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School-tech spending often wasteful

BY LEWIS M. ANDREWS

As we enter the season when many Connecticut towns are voting on their budgets, more schools than ever are asking for increases to cover school-technology spending.

Some parents are delighted by the prospect of turning their children's classrooms into high-tech learning facilities, but not all experts are convinced. As far back as 2000, Stanford University education professor Larry Cuban compared the value of technology spending to "buying dot-com stocks that lose money year after year."

Dr. Armand Fusco, a former Connecticut schools superintendent and education finance reformer, believes lax oversight negates any benefit from wiring classrooms. "Few districts," he says, "bother to track assets, with the result that computers and related items rapidly disappear."

In fact, the phrase "school technology" is an imprecise expression used to reference two distinct, and in many ways contradictory, trends.

The first, described by Dell Computer founder Michael Dell as "expediting old methods of teaching," creates devices such as electronic note pads, mouse-sized clickers for taking multiple-choice tests, high-definition projectors and programmable whiteboards. School administrators like this kind of gadgetry because it holds out the promise of academic im-

provement without fundamentally changing education.

Support also comes from a growing army of consultants, providers and service professionals, some with questionable links to the schools. In May 2006, a \$13 million technology bond issue for the Katy, Texas, school system featured a lesson-planning program developed by four of the district's own administrators.

More seriously, the Los Angeles Unified School District has come under investigation for misspending nearly \$175 million in consulting contracts, much of it for technology related expenditures.

Less enthusiastic are the many educators who have to cope with the time-consuming implementation of technology they believe is irrelevant to student achievement.

Donna Garner, an experienced teacher who helped defeat the Katy bonding proposal, argued even the fanciest computerized lesson plan "does not matter a whit" when it comes to raising test scores.

Jerry Graham, a remedial-skills instructor at Chemeketa Community College in Oregon, says the underreported downside of electrifying the traditional classroom is broken machinery, the continuous installation of upgrades, and a lack of immediate support.

Think tanks that study municipal finance also have noted a disturbing trend of disguising the high cost of

classroom technology by using the proceeds of bonds, traditionally reserved for "bricks and mortar," to cover remodeling, computer maintenance and even software. According to the Mackinac Institute, Michigan laws to curb such abuse by prohibiting bond maturities longer than the useful life of the assets have been subverted by schools delaying payments on construction until the electronic devices are paid off.

The alternative, and truly innovative approach to school technology, is the development of economical online courses, which take curriculums developed by the best teachers in America and make them available over the Internet.

One obvious advantage of what some call "virtual schooling" is the burden for upgrading to a newer version of any course and making it run smoothly is borne by the provider. Schools with older computers and modest budgets can benefit from an Internet-based curriculum just as much as the wealthiest suburban districts.

Another advantage is access to coursework from almost any location. In Birmingham, England, where high crime rates and disciplinary problems interfere with regular attendance, the 24-hour availability of online instruction has boosted students' performance in math and reading tests. In Brazil, Internet-based courses are provided free in the worst urban slums, the *favelas*, giving even very poor children the opportunity to rise.

Here in the United States, according to a recent issue of Harvard's Education Next, the quality of online instruction has fueled a dramatic increase in home schooling, which surged 29 percent between 1999 and 2003.

Recognizing the potential to deliver world-class courses at a reasonable price, Florida has passed legislation to require virtual-learning programs for all students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Unfortunately, most states and localities still interpret "going high-tech" to mean spending on electronic enhancements to old pedagogies, and on the personnel costs that follow. According to Frederick Hess, director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, public schools' expenditures on technology went from virtually zero in 1970 to more than \$100 per student in 2004, while U.S. students continued to lag those in other industrialized countries in math and science achievement.

Sue Helms, board president of Alabama's Madison City Public Schools, warns her colleagues not to be mesmerized by high-tech versions of the blackboard and offers a simple test for evaluating any supposed classroom innovation: If one day the hardware "went away and you were still able to teach," she says, then "that's wasted dollars."

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