

Bridging the Gap

Strategies
for Creating
Equitable
Learning
Opportunities

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By Don Hall



In the media-centric world our students live in today, they are barraged with multiple streams of information in various formats. The amazing thing is they can simultaneously process it with seeming ease. Yes, they truly do think differently than those of us who were raised with Mayberry and even the *Brady Bunch*. However, when they come to our schools, they encounter organizations strikingly similar to those you and I found great success in at their age. Is it any wonder that increasing numbers of students are disengaging and commenting about the lack of relevance and rigor?

Even more disturbing is that the most dramatic disconnect seems to occur in schools with the highest percentage of at-risk students. These are the students who can least afford to miss out on meaningful learning opportunities. Numerous reports talk about the digital divide narrowing in this country; however, I would beg to differ. What I have witnessed is that technology is actually accelerating the rate at which the divide is growing.

In Jim Collins' book, *From Good to Great*, he makes a most remarkable observation. As he studied the highest performing companies over a 15-year period, he found that technology was not a significant factor in the decline or progress of these companies. However, he did find that it was an accelerant for the trend already occurring within the organization. So if a company had its act together, then the use of technology accelerated the rate at which it excelled. Conversely, if it was already on the downward slide, then technology made its failure occur even faster.

That same premise holds true for schools. We have long held a false notion that technology would solve our problems. In reality, it merely accelerates the positive or negative trends in student achievement that are already occurring.

I propose this is also true when it comes to closing the digital divide. If a district is already taking measures to actively address the divide in a positive way, technology will expedite that progress but the reverse is true as well. If this is the case, what can we do to make a real difference? However, the more important question to understand is what does the digital divide really represent? For me—it represents students' equity in learning opportunity and productive participation in society.

In my school district (Kent, Washington), we do think we can make a difference, and we feel equity in learning opportunity is the answer. As a diverse school district serving more than 27,000 students, our challenge is to understand the needs of each student as an individual with unique goals, needs, and dreams. Our district mission says we must "successfully prepare all students for their future." That is one daunting task, to say the least. Currently we serve 96 language groups and our ELL population is growing at more than 10% per year. Socioeconomically the district ranges from schools with more than 80% free or reduced lunch to families that build million-dollar homes. So the concept of the digital divide is quite real for us. Yet there are some very real strategies that are helping us reach all students and make a difference in their lives.

Bridging the Gap Grant Program

Our district is fortunate to have a very supportive community, and we have been able to implement a comprehensive technology program over the past five years aligned to support our instructional program. One part of that program includes an ongoing equipment refresh/replacement cycle so that resources used in our schools are appropriate for their educational purposes. The result is a regular supply of surplus computer equipment, which we believe still has some value.

Given our student population, we put together a student computer grant program for those students without a computer in their homes. This program is a student-run project in all aspects—from the marketing, refurbishing, training, language translation,—as an extension of our instructional program. The program just completed its third year, and we have supplied computers to more than 3,000 homes in our community.

The goal of the program was to extend the learning experience from our classroom into the homes of these families, thereby providing those students another opportunity to compete with our more affluent students. Another side benefit has been the tremendous learning opportunity for those students serving in the program as they donated their time in managing the program and giving back to their community.

Equity in Magnet Programs

This year, we opened a new choice program technology magnet academy, the first of its type in our district. Usually when a district opens a proof-of-concept program of this type, the criticism is that these schools draw from the best and brightest within the district or only those students who can afford to participate. Consequently, the student population often does not represent the diversity of the district.

In our case, we made the intentional choice to ensure that the student population was very representative of the wonderful diversity of our district. Although it often provides us a challenge in our instructional program, we also believe it gives us a richness to the texture in our learning experiences. As we began selecting students, we sectioned the district into areas and allocated a percentage of slots for those areas. By using this approach prior to drawing the student lottery, we increased the probability of being

more representative. When the final selection was complete, we were very successful.

Our student body represents diversity not only in ethnic background but also language, and even some special programs diversity. We firmly believe this composition allows us to highlight what a real learning community looks like and how technology can level the barriers and bring a community together. This academy opened as an anytime-anywhere learning center using a thematic approach with mastery-based learning. Although the school is called a technology academy, technology takes a backseat to the student-directed learning model as they learn to select the tools and approaches that make the most sense to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of learning.

