

Sarah Barnett  
November 17, 2013  
ITEC 7430  
Blog Post—Equitable Access

My post:

August not only signals the start of school, but also the beginning of school shopping season, the time of year when stores offer sales on “back-to-school” merchandise including pencils, paper, calculators and crayons. Yet, more and more frequently, technology—in the form of home computers and mobile handheld devices—is making its way, whether explicitly or implicitly, on to back-to-school shopping lists. While conventional surveys seem to suggest that the digital divide, or the lack of access to technology by certain racial and socioeconomic groups, is closing, Common Sense Media’s (2011) report suggests otherwise. While 72% of children 0-8 years of age have access to a home computer, when these numbers are disaggregated by socioeconomic levels the numbers are not as promising: 91% of high income families can offer their children at-home computer access, but only 48% of lower income families can do so (2011). Barron, Walter, Martin and Schatz (2010) suggest that access at home *does* matter since computer access at home not only increases school readiness, mathematics achievement, and reading fluency, it also allows students the opportunity to participate in creative activities that make them better thinkers and creators. Inequitable access to computers at home amounts to inequitable opportunities for students to develop critical skills that will make them successful in school.

What can schools do to ensure students’ equitable access to technology? For my school, we have chosen to first wage this battle at school by implementing a Bring Your Own Device policy that encourages students to bring personal devices to school and teachers to implement activities that require usage of technology. While some students do not have their own devices, we have approximately 300 laptop computers in the school that teachers can check out for individual students who may not have access to personal devices during the school day. In this way, these students are getting the opportunity to participate in important technology-based reading and mathematics activities, even though they may not have access at home. Also, one teacher at my school has collected discarded smart phones and used those in her classroom, though she has had some difficulty in teaching students how to use phones with which they are not familiar. Further, we do provide students with abundant access to computers before, during and after school to complete assignments that may require technology. Our local public library has faced several budget shortfalls which has led to reduced hours so many of our students cannot rely on this resource for technology access after school hours so increased access at school is vital.

Holmfeld (2010) suggests that schools like mine may go one step further and allow families to check out school owned devices, such as laptop or desktop computers. My school system is not yet ready to assume the risk in allowing students to check out devices for use at home, so in this way we are unable to ensure equitable access. However, I recently attended GaETC and heard a speaker discuss ways in which Clarke County Public Schools is

approaching this potential problem. By soliciting partners in education, especially those in heavy information areas, to donate their used business computers before upgrading to newer devices, they have amassed a small storehouse of computers that they can then sell to families for \$25 each. Combined with giving families information about cheap or free access to Internet for low-income families offered by many of the Internet providers, they have been able to increase the number of students who have access to technology at home.

Another finding that I personally have discovered is that many of my students who do not have computer access at home *do* have access to mobile devices at home; they simply do not realize that they can use the device to perform many of the activities they would traditionally associate with a laptop or desktop computer. By teaching these students about free apps for word processing and other important computer functions, they can use mobile devices at home to complete computer-related activities. Also, leveraging the support of family and community coordinators at the school level can certainly go a long ways in educating parents about the opportunities for free or cheap access to devices and services available in the community.

Barron, B., Walter, S. E., Martin, C. K., and Schatz, C. (2010). Predictors of creative computing participation and profiles of experience in two Silicon Valley middle schools. *Computers & Education* 54, 178-179.

Holhfeld, T. N., Ritzhaupt, A.D., & Barron, A. E. (2010). Connecting schools, community, and family with ICT: Four-year trends related to school level and SES of public schools in Florida. *Computers & Education* 55, 391-405.

Rideout, V. (2011). *Zero to eight: Children's media use in America*. Common Sense Media, 7 – 44

My response to Jordan:

Jordan,

I think you bring up an excellent point when you note that since teachers are increasingly using technology to communicate with parents, we must ensure that parents have access to technology and understand how to use it so that our attempts at communication are not in vain. I think that a parent learning night certainly sounds promising, but I do worry that the parents without technology access are often uncomfortable at such events, since they further highlight their lack of access. Just like parents who are non-native English speakers, they rely on their children to teach them about technology and feel uncomfortable in social settings where their lack of knowledge about a specific area is addressed.

Therefore, I think schools must continue to teach students how to use technology and teach them how to teach their parents. Has your school considered starting a technology club for this purpose? There is one elementary school in my county who has gotten state-wide

attention because of their creation of a technology club and Computer Café, basically a time before school for open computer access for those students without access at home. Teachers are available during this time to help students learn to use specific computer programs since their limited access at home often means that they struggle using technology in the classroom. I think the more access to technology we can provide our students during school hours, the more this knowledge will trickle down to their parents.