I recently had the privilege of participating in a Computers in Schools Strategic Planning Symposium held in Edmonton, Alberta. The 160 participants were broadly representative of Alberta's education system: elementary and secondary school teachers, computer coordinators, principals, superintendents, school board members, college faculty, and people from the Alberta Department of Education. Two major computer companies were also represented; they provided some help in supporting the symposium.

Alberta has a population in excess of two million, spread over a very large geographical area. Currently Alberta schools have about twice as many computers per student as the average for the United States. This rapid growth in computer availability has been aided by substantial funding at the provincial level.

The purposes of the Strategic Planning Symposium were to do long-range planning and to make recommendations for appropriate and effective use of computers in schools. I believe the symposium was outstanding in its conception, organization, and results. I strongly believe that every state and province could benefit by conducting similar symposia.

The symposium had broad sponsorship, including the Alberta Department of Education, the Alberta School Trustees Association, the Alberta Teachers Association, and the Alberta Teachers Association Computer Council. This broad sponsorship helped spread "ownership" of the ideas and results to many people and organizations. In fact, the entire symposium was carefully designed to help spread ownership of the resulting ideas and recommendations.

An initial 40-minute talk was presented by David King, then Alberta's Minister of Education. Over the past four years, Mr. King had exhibited strong leadership in supporting the growth of computer use in Alberta's schools. In his presentation, Mr. King showed knowledge both of the current status and of the potential of computers in schools. He indicated that the department of education intended to continue providing strong support for increased use of computers in schools. Mr. King's interest in this symposium was demonstrated both by his initial presentation and his informal return to the symposium as it drew to a close two days later. At that time, he presented a few informal remarks further supporting the work of the symposium participants.

My keynote address was designed to provide a background for strategic planning and to clarify some of the basic issues. For example, I stressed that the main goal of instructional use of computers is to improve education—that is, to improve how well we accomplish the traditional goals of education. My initial theme was people, not machines.

However, computers are a change agent, so our schools are faced with the task of accommodating and building upon this change. Some educational goals need to be modified to fit the increasing technology in our society. For example, learning to communicate and to access information have always been goals in education. These goals need to be expanded so that students learn to communicate through and with computer-based information systems.
to solve problems has always been an educational goal. Now this goal needs to include appropriate use of computer technology as an aid to problem solving.

Technology-based change has just begun. I stressed that all of the progress we have made so far is small in comparison with what lies ahead. Thus, now is a good time to be identifying key issues and making long-term recommendations. For example, the field of artificial intelligence is just beginning to produce knowledge-based expert systems. If such a system can solve or help solve a particular type of problem, what should students learn about this type of problem while in school?

After the initial presentations, symposium participants were divided into nine working groups: Elementary School, Secondary School, Local Area Networks, Wide Area Networks, Staff Development, Software Evaluation and Acquisition, Instructional Facilities, Administrative Uses, and Business Education. Participants had been assigned to working groups on the basis of their indicated choices when preregistering for the symposium. Interestingly, relatively few participants had to be assigned to their second or third choices.

The working groups were each preassigned a leader and an expert consultant. The expert consultants had prepared working papers for their specific areas. In addition, symposium participants had been asked to provide lists of their concerns. Thus, each working group had an initial list of issues to address as well as some background information.

Each working group included a mixture of participants. For example, I was the expert consultant for the Secondary Education group. Our group included two school board members, a number of school and district-level administrators, several teachers, and several computer coordinators.

Each working group was assigned the task of identifying key issues, prioritizing the issues, suggesting solutions and making recommendations. All of this was to be accomplished during 10 hours of meetings. A written report was to be prepared for distribution to all symposium participants on the last day of the symposium. Computer facilities were provided to aid in this task.

One key issue addressed by the Secondary Education group was use of calculators and computers as aids to doing the calculations needed to solve various math problems. The group noted that calculator use is now allowed on a variety of province-wide school exams, and recommended that computer use also be allowed on such exams.

Each of the nine working groups accomplished their assigned duties. The final three hours of the symposium consisted mainly of hearing reports from the group leaders. Each symposium participant left with a 49-page document and overview knowledge of all nine areas. There was a strong spirit of camaraderie and excitement.

In the two months after the symposium, the report was revised, expanded, and distributed to all school districts in Alberta. I believe it will be a valuable resource document for several years to come. Alberta educators are to be congratulated for this design and implementation work. I hope that educators in other provinces and states will follow their lead.