

Education's Shiny Toy Syndrome

It's elementary. Public education bureaucrats do the darnedest, stupidest things. Clever kids are ready, willing and able to capitalize on that costly stupidity in a heartbeat. Within days of rolling out a \$30 million Common Core iPad program in Los Angeles, for example, students had already hacked the supposedly secure devices.

The Los Angeles Times reports that the disastrous initiative has been suspended after students from at least three different high schools breached the devices' security protections. It was a piece of iCake. The young saboteurs gleefully advertised their method to their friends, fellow Twitter and Facebook users, and the media.

"Roosevelt students matter-of-factly explained their ingenuity Tuesday outside school," the L.A. Times told readers. "The trick, they said, was to delete their personal profile information. With the profile deleted, a student was free to surf. Soon they were sending tweets, socializing on Facebook and streaming music through Pandora, they said."

Goodbye, Common Core apps. Hello, Minecraft! The district spent untold millions of taxpayer dollars on iPad "training," but many teachers still couldn't figure out how to sync up the souped-up tablets for academic use in the classroom at the start of the school year. In less than a week, though, teens were able to circumvent the locks for fun and playtime at home faster than you can type "LOL."

The Los Angeles Unified School District school board shoveled \$30 million to Pearson for the leaky iPads, but nobody foresaw this glaring security weakness. Where's the fiscal accountability? Where's the adult responsibility?

Remember: These "reform" programs are not about stimulating brain cells. It's all about stimulating the Benjamins. Pearson is the multibillion-dollar educational publishing and testing conglomerate at the center of the federally driven, taxpayer-funded "standards" racket. For Pearson, ed publishing and ed computing are a \$6 billion global business. For nearly a decade, the company has plotted a digital learning takeover. According to industry estimates, Pearson's digital learning products are used by more than 25 million people in North America. Common Core has been a convenient new catalyst for getting the next generation of consumers hooked.

As I reported last week, Pearson sealed its whopping \$30 million taxpayer-subsidized deal to supply the city's schools with 45,000 iPads pre-loaded with Pearson Common Core curriculum apps earlier this summer. I repeat: That works out to \$678 per glorified e-textbook, \$200 more than the standard cost, with scant evidence that any of this software and hardware will do anything to improve the achievement bottom line.

The abysmal history of federal investments in ed technology is as crystal-clear as an HD touch screen. Take President Obama's \$49 million technology initiative for the Detroit public schools, funded by federal stimulus money. The city is bankrupt. The urban school system is overrun by corruption, violence and incompetence. The federal ed tech program showered some 40,000 new (foreign-made) ASUS netbook computers on Detroit, plus thousands of printers, scanners and desktop computers to teachers and kids from early childhood through 12th grade.

The district budget is \$300 million in the hole. Meanwhile, the board slashed special education buses and shut down 70 schools. Have the devices helped students "compete in a global marketplace," as champions of the program promised? SAT scores in Detroit remain "stagnant." High school graduation rates are rock-bottom. According to the most recent data, just 3 percent

of Detroit fourth-graders are proficient in math; 6 percent are proficient in reading. In 2010, 11 people were charged in connection with a lucrative fencing scheme involving hundreds of DPS computers, which they stole and sold on eBay or peddled to friends and family.

Nothing has changed. As I've reported previously, in both urban and rural school districts, large and small, these technology infusions have turned out to be gesture-driven boondoggles and political payoffs that squander precious educational resources – with few, if any, measurable academic benefits. The Obama administration plans to dig even deeper into the FedEdTech hole through a furtive \$5 billion "fee" on cellphone users for "ConnectEd" – another progressive, FedEd boondoggle to subsidize high-speed Internet installation throughout the U.S.

Like districts across the country, Detroit and Los Angeles are infatuated with fancy electronic devices, glossy new textbooks and DVDs "aligned" to top-down Common Core "standards, and other whiz-bang gadgetry to stimulate "21st century learning." Education's Shiny Toy Syndrome is the result of a toxic alliance between big government and big business. In the words of Robert Small, the Maryland dad who was arrested last week for daring to raise questions about Common Core: "Parents, you need to question these people. ... Don't stand for this!"

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