TECHNOLUST

A School That's Too High on Gizmos

By Patrick Welsh
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What's wrong with the teachers at T.C. Williams High School?

Last September, we moved into a new $98 million building in Alexandria, one of the most expensive high schools ever built. Natural light floods the classrooms, and each one is equipped with a ceiling-mounted LCD projector, which transfers anything I can put on my laptop computer -- from poetry readings at the Library of Congress to YouTube interviews with Toni Morrison and other writers -- onto a large screen at the front of the room. Students' behavior seems much improved: A cafeteria that looks like something out of an upscale mall has had a curiously pacifying effect on them, as has the presence of 126 security cameras.

So you'd think T.C. teachers would be ecstatic. But it's just the opposite -- faculty morale is the lowest and cynicism the highest I've seen in years. The problem? What a former Alexandria school superintendent calls "technolust" -- a disorder affecting publicity-obsessed school administrators nationwide that manifests itself in an insatiable need to acquire the latest, fastest, most exotic computer gadgets, whether teachers and students need them or want them. Technolust is in its advanced stages at T.C., where our administrators have made such a fetish of technology that some of my colleagues are referring to us as "Gizmo High."

Science and math teachers, for instance, have been told that they can't use traditional overhead projectors to present material to classes, even though the teachers say that in many cases, they're far superior to computers for getting certain concepts across. But the measure of teachers now is not whether they can convey their subject matter to students but how "paperless" their classrooms are -- how many new gizmos they use. To paraphrase the movie "Field of Dreams," if a computer company makes a classroom gizmo, the Alexandria school system will buy it.

The latest is the "school pad" -- a hand-held device that allows a teacher to roam around the room and underline whatever the LCD projects onto the screen. In other words, it saves teachers from walking a few feet to their desks to click the computer mouse. The school system ordered 77 school pads for T.C. at $495 apiece, even though one teacher said they reminded her of "the Magna Doodle pads we had as kids. It's another way to waste money for people who are too lazy to write on the board."

For a while, I thought it was just older teachers like me -- immigrants to the Internet world -- who were chafing at the so-called technology initiative, but it turns out that even the youngest teachers are fed up. "They would rather have a cyborg teaching than me," one young English teacher complained to me. "It's

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technology for the sake of technology -- not what works or helps kids learn, but what makes administrators look good, what the public will think is cutting edge."

The school admits as much on its Web site, which includes this entry addressing teachers:

"Imagine this headline: '[Alexandria City Public Schools] Recognized for its Premiere Educational Technology Program, Student Achievement Correlated to Technology Implementation.' What kind of technology exists at the high school that would create a headline like this?"

Principals and other administrators may live off headlines, but teachers live off whether their students learn. "Teachers shouldn't have to change how they teach to fit some technological device," said Peter Cevenini, who heads up the K-12 education division of Cisco's Internet Business Solutions Group. "Teaching is a craft, and many great teachers instruct in totally different ways. Too many school systems are becoming device-driven -- they're buying computer devices because they're there."

Kids certainly aren't fooled by all the gizmos. "The most effective teacher I have is Mr. Nickley," said senior Jamal Stone. "He isn't into all this computer stuff. All he uses is the board -- the whole board. He's lively, energetic, witty and really knows his math. He forces you to pay attention; you can't drift off even if you want to."

Stone said he feels sorry for many of the "paperless" teachers who are always having students use their school-issued laptops in class. "The teachers think their students are engrossed in class research when they're actually playing video games and surfing the Net," he said. "Whenever the computer Nazis block one game, kids just find new ones." Senior Katerina Savchyn confirmed that she sometimes uses her laptop to escape the boredom of class by playing the online "Helicopter Game."

In fact, the school-issued laptops are a problem in many ways. Students say all kinds of class time is wasted as they struggle to upload programs for class. The laptops constantly fail to connect to the wireless server, even though the computer geeks came around to every classroom a few months ago and installed new memory in every computer. The school system, which rushed into giving kids laptops three years ago, is constantly trying to play catch up with the technology.

What's truly disconcerting is that the technology overkill is turning off talented young teachers. As one of the best here -- someone whom parents seek out and students love -- put it: "There's a lot of things I like about the computers, but we're being forced to do an unreasonable number of computer activities. Many of them don't fit my teaching style. We have so many hoops to jump through that some days I come in and I'm not excited to teach. All the computer activities just take us away from students."

The administration doesn't seem to care about that. Recently, we English teachers had to get substitutes for our classes and attend an all-day technology session. An e-mail from the central office informed us that we would "examine methods for integrating technology to deepen student understanding by increasing rigor, creating relevance and building relationships with students and among students."

Apparently administrators really do believe that computers are the key to building relationships. The human voice and face-to-face contact have been replaced by e-mail and Blackboard, a computer program that allows teachers and students to communicate via the Internet. I've always thought that in some ways schools should be like families, but as one experienced teacher puts it, "We're becoming like a correspondence school where all communication is faceless."

You can walk around T.C. and peer into offices and classrooms and see administrators, guidance counselors and teachers staring at their computers instead of interacting with students. To some, T.C.'s principal of two years seems more comfortable in cyberspace than in face-to-face interaction. His preferred method of communicating with teachers seems to be via e-mail, and some say they think he doesn't know who they are or what they teach.

I love my computer and all I can do with it; on the few days when it's been in for repairs, I've felt a bit lost at first, the way I do when I can't find my cellphone or my TiVo remote. But as classes go on, I feel much closer to my students without the distraction of the laptop.

Of course, the big question isn't whether teachers like spending their time learning one new gizmo after another, but whether a parade of new technologies will help kids learn. From what I can see, that's not the case. Says one math teacher: "Math grows out of the end of a pencil. You don't want the quick answer; you want students to be able to develop the answer, to discover the why of it. The administration seems to think that computers will make math easy, but it has to be a painful, step-by-step process."

A social studies teacher agrees. More than ever, he says, "our students want to push a button or click a mouse for a quick A, B or C answer. Fewer and fewer of them want to think anymore because good thinking takes time."

I see the same thing in my classes, especially when it comes to writing essays. Many students send their papers in over the Internet, and while the margins are correct and the fonts attractive, the writing is worse than ever. It's as if the rule is: Write one draft, run spell check, hit "send" and pray.

Alexandria isn't the only school system bitten by the technology bug. Many rushed into giving every student a laptop in the hopes of finding a quick fix to the technological and academic performance gaps between the well-to-do and those less so. But now, a number are abandoning the programs, saying there's no evidence that the laptops are helping students academically -- and that they may even be a distraction.

North Point High School for Science, Technology and Industry in Waldorf went with ceiling-mounted LCD projectors but nixed the idea of laptops for all students. "Our philosophy is to have whatever technology our teachers want to do their jobs better available to them," Principal Kim Hill told me. "Technology is just a tool, not an end in itself. It will never replace good teaching."

Are you listening, Alexandria?

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