiated this program we had not anticipated parents who could afford to pay for a laptop but would insist that their child participate and not contribute toward the cost of the laptop. This has led to a conversation with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that jeopardizes the entire laptop program where over two thousand children already benefit from this innovative choice.

Fullerton School District staff worked with legal counsel from the start, before initiating this program, and firmly believes that Education Code §17453.1 allows the district to charge for appropriate technology. "Internet appliances or personal computers; sale or lease by school districts to parents of pupils", allows a school District to charge parents who desire it. We firmly believe that all Fullerton students are being provided with an excellent education. Technology is provided to all students in every class, but access to one of four computers in a classroom does not equate with the opportunity to utilize a laptop assigned to one specific student. We would obviously like to make this opportunity available to as many students in Fullerton as possible and have made plans to assure that this happens as resources are identified and as staff are ready to participate.

With limited resources, it is unfortunate that the District must now expend valuable resources defending the right of over two thousand children and their parents' right to provide their own child with appropriate technology. They believe that this access and skill will make their children better able to compete in a global society.

The Fullerton School District hopes more children can enjoy the same advantage as our few pilot schools. We believe that we must come together as a community and county to assure that all California children are once again equipped to be the leaders of their communities, California, the United States and the world. Many children in other countries already enjoy the access that only some Fullerton students currently enjoy today! The United States is in jeopardy of losing its status as the foremost country in the world. Our future depends on all of our children being able to compete globally. This means providing them with a 21st century education now and not when the legislature and governor decide to make it a priority again! We believe that the technology initiative in Fullerton is good for our students and thus it is worth fighting for!