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Bring Your Own Technology: A Public School Technology Policy Case Study

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This case study examines a large Texas school district that implemented a “bring your own technology” (BYOT) technology policy. The study considers teachers’, administrators’, and students’ issues and challenges as a result of the implementation. The study finds that although this policy is aligned with national and state technology integration standards for education, it is problematic in reality. Questions are raised about equity and adequacy, the need for professional development to deal with implementation, and the intention versus the reality of BYOT policies.

Key Words: BYOT, Technology, Policy, School

In July 2008 when I joined my district’s team (as assistant principal at the high school, responsible for instructional technology), the community had passed a \$5,000,000 bond communicating a mandate to improve students’ access to technology in the district. Ultimately the school board approved a 1:1 laptop program at the high school, 1:1 iPad at middle school, and 4:1 elementary computer ratio. This is an uncommon reality in school districts in Texas. Our situation has given me many opportunities to work with other districts investing in technology. As the instructional technology leader in this setting—one of 56 Apple Distinguished Schools in the nation—I see technology integration in education as critical to how we educate students.

The National Education Technology Plan published by the Department of Education (2010) states explicitly as a priority: “Supporting efforts to ensure that all students and educators have 24/7 access to the internet via devices, including mobile devices, and that states, districts, and schools adopt technologies and policies to enable leveraging the technology that students already have” (p. xxii). The State of Texas 2010 Progress Report on the Long-Range Plan for Technology 2006-2020 (2010) supports the national policy: “Texas is striving to ensure . . . Texas students have the experiences that keep them “powered up’ at school – and ‘powered up’ for the future” (pg. 7).

Although portable computing devices are more economical now than ever, current financing for Texas schools is in deep crisis. As a result, state-wide more and more schools are turning to a policy of “bring your own technology” (BYOT) to “power up” their schools. Although this policy may, on its face, be “leveraging the technology that students already have,” it is fraught with issues.

The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) has been holding a series of meetings in Austin to renew their goal to support the new digital learning environment that the Visioning Team wrote in 2008. At one meeting, BYOT was discussed as an alternative solution to schools providing technology access in light of district budget reductions and tighter fiscal controls. The consensus at TASA was that BYOT is not an adequate solution to the national or state challenge.

I want to discuss this policy adopted recently by a district that I'll call Newville ISD (not its real name). Newville ISD is a district with five large-size high schools. At least two of these high schools are Title I schools. Three of the high schools are considered "wealthy." This district recently hired a new superintendent whose immediate district-wide mandate was to allow students to bring their own technology to school for use in the classrooms. In an interview with the local news station, the superintendent said, "Technology embraces what teens already do. They will be more engaged in learning." The interview continued: "Another perk: BYOT saves the school district money. Technology is expensive, and we don't have to pay for that." BYOT is admittedly seen as a way to erase the district's obligation to provide technology tools in schools—and, had this superintendent been in a district comprised solely of the wealthy zones, that might have been a good policy. In spite of the cautionary tales discussed at the TASA visioning meetings, the BYOT directive was given to principals within the month of his hire, with no professional development plan or implementation support. It is in this context that the problems of implementation have begun to arise.

The first issue is how economically disadvantaged, or even middle class children, fare. Although Cuban (2011) showed that "the digital gap between high poverty and low poverty schools in having access is nearly closed" (p. 1), a recent trend toward BYOT raises questions equity issues again for our middle class and economically disadvantaged children. If we rely on students to bring their own technology as the means of providing access, we are deceiving ourselves that this is equity or that this meets the goals or vision of the national or state plan. Because children today are surrounded by technology is not proof that they have access to technology for school or learning purposes. In class, how can we justify telling our students to "take a poll" when not every child has a smart phone? How can teachers ask students to research online when the wi-fi network cannot handle the load? Will we send those students who have no technology out of class to a computer lab to participate? One teacher, Mr. R., says the BYOT program has been mixed. When asked his best example of using technology in the social studies classroom, he replied, "I have done some great activities with it, such as Skyping to the Berlin Wall." This was student-led but teacher-initiated, and executed on classroom equipment, not on BYOT tools.

A second issue with BYOT is that it does not necessarily increase access to "tools of innovation" (Berry et al., 2011, p. 80). Constructivist epistemology underlies the prevailing views of successful technology-rich instruction (Apple Computer, 1991; Coupal, 2004; McDermott & Murray, 2000; Ravitz, Becker, & Wong, 2000). Therefore, the most effective tool for students is one that allows creativity, including audio and video and graphic design capabilities, or access to those powerful web2.0 tools. Mrs. B., a 20-year veteran who likes technology, reports that her English Language Arts students "don't have iPads and laptops to bring to class. How can you type with a phone? You can't. The only positive I see with the phones is dictionary.com." Again, we can say our students have access to tools of innovation, we can say our students have access to a world-class education, but saying it doesn't make it so.

A third issue that is not feasible with BYOT is an "increase in online learning" (Berry et al. 2011, p. 76), at least when we talk about online classes. The Texas Association of School Administrators envisions an "any path, any pace" model of learning (2008). The National Education Technology Plan's goal 1.3 envisions "any time, anywhere" access to technology (p. xvi). But it is very difficult for students to access the online course on a smart phone, or on a network that limits access or blocks certain sites (YouTube.com, for instance) as is the case in Newville ISD.

Another issue that has come to my attention from the teachers is the difficulty when they prepare a lesson but not everyone has the same tools to accomplish the lesson. I cannot present this to my Spanish 2 students: "Log in to TodaysMeet.com and let's start a discussion about the school's tardy policy using only Spanish. We are arguing for the policy; Mrs. Smith's class down the hall will be logging in as well, arguing against