Tablets for San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD)

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CM220: Composition Two

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August 1, 2015

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Tablets for San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD)

San Antonio’s population makes it the nation’s seventh-largest city, yet it ranks 60th among the country in terms of literacy rates (Weber, 2014). While there are school districts in San Antonio that have “exemplary” literacy rates, other school districts, such as San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) received only an “acceptable” rating in 2011, and that was a step up from its “unacceptable” rating in 2009 and 2010 (SAISD, 2011; Texas Education Agency, 2012). In order to help students in underperforming school districts such as SAISD increase their literacy rates, students should be supplied with technological aids for learning, such as electronic smart tablets, which have been shown to increase learning outside the classroom, promote engagement with curriculum, and improve literacy rates.

As evidence that students in the district need this boost, one needs only look at how the SAISD students compare to others in the state of Texas. According to The Texas Tribune (2014), the SAISD graduation rate is 51.5%, more than 20% below the state average, while the dropout rate of 10.9 % is more than double the state’s average of 4% (The Texas Tribune, 2014). San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro, a keynote speaker at the 2012 Democratic Convention, touted the city’s innovative education programs like Pre-K for SA and Café College, programs meant to give academically unprepared or impoverished students greater opportunities (Castro, 2012). It’s time for SAISD to also receive support. The city cannot continue to let students in SAISD struggle to compete with their peers on tests and leave them to drop out of school.

In other districts, the city has looked to tablets as a way to increase literacy rates. In 2012, San Antonio opened the BibilioTech all digital library in the Harlandale and Southside school districts. Like SAISD, students in these districts needed greater access to technology, and the library’s tablets and computers provided some of that access. Ashley Elkholf, the head librarian
said that the library frequently fills with local high school students who want access to the library’s on-site desktops and the smart tablets that can be checked out (A. Elkholf, personal communication, February 14, 2014). Based on consistent student interest, Elkholf believed students would benefit immensely from local schools funding and providing smart tablets to all students. For those who worry students will not be responsible for any state-provided technology or are concerned students will damage or fail to return tablets, Elkholf stated that no student ever failed to return a checked-out smart tablet.

While providing students with tablets would be a first step, students would also need internet access at home to review videos or complete online exercises. A USA Today article about BiblioTech indicated many residents near the BiblioTech library lacked Wi-Fi access (Weber, 2014). The city should look into providing low-cost Wi-Fi access in this area of the city, or the district could provide Wi-fi hotspots to any student who lacks internet access at home or purchase a data plan for the tablets.

Certainly, providing tablets and internet access to all students in the district is a significant investment, and technology is not cheap. Implementing a smart tablet pilot will mean initial and long-term maintenance costs, so it will be essential that the technology chosen will work. The failure of some high-profile tablet pilot programs in Los Angeles and North Carolina could generate fears of a similar high-cost folly. The Guilford County, NC school district spent $30 million to give all of its middle school students Android tablets only to experience numerous hardware malfunctions and screen breaks (Catalano, 2013). Many schools in Texas are already struggling financially since the $5 billion cut to its education budget in 2011 (Sanchez, 2011). In fact, technology often moves to the bottom of a priority list when schools have to decide between new computers or larger student-teacher ratios.
Yet once implemented, the educational benefits of an investment in technology can outweigh the costs. Minnesota’s Byron Independent School District (ISD) found that technology provided a solution to their district’s budget woes. To reduce costs, Byron ISD abandoned textbooks and created their own online math curriculum (Fulton, 2013). Additionally, instead of purchasing an expensive learning management system (LMS), the district used Moodle, a free, open-source digital online virtual learning platform. Because Byron ISD created their own curriculum, they did not have to pay any of the steep fees that normally occur once a school district partners with a popular textbook company like Pearson Publishing (Fulton, 2013). Byron ISD showed how technology, combined with innovative curriculum, can save money and improve students’ engagement with learning.

The school district can also create partnerships with local businesses to reduce cost. Education innovators like Microsoft founder Bill Gates has repeatedly invested in educational technology programs that provide teachers with the tools they need to motivate, challenge, and support students. However, according to Gates (2012), “Just giving people devices . . . has a really terrible track record; you really have to change the curriculum” (as cited in Young, 2012, para 3). Gates also stated that school districts’ need to “learn, make mistakes, try new things out, find new partners to do things” (as cited in Young, 2012, para. 3). There are many available resources for districts to consider for teacher training. For example, Khan Academy, a non-profit with thousands of free educational videos and interactive tutorials available to teachers and students, provide a model for using technology to help students learn outside of the classroom.

Teacher training will also be important for the investment to lead to improved student learning outcomes. As Justin Reich (2012) noted in Education Week, technology “has the potential to transform education for many students,” but he followed with a reminder that “it is
not a standalone silver bullet for improving outcomes” (para. 1). Without carefully considering the purpose of the technology and training teachers to use that technology effectively, he argues, technology will fail to have a real impact on learning (Reich, 2012). SAISD must therefore create a curriculum that uses tablets effectively, or this investment will not help students.

Furthermore, critics have argued that technology will dehumanize education; in fact, technology can actually personalize education. For example, once a print textbook is adopted, schools will stay with the curriculum until the next textbook adoption cycle. However, as Minnesota’s Byron Independent School District (ISD) realized when they designed their own online curriculum, teachers can adapt an online curriculum as needed to individually personalize a student’s educational experience. For example, Byron’s teachers made real time adjustments to a particular math unit if a particular student was struggling to master an intended learning objective (Fulton, 2013). The Byron ISD experiment suggested technology, combined with a thoughtful pedagogy, can have a lasting, personal and positive impact on student learning.

With smart tablets, teachers can also “flip” a classroom. Many Byron ISD teachers created additional instructional videos to help with student understanding outside of the traditional brick and mortar classroom, where students engage in lessons at home too (Fulton, 2013). When students returned to school, they were more prepared to work on assignments, ask questions, and tutor each other. As a result, in just over two years, Byron ISD’s students in flipped classrooms scored higher on chapter tests than those in traditional, lecture-oriented classes (Fulton, 2013). While researchers are still sifting through evidence like these pilots to see if the flipped model has a direct impact on student outcomes in general, Goodwin and Miller (2013) note that educators see distinct benefits like better student-teacher interaction, the ability
to provide students immediate feedback on their work, and the chance to let students learn at their own pace.

Khan’s (2011) TED Talk also described a successful pilot of a fifth-grade flipped math classroom where students clearly improved as they reviewed videos and completed tutorials. Goodwin and Miller (2013) also noted educators who implemented flipped classrooms into their instruction saw distinct benefits like better student-teacher interaction, the ability to provide students immediate feedback, and the opportunity to help students learn at their own pace. With flipped classrooms, or as Kidd and Chen (2011) referred to it, “ubiquitous learning,” students access curriculum and instruction anytime and anyplace. Kidd and Chen (2011) argued, “This type of learning can be powerful, personal, current, and situated” (p. xi). These benefits alone are reason enough for SAISD to run a tablet pilot in at least one school.

Failure to provide students with educational opportunities afforded by technology, particularly in underperforming school districts like SAISD, will further widen the “digital divide,” keep literacy rates stagnate, and increase the economic disparity in Texas and in this country. As Jose Ferreira (2014), founder of the Knewton adaptive learning platform argued, “We have to cure poverty by improving education” (para. 6). The best way to improve education for San Antonio and its low performing school districts is to increase student access to technology by way of providing smart tablets, internet access, and teacher training, all important steps to move SAISD in the right direction.
References


