Letter to School Administrators


Dear School Administrator:

You know that we face a crisis in the American educational system—a system designed about a hundred years ago for a society evenly balanced between agrarian and industrial interests. That time is long past. We have been in the Information Age since 1956. Combined direct employment in agrarian and industrial manufacturing occupations is less than one-fourth of total employment in this country.

Do you know that more than one-fourth of all American workers have a microcomputer sitting on their desks? Many others have a computer terminal hooked to a mainframe system. Did you know that there is a general purpose microcomputer in more than one-fourth of all American homes? More than half of the purchasers indicate that the equipment is purchased for work-related purposes, and nearly half indicate that it is to help educate their children. The total number of microcomputers in American homes is 10 times the number used for instructional purposes in schools. American business and industry will install nearly twice as many microcomputers for its own use in 1991 as the total number of microcomputers currently being used in our schools.

This type of data is a small part of a growing picture that suggests that the school system is not adequately adjusting to the changing needs of society. There is a growing gap between the needs of a well-educated adult citizen and the average product of American schools. Solving this problem will take the combined resources and support of a large number of different stakeholders. In some sense, you stand in the middle of these stakeholders, with students, parents, teachers, and curriculum coordinators on one side, and business and government leaders on the other side.

Every educational administrator is faced by overwhelming demands on a limited amount of resources. The problem is to balance use of these resources to meet the demands of the stakeholders and to maximize the quality of education that students receive. Here are three major areas focusing on computer-related technology that you must address.

1. There is strong and growing evidence that appropriate integration of computer-based technology into schools can drastically cut dropouts, increase basic skills, and increase higher-order cognitive skills. A computer is a tool designed to aid “knowledge” workers, and every student is a knowledge worker. Eventually our schools should provide every student with easy and routine access to computer-related technology, both as an aid to learning and as an aid to solving a wide range of problems. Every school and school district should have a long-range plan for accomplishing this task. This plan should be developed by the combined efforts of all key stakeholders—parents, teachers, school administrators, local business people, and so on. These stakeholders must have ownership; it is absolutely essential
that school administrators not make unilateral decisions about the acquisition and installation of computer-related technology.

2. There is growing evidence that school restructuring, including site-based management that better empowers teachers, leads to substantial improvement in schools. There is substantial literature on school restructuring. Key ideas include involving students and teachers in team-taught multidisciplinary activities, cooperative learning, removing the bottleneck of short 40- to 45-minute school periods that focus on a single subject, and making major changes in student assessment. (Standardized objective testing is a growing barrier to school improvement.) These types of school restructuring facilitate more effective use of computer-based technology.

3. Our current teacher certification and staff development system was designed to meet the needs of a very slowly changing world. The exponential rate of change in science, technology, and educational research in recent years has overwhelmed staff development systems. New, successful models for effective staff development have been developed. They are site-based, and they require that all teachers participate. Every teacher has personal and group responsibilities. The school is structured to help teachers meet these responsibilities. Staff development becomes an ongoing process, built into the everyday functioning of the school.

The rapid pace of change in society is a major challenge to school administrators. However, it also provides a unique opportunity for excellence in leadership to make a major difference. The International Society for Technology in Education has a mission of working to improve schools. If we can be of help to you, please contact us.

Sincerely yours,