A Backlash Against Classrooms with High Technology -- But No Air Conditioning

By EMILY ALPERT | Posted: Tuesday, February 16, 2010 7:35 pm

The sleek new digital whiteboards in math classrooms at Patrick Henry High can pull up websites for classes to view and save interactive lessons teachers create in advance. Jeff Bellinger calls his "a wonderful piece of equipment." But he rarely uses it to do much more than draw perfect circles or graphs for students in his math class -- things he could do on a regular dry-erase board, albeit a bit slower.

"It just seems like a bit of overkill," he said.

Bellinger teaches in a temporary classroom with no air conditioning. The influx of new technology over the next four years into classrooms like his is a rare boon for San Diego Unified schools in a budget crisis. But the tools have also inspired a backlash from some teachers and parents who don't see the point in computerizing classrooms while more mundane fixes have to wait, such as repairing roofs, replacing fire alarms or upgrading buildings for earthquake safety or disabled access.

Though the technology is being installed while schools scrape for copying paper and teachers are being pressed for salary cuts, there's little that schools can do about that. Scrapping technology wouldn't help solve the larger budget crisis because the money can only be used for buildings, equipment and repairs -- not teachers or school supplies. School district officials say delaying the technology could also jeopardize millions in federal grants.

But putting the computers first means that less money is immediately available for other building fixes. And timing isn't the only debate: Community members charged with overseeing the $2.1 billion school renovation bond that pays for the computers are also questioning whether it made sense to borrow money for technology that grows obsolete. Some question whether they need to go digital at all.

Advocates counter that technology will make a bigger difference in how kids are educated than other, more cosmetic fixes in schools. One technology proponent called the blowback "old school thinking."

"You're bringing the world into the classroom," said Matt Spathas, who sits on the bond oversight committee. "Sometimes when you haven't seen the future, it's hard to imagine it."

To create those futuristic schools, San Diego Unified is devoting more than $300 million out of the $2.1 billion school renovation bond to technology over roughly the next 15 years. It is spending even more on repairs -- $500 million. But as property taxes bring in much less money than the school district had expected, it has been forced to put off many repairs, some for as much as four years. Technology, however, has stayed at the beginning of the schedule.

School officials decided to install the technology grade by grade to make sure that students who get the computerized classes one year will also get them the next year. Their goal is to engage students with more interactive, individualized tools that will let each child learn at their own pace. The technology isn't just supposed to make classrooms snazzier. It's meant to transform the way children are taught.

Classes will get individual, laptop-like computers called "netbooks," voice amplifiers, digital whiteboards and individual responders that students can use to answer questions, along with other upgrades. The cost for each classroom ranges from $16,000 to $32,000. These tools have been popular in National City, San Ysidro and elsewhere, but San Diego Unified is rare among urban school districts in digitizing every class, said Darryl LaGace, who oversees technology.

Some schools tried out the technology even earlier: Millennial Tech Middle, which opened in 2008, uses netbooks and interactive boards to let students study at their own pace. Point Loma High teacher Jennifer Roberts thought the idea was "nuts" at first, but now that her students have individual computers, she can easily find and pull up readings outside the textbook for her English class.

Teens gravitate to the computers, Roberts said, making them more likely to tackle tougher work. When she assigned them a dense text written by one of the Puritan leaders in the colonies, she made the difficult assignment more palatable by sending her students to a website where they could highlight their way through the document and send her their notes, instead of slogging through them on paper.

"They're willing to do something tricky because they're doing it in a nifty way," Roberts said. "And I can focus more on instruction because I'm not worried about stacks of paper on my desk."

But as repairs are delayed, some teachers and parents question whether it makes sense to put new technology first. Some parents believe that technological extras are displacing more immediate needs, such as making schools fully accessible for the disabled.

"I am disgusted with this whole technology thing," said Cindy McIntyre, vice president of the San Diego Unified Council of PTAs, who advised the school district on bond projects. "I feel like they're pulling a fast one."

Others wonder if everyone really needs the new technology. Ted Foster, a La Jolla High music teacher, told the school board he'd forgo a whiteboard to save money, calling it "just another thing on my plate." Surveys show most principals say the majority of their teachers understand and back the technology push, but there are annoyed exceptions -- and they are speaking up.

Teachers didn't get to choose whether they wanted the boards or not. They were installed in all classrooms in specific grades or subjects, sometimes literally where teachers didn't want them -- on a different side of the room or in front of traditional boards. While most teachers have gotten at least a full day of training on the whiteboards, there is still more to come, and a steep learning curve with it. If teachers don't embrace the new tools -- or don't understand them -- whiteboards can end up being glorified overhead projectors, said Bruce Braciszewski, executive director of the Classroom of the Future Foundation.

Other districts have tried to avoid that problem by phasing in boards voluntarily. But that leaves some kids without them. Instead, San Diego Unified chose to make technology the norm. LaGace said the strategy ensures that the same tools are available to all kids and allows teachers in the same grade or subject to start planning together with the equipment. It also raises the peer pressure for teachers.

"It's the 21st century," said Roberts, the Point Loma High teacher. "You can be a part of it -- or you can go to another district."

Financial and construction experts who help oversee the bond are also worried about the technology, but for different reasons. Bond oversight committee member Leonard Pinson said the group has questioned whether computers are a good use of borrowed money, since they'll be obsolete by the time they're paid for. And putting off the other repairs only adds to their costs.

Upkeep has been a perennial problem: The district is slated to spend less on maintenance this year than is recommended by outside experts.

"It's a tradeoff," said Larry Goshorn, who consults the oversight committee. "It's difficult to measure how much more expensive repairs get. But it's also difficult to measure lost opportunities for kids."

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