educational technology®

the magazine for managers of change in education

Volume 51, Number 4

July–August 2011

educational technology®

Volume LI
Number 4

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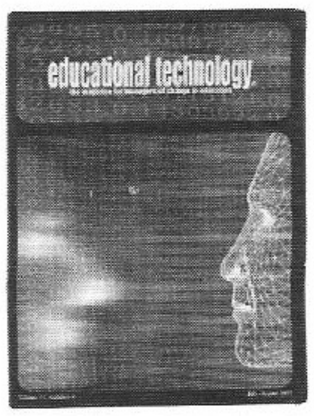

About This Issue

A general issue covering varied aspects of educational technology

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Will We See Follow-Through on Technology in Education?

Charles L. Blaschke

After my initial studies of educational technology use and project management experience with technology R&D in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the newly-created Community Action Technology Demonstration Program in the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity during the mid-1960's, I concluded: For a society so adept at developing technology, we have been inept in developing the political and managerial innovations necessary to apply that technology in such a way to realize its benefits (e.g., student performance increases in less time and cost-effectiveness related measures). In November 2010, in a major departure from prior USED education technology policy, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, before the American Enterprise Institute, gave a speech called "The New Normal: Doing More With Less." The Secretary challenged policymakers, particularly at the state and district levels, to rethink "policies around seat time requirements, class size, compensating teachers based on their educational credentials, the use of technology in the classroom, inequitable school financing, the over placement of students in special education — almost all of these potentially transformative productivity gains are primarily state and local issues that have to be grappled with…Technology can play a huge role in increasing educational productivity, but not just as an add-on or for a high-tech reproduction of current practice. Again, we need to change the underlying processes to leverage the capabilities of technology…Better use of online learning, virtual schools, and other smart uses of technology is not so much about replacing educational roles as it is about giving each person the tools they need to be more successful —reducing wasted time, energy, and money." Finally!!! It took the "great recession" upheaval, state education budget cuts, and an imminent Federal "funding cliff" — as the $100 billion education stimulus funding runs out this year — to redirect the prior Bush Administration's policy, which only assessed the effectiveness of technology in terms of increased math and reading scores on standardized state assessments, not individual student progress.

Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute called the speech "unlike any I've ever heard a Secretary deliver. Now the only question is follow-through — will this prove to have been a one-time speech, or something more than that." Further, Hess noted, the Secretary can "make it safer for superintendents and state chiefs to talk about productivity and efficiency alongside student learning. He can make it safe to talk about labor-saving technologies, new staffing approaches, and school closures as part and parcel of reform." I share Hess's concerns; however, beyond providing political cover for reform-minded, pro-technology state and district officials to institute such reforms which allow the benefits of technology to be realized, there appear to be some positive steps.

Even though the Administration's FY 2011 Blueprint for ESEA reauthorization zero-funds the Title II D State Technology Grants program from about $900 million over the last two years (including more than $600 million in stimulus funds), the Administration is encouraging the expanded use of technology in large Federal formula programs such as Title I (about $15 billion) and IDEA special education (about $11.5 billion) by touting existing "flexibilities" in laws and regulations. Moreover, in 2009, Secretary Duncan provided waiver approvals to 315 requests from SEAs and districts (and likely a similar number for 2010, even though actual data are not yet available), compared to only 37 waivers approved under former Secretary Margaret Spellings in 2008.

On December 15, 2010 USED posted final priorities which will apply to all USED and Institute of Education Sciences discretionary grants and contracts in the future. Differing from the proposed 2010 priorities posted in the Federal Register (August 5th), the final priorities include "technology."

As the final notice states, "Rather than modify each individual priority, we have decided to establish a new priority focused solely on educational technology." The New Priority 6 – Technology now reads: "Projects that are designed to improve student achievement or teacher effectiveness through the use of high-quality digital tools or materials, which may include preparing teachers to use the technology to improve instruction, as well as developing, implementing, or evaluating digital tools or materials."

In addition to the New Priority 6, Priority 16 – Improving Productivity has been changed to read, "Projects that are designed to significantly increase efficiency in the use of time, staff, money, or other resources while improving student learning or other educational outcomes. Such projects may include innovative and sustainable uses of technology, modification of school schedules and teacher compensation systems, use of open educational resources, or other strategies."

As we wrote in our Technology Monitoring and Information Service (TechMIS) reports (March 2011), "To the extent that USED and its selected peer review panels of future discretionary grant programs take new Priority 6 and revised Priority 16 into account in a serious manner when reviewing discretionary grant applications, there appear to be much greater opportunities to make the case for effective and appropriate use of different types of technology applications in which the cost savings or benefits of the use of technology can actually be realized."

State and district policy indicators, which Federal policies support, encourage, and possibly fund through competitive grants, could include:

- state policies which encourage individualized student learning 24/7 as reflected in such initiatives as: dual enrollment, mastery or competency assessment, credit recovery;
- eliminating state "seat time" requirements for online instruction in such areas as community college remediation, state virtual schools, and cyber charter schools.

To assess the Secretary's "follow-through" on implementation of the new USED policy using technology to realize benefits, the single most important indicator will be the degree to which the policy is integrated into the "fix-it" legislation as part of the likely reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year. □

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