

## **Schools and Technology**

by  
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I was mesmerized as I entered our virtual work room through my computer and watched an Apollo-Ridge school student begin an informal tutoring session on the nuances of a computer language. The lesson was being conducted via the Internet by a collegian sitting in Sydney, Australia. No known high school could have offered a class that advanced at 10:30PM. This student's enlightened self-education was a glimpse of the future because in today's job market, education is becoming a perpetual discipline.

Duquesne University President, Dr. John E. Murray, Jr. recently predicted that "cyberschools will replace college branch campuses, and university libraries will swap dusty stacks for databases." It should come as no surprise that Duquesne is investing heavily in the next frontier - "distance learning" or the use of the Internet and a computer in instruction. As an example, distance learning has allowed Duquesne to offer a chemistry course to students both at Duquesne and the University of Kansas simultaneously.

Is it possible that our public school districts will also begin to reinvent themselves as education resource centers for students of all ages? Could one of Dr. Murray's branch campuses be virtually housed at Apollo-Ridge for example? As we approach the cusp of a new information era, it is important that educators begin to harness new technologies before technology begins to harness them.

Few will dispute that keeping up with the advances of technology is critical for the valley's public schools if area students are to compete in our global economy. But how? State-of-the-art equipment purchased today becomes primitive within three years. Who will make the necessary upgrades and maintain these systems? In addition, providing school computer networks requires a well-trained level of sophistication. Who will teach the teachers how to use this technology? Complicating the issue are the risks involved with new technology. How do we prevent students from seeing smut over the Internet for example? Despite these challenges, most school districts are beginning to realize that there is more risk by not moving forward. Those with the best computer systems will give their students a big boost toward colleges or careers.

Some astute school boards have recognized the importance of managing technology. They understand that technology should be treated as an investment, rather than as an expense. These schools are not only hiring people to direct technology, they are developing malleable technology plans. Apollo-Ridge is one of those schools.

Superintendent Bill Kerr has a vision and a boundless enthusiasm that is necessary if Apollo-Ridge is to move forward into the 21st century. His mission will be very difficult though. People generally resist change. Employing new technologies is uncomfortable

for most of us. However, schools that do not begin to innovate with new technologies will push opportunity away from students.

Apollo-Ridge has wisely sought guidance from several important sectors. They have solicited the help and input of businesses, Pennsylvania universities and the community.

As an Apollo businessman, it is very encouraging to see business experiences being valued by our school district. Not only is the area's computer expertise being utilized, relationships are being formed with faculty and students. On another front, the University of Pittsburgh has been the center of a joint Bosnian/Apollo project using the Internet. These cooperative efforts are excellent.

The constraints of Pennsylvania's discriminatory school funding system will make technology funding even more onerous for small and rural school districts like Apollo-Ridge. The gap between the haves and the have nots widens as education becomes technology driven and more costly.

The Apollo-Ridge school board has an obligation to property owners to be fiscally prudent. Therefore the strategic initiative that Apollo-Ridge has begun to undertake has been very resourceful. For example, the Apollo-Ridge education foundation was begun this year to help shoulder the financial burden. The Gannett foundation in turn recently stepped to the plate and awarded the education foundation \$2,500 in their efforts to help themselves.

We in the valley have to give more kids opportunity to teach themselves from Sydney and maybe London, Milan and Hong Kong. They then will be better prepared to compete in a global economy.



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