Education Would Be Better If...

Moursund, D.G. (August/September 1988). Education would be better if... The Computing Teacher. Eugene, OR: ICCE.

Recently I have asked a number of computer using educators to complete the sentence: "Education would be better if..." When I first started asking this question, I expected the common response to be "if we had more computers," to be closely followed by "if we had more and better software." Surprisingly, that was not the case.

While I have received many different responses, there are three unifying threads in the answers. Some samples of frequently given responses include:

If teachers had more status in our society.
If our society valued education more.
If there were more money and better pay.
If teachers were more professional.
If teachers were life-long learners.
If teachers had the opportunity to visit each other's classes and to observe master teachers at work.
If more and better inservice opportunities were available.
If administrators and school boards would let teachers teach and quit interfering so much—for example, quit assigning teachers so many non teaching duties.

The first three responses tend to be offered first. They suggest that the blame for our current educational system lies outside the hands of educators. I get the impression that many teachers have already thought about the question, and they are used to giving these types of responses.

A smaller number of teachers provided responses like numbers 4 and 5. These focus on teachers, suggesting major defects within the profession. A surprisingly large number of computer using educators are critical of other teachers—especially those who have not learned to use computers.

The final three responses point to ways of helping teachers improve. They are often suggested by teachers who are actively engaged in bettering themselves through inservice work, or who are providers of inservice. I want to focus on these ideas.

It is evident that teachers play a central role in our current educational system. Thus, one major way to improve education is to facilitate teachers' work. And the computer arena provides a wonderful basis for discussion about ways to do this.

For example, I suspect all teachers recognize that they need to have some knowledge of computers and that computers should be having some effect on their professional lives. All teachers are aware that many students use computers at school and at home; all are aware that
some teachers have embraced computers and routinely use them both to help students and to help themselves.

Thus, it is reasonable to ask why all teachers are not using computers. While there are many possible answers, most fall into a couple of categories. It is evident to a teacher that it takes time and effort to learn about computers, and it takes time and effort to use computers. Many teachers have decided that the effort required to learn to use computers and/or the effort to actually use computers is larger than they are currently able or willing to put forth.

The conclusion seems obvious to me. If we want to facilitate increased use of computers in schools, we need to do things that make it easier for teachers to learn to use computers and to use computers in schools. There are lots of ways to do this, and some don't cost any money. Here are some suggestions to help teachers learn more about using computers in schools.

Remove one or more computers from areas where students use them, and place them where only teachers have access. This will have a double benefit. Not only will it make it easier for teachers to get access to computers, it will also make it easier for teachers to teach each other how to use the computers. Research suggests that this one-on-one, informal peer instruction is a very effective mode of staff development.

Loan out computers to teachers on weekends, vacations, and over the summer. Many school districts have done this, and the cost is minimal. This might be combined with asking some computer-using teachers to volunteer to help other teachers, perhaps by showing them some of the ways they use computers for making lesson plans, handouts, and grade reports. Most computer using educators are quite happy to show their fellow teachers some neat ways to reduce their workload by using computers.

Make use of the most obvious and least expensive methods of allowing teachers to visit the classrooms of computer-using teachers. For example, in an elementary school this might be done by combining two classes for an hour or having a school administrator supervise a class for an hour. The key point is that many educators would like to have the opportunity to see their fellow teachers in action. This is an effective method of staff development.

Provide educators with easy access to print materials that will help them learn to use computers or will encourage them to extend their computer knowledge. For example, an ICCE membership can be purchased by a school library, and issues of The Computing Teacher can be circulated to interested teachers. The cost is minimal.

The list can easily be extended. And you can make a major contribution. Pick one of your fellow teachers who isn't into computers as much as you would like. As one of your goals for the year work on getting this teacher to become a more effective computer using teacher,