A Growing Concern: Is 'Grass Roots' Dead?


Much of what has been accomplished in instructional computer use in schools can be properly labeled as a grass roots movement. Individual students and teachers became interested in computers. Individually and collectively they acquired some hardware, developed and/or acquired some software, and began using computers in schools. Many thousands of individual teachers have implemented computer applications into their courses and/or initiated computer-related courses in their schools.

But the grass roots movement is not solely responsible for the current status of computers in schools. Two million microcomputers cost a lot of money. Inservice education for hundreds of thousands of teachers takes support from the top. Statewide computer literacy requirements represent a top-down approach to an educational concern.

At the current time one might argue that there is a reasonable balance between the grass roots support of computers in schools and a top-down approach. In most schools and districts the impetus and the leadership is still coming from individual teachers or from people who have fairly recently moved into computer coordinator positions. But there are growing signs that this balance is about to be destroyed. I have encountered a number of examples of this in recent months.

One example was an elementary school teacher who indicated that her superintendent had, in a rather unilateral manner, decided to put a large amount of money into a computer assisted instruction system of hardware and software. The decision diverted funds that could have been used to support computer-as-tool and a program emphasizing higher-order skills that this teacher was fostering.

A second example was the recent abolishment of the 17 TEC Centers in California. The state governor has line item veto power in this state, and with a single stroke of the pen he dismantled a system of TEC Centers that has done much to make California a national leader in instructional use of computers in schools.

Interestingly, it was just a few months ago that California established a computer-related teacher certification requirement. In essence it requires all new teachers receiving their initial certification to have somewhat more than the equivalent of one full computer-in-education course. One hand gives while the other takes!

These examples illustrate top-down approaches to computers in education. They are signs that the field is maturing; it has captured the attention of superintendents and governors. By virtue of their positions, such people can make decisions that have major and long-range impacts on education. When such decisions are favorable to our cause, we tend to laud them. We tend to believe that our grass roots movement has been successful, having now reached top decision makers.

But how do we explain decisions that go against our desires? And what can we do about such decisions? Do we have the political clout and savvy to take on top-level decision makers?
At the level of a superintendent or other district-level key decision makers, I am quite sure the answer is yes. In most school districts there is now a well-established core of computer knowledgeable teachers and computer coordinators. These educators have a good understanding of appropriate instructional uses of computers. They know the levels of teacher knowledge and commitment needed for computers to help improve our educational system.

An organized group of such computer education leaders can easily take on a district-level decision maker, and usually will win. Each such confrontation is apt to depend heavily on local politics and the particular people involved. But here are a few general pointers.

1. If a district has a school board-approved, long-range plan for computers in schools, it is difficult for a superintendent or other key decision maker to unilaterally act contrary to this plan. If significant progress is occurring toward development of such a plan, it is difficult for a single decision maker to usurp the planning committee's powers by taking a major action that might be contrary to the emerging plan.

2. However, computer educators should be aware that it is difficult to undo a major decision. Thus, it is essential to detect the possibility that a key decision maker is contemplating a major computer-related decision. A common scenario begins with the decision maker meeting with representatives of some computer company. This first meeting may also include a district computer coordinator and other computer knowledgeable educators. But subsequent meetings occur without the presence of the computer knowledgeable educators, and perhaps without their even being aware of such meetings. A sequence of such meetings may lead to the decision maker announcing that a decision has been made, funds have been committed, and implementation will begin shortly.

My conclusion is that the computer education leadership in a school district needs to have a good spy system.

3. Once the computer education leadership detects the possibility of a major computer-related action, it should insist on widespread publicity, open meetings, involvement of a variety of teacher organizations, etc. A good decision will stand up to scrutiny by educators, parents, local business people, and outside consultants. A poor decision won't. Thus, the mere possibility of such scrutiny may achieve the desired effect of deterring the key decision maker from a unilateral action.

The action of the California governor is difficult to fathom, and such unexpected action is more difficult to deal with. It has been suggested that this was a political decision—part of a battle with the state superintendent of public instruction. The decision was made quite unexpectedly, at a time of the year when schools were out and many educators were on vacation.

But we all know the power of a grass roots movement in politics. Have you ever contacted a reporter or held a press conference to discuss important educational issues? Have you ever called together groups of students or parents to apprise them of major educational decisions that are being made and that affect them? If not, you will be pleasantly surprised at the power of the press, an organized group of students, or an organized group of parents. Don't give up on the
power of the grass roots movement in computer education. It has brought us a long way, and it can continue to serve us.