The Future of Technology in Education

by Joyce Johanson

Are you old enough to have met George Jetson before the cartoons about him and his family were re-runs on Nickelodeon? If so, you probably remember watching the series’ unusual technologies—the food cooking itself on command, the instantaneous communication, the computer-assisted homework, the rapid transportation—and thinking, “Wow, wouldn’t that be great! Too bad it’ll never happen.”

Guess what? It has happened. It is happening! Our world is filled with amazing technologies that our children take for granted and that tend to bewilder those of us old enough to remember the day our family bought its first TV set VCRs, compact disc players, remote controls, computers, modems, fax machines, cellular phones, microwave ovens, photocopy machines, bar code scanners, digital cameras, palm pilots—all are wondrous technologies that allow us to do things better, faster, easier. Where will it lead? What are the possible impacts on and for education? The potential is mind-boggling!

Technology’s advancements are not going to disappear. Even those teachers and administrators who are reluctant to jump on the technology bandwagon must now admit that what looked like just another fad on the educational scene 18 years ago is here to stay. Technology is education’s "newest" tool, a tool that constantly changes and offers new opportunities for learning. Even so, old habits and sacred paradigms are hard to change.

The American school system paradigm was developed more than a century ago. Changing that paradigm to create a technology-based educational paradigm is challenging but necessary on all educational levels. Complacent college and university professors should teach with technology so future teachers will “teach as they were taught.” Teachers and administrators must wake up and realize that waiting to implement a technology plan only cheats students of valuable learning opportunities. Administrators must formulate strategic planning committees and find ways not only to provide their schools with hardware, software, and networking tools but also to provide all staff with much-needed technology training, follow-up, and technical support. As Joel Barker so eloquently points out in Discovering the Future, “Those who say it can’t be done should get out of the way of those who are doing it!”

Americans accept the advantages technology offers us at home, on the highway, in business and industry. We accept, expect, perhaps even demand, these advantages in all aspects of our lives except education. Why? Why is it that the educational “we’ve always done it this way” and "it’s worked for over 100 years" attitudes block the integration of technology into our schools where we are educating children for a future that demands they understand and use technology? The fact is that if America wishes its future generations to be able to meet the demands of a global community, to compete in a world that is technology-based, and to manage the vast amounts of data and information available, we must give today’s children the tools through education.
Computers, the Internet, distance learning, and other educational technologies are a fact of life. Traditional textbooks and worksheets—along with traditional learning environments—may soon go the way of slate tablets. Administrators, teachers, and parents who bury their heads in the sand hoping the technology "fad" will pass them by may be resisting because they see change as a threat or because they do not understand how technology can be integrated into the traditional educational system. Whatever the reason, the longer they delay, the more they are shortchanging children's futures. As research at the Center for Best Practices indicates, technology is an important equalizing tool for children with disabilities. It is an equally important tool for all children.

One thing is clear: the time has come for educators comfortable living with the Flintstones to accept the inevitable and "meet George Jetson!"