Chapter 17

New and Emerging Technology Purchase Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Periodic waves of new challenges almost always await those who are or seek to become school system technology directors. None are more apparent than when school or district personnel decide to purchase technology hardware or educational software for which no one is prepared, or at best, ill-prepared. In other words, there is sometimes an overwhelming tendency to “buy technology stuff now, then catch up later.” The chapter discusses issues that technology leaders in the school system may face when making technology purchasing decisions. The narrative account addresses some relevant considerations that this particular technology director had to confront in terms of technology acquisition. The author hopes that the narrative will enlighten future technology directors and coordinators on the mechanics and ramifications of technology purchases.

INTRODUCTION

How far ahead of the curve should schools attempt to go in their technology acquisition endeavors? Educators at all levels are sometimes enticed by new technology marketing tactics whenever there may be a windfall in funding, when their neighboring districts or schools possess new technology tools, or educators think their own schools or school system needs it. Often, new technology items are purchased without proper planning or consideration of other indirect affects such as power availability, room size, available wired or wireless Internet connectivity, and trip hazards caused by electrical cords, and from projector and Internet cables. After purchase of unanticipated new technologies, Technology Directors (TDs) are forced to find ways to make the new technology fit with what is being done, rather than the new technology being a tool needed to assist in educating students.

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BACKGROUND

Technology purchase decisions are often forced on technology departments for which they are unprepared. New technologies require varied types of installation, support, repair, and training for participants in at least basic use. Older buildings require electrical reconfiguration or addition of power sources; technicians require training in repair skills of new technology items, aside from “just computer workstations.” Unfortunately, most school or system technicians really never obtain a chance to try out new technology; rather they have to learn it along the way with those possessing the new technology. Even then, some technicians do not possess the new technology, but rather are expected to fix the new technology when it breaks. Training is an afterthought in a lot of cases that keeps new technology from being implemented at all. If training is conducted, it is often done at a low quality level. All these unexpected consequences of new technology purchases are often unbudgeted as well.

The majority of educational sales representatives are earnest individuals with a desire to help schools improve better student learning with programs, tools, etc. they sell. They do their best to provide necessary support and training, often at additional cost, and follow-up on products purchased by districts. There are some sales representatives that make any product sound like it is the panacea for all ills with much potential. Often schools or schools systems are left holding technology inventory that has little usefulness or is antiquated by the time staff members get around to learning to use the technology. Regardless, it is often then “on to the next, new wave of technology.”

The necessity to spend designated funds in a year simply does not leave enough time for medium to large districts to purchase technology, have it installed or implemented, provide adequate training, and conduct follow-ups to determine how the new technology is being used. Unfortunately, in many school systems, funds such as federal grants must be spent within a calendar year that prohibits a rational implementation schedule.

NARRATIVE FOCUS

This narrative encompasses some school and system purchasing events in which this chapter’s author is employed: the Pascagoula (MS) School District (PSD). The account is intended to demonstrate the issues and considerations that must be given by the author to short-term and long-range decision-making, and this is always a work in progress. However, the narrative also enlists purchase consideration dilemmas faced and mentioned, via several technology listservs, by the many schools and school systems in the state of Mississippi as well as the region; if not all across the nation and other countries.

The model for discussion in this section will be mobile computing. Because mobile computing is so new to schools at the time of this writing, its effects and the decisions after its rollout are still being measured. There will be references to past experiences with other technologies to illustrate the point that proper planning and executing those plans is necessary for successful implementation of new technologies. Schools or school systems, by virtue of their receipt of E-Rate funds, must have a three-year technology plan written and approved by its state board of education or another approved state entity. The plan should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis and can provide some remedy when coming to impulse or unplanned technology purchases.

The narrative will not offer any final solutions to issues because technological challenges are never-ending. When one issue is solved, most often another rises. The prevalent challenges manifest themselves in the forms that follow in the subsequent paragraphs. While each challenge can be treated as an individual issue, they are all interrelated in the challenges of dealing with the
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