Student Technology Advisory Board

I often use the phrase, “Students are not only recipients of the benefits of technology; they are also the messengers.” We have created highly visible roles for them in most aspects of our programs. One of those areas is our Student Technology Advisory Board. This board’s primary purpose is to provide feedback on key issues, assist with implementation around key projects, and allow students a forum for sharing their ideas about how technology can make a difference in their educational experience.

This is another area where we were very intentional to ensure the student representation reflects the diversity of our district. The reason was quite simple. When you are discussing ideas for new initiatives or talking about how to implement an idea, having students who represent students from the lower socioeconomic, minority, or ELL populations is vital. They bring up important concerns or issues that often make or break a project in its successful launch or ability to allow participation by the full student body.

It is a reality that cannot be underestimated in importance.

The goal here is twofold:

- Provide students a valuable learning experience in developing leadership skills.
- Address the digital divide issue by listening to students who represent peers who would be affected by potentially exclusionary technology practices.

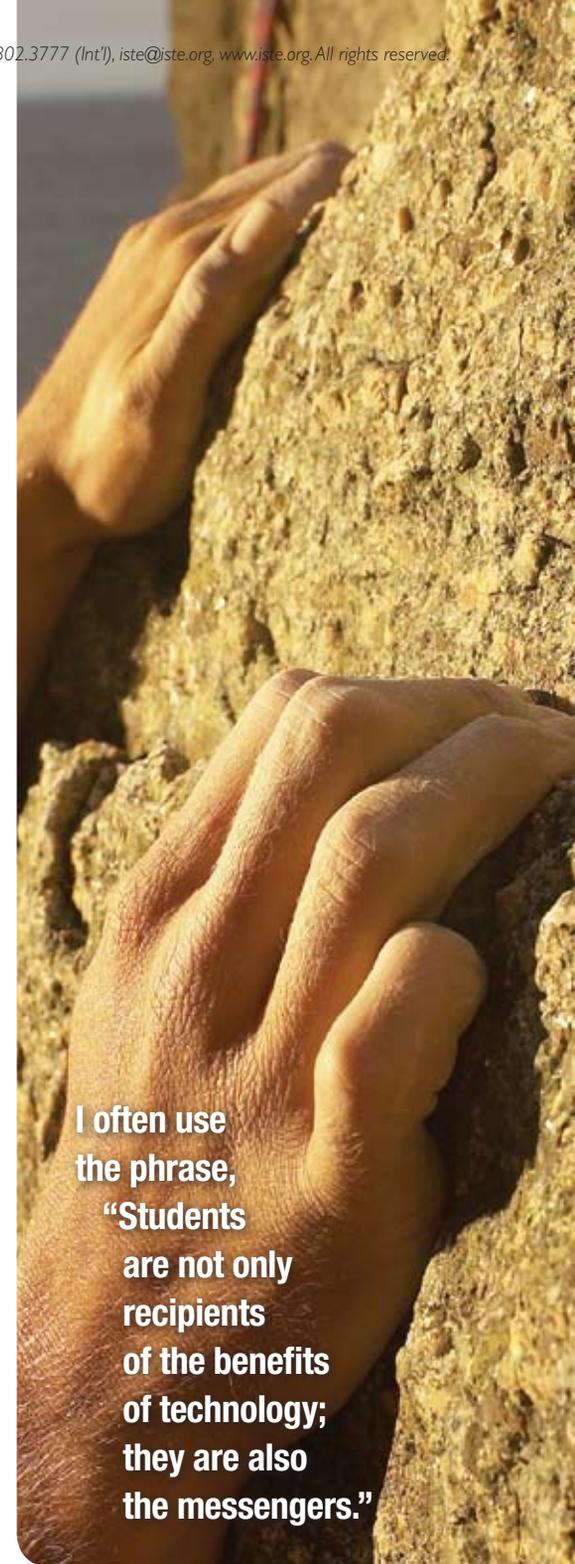
Partnering with Community

Another successful strategy for us to support our disadvantaged students has been to build strong partnerships with key community partners. Often these partners fall outside the traditional ones many school districts seek out. To extend learning opportunities and deal with the digital divide, we have built strong relationships with the African-American Cultural Center and the Ukrainian Cultural Group (which happens to be one of our largest ELL student populations) by supplying them with a computer lab from our surplus computer equipment. Both of these groups provide after-school tutoring services for our students, and now they can access district resources using our equipment.

In addition, we went into two of our community’s largest apartment complexes, which have large immigrant populations. We equipped their on-site community centers with computer labs and provided technical support so that our students who reside there have additional access after school hours. Again, the issue for us is equity in learning opportunity, because that is what the digital divide represents.

Although this may not seem like a traditional role for the technology department to undertake, it is a critical one if we are going to help our district meet its mission. After all, isn’t that why our department exists in the first place?

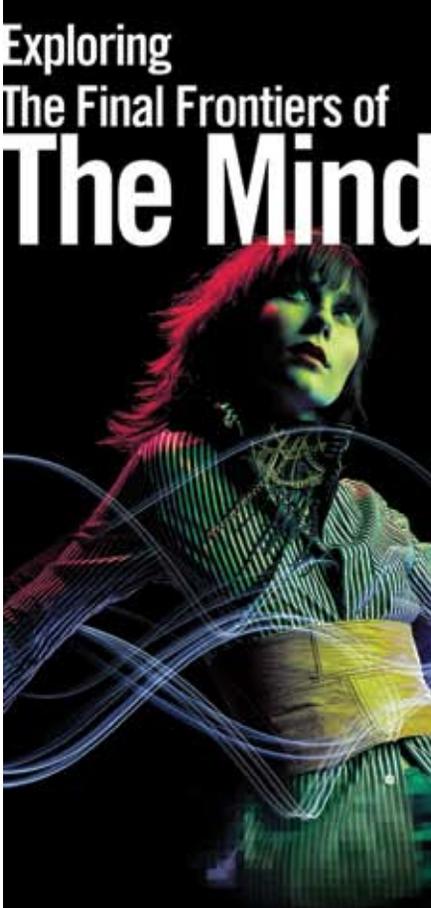
Now I am sure some of you are wondering what this has to do with



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instruction and what is happening in the classroom. Well if you operate from the perspective of a student-centered program, sometimes the answer is outside the classroom—because a good deal of their lives and their concerns lie outside it. This is not to diminish the importance of the instructional experience at all; however, numerous efforts are already aimed

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at interventions within this context. When I look at district initiatives, I find that most stop short of taking the larger, more holistic view of the student as a person. We wanted to put the student front and center—in the classroom and outside it as well.

Bringing the Family In

As we began working through our programs to address student needs and designing strategies to equalize learning opportunities, we had to address another important issue for us. You cannot separate the families' needs from those of the students. This factor is vital for the targeted populations in question. In most instances, a strong extended family network exists and must be considered in any solution offered. It usually does not mirror or resemble the structure of the relationships many white middle-class families are familiar with.

This fact has led to complications in successfully engaging these families in school activities in the past. Our most successful efforts considered this aspect in the design criteria and took advantage of it. That outreach component allowed us to reach a segment of our community that often felt alienated and unprepared to participate in the life of our school district.

Some simple accommodations included:

- As we designed many of our training programs, we invited the adults to attend along with the students.
- We translated many of our documents because we knew the adults were usually the ones with the more limited English skills.
- We provided child care for younger siblings.
- We held events off-site, at places they were more comfortable with because the school buildings often intimidate the adults.

By providing technology skills and learning opportunities to our

students, we often helped the entire family improve their quality of life and ability to successfully participate in our community. That is an ultimate win-win scenario.

Conclusion

So can you close the digital divide? *Maybe.* I am sure that is not the answer you wanted. However, it is the most honest answer I can give you because it depends on what point of view you have when you ask the question.

If you define closing the digital divide as merely providing students more access to technology thinking that will help them learn more, I would have to say the answer is no. The matter comes down to an issue of pure economics. You will never be able to deal with the fact that we live in a society where the wealth is not distributed equally and probably never will be. In addition, there is no direct cause and effect relationship between mere technology access and learning. It is much more complicated than that.

However, if you define closing the digital divide as providing equitable learning opportunities for all your students and ensuring they are successfully prepared for their future where technology plays a valuable role in helping that to occur, then the answer is a definite yes. There are things within the scope of our control we can do that are educationally sound and fiscally practical that can move us toward that goal. This outcome is not only doable, as educators, it is also well worth doing.



Don Hall is the executive director for information technology with the Kent (Washington) School District. He serves as a volunteer columnist for L&L. He's a career educator with experience in teaching and administration. Hall is a veteran conference presenter at the national and international level, published author, and experienced consultant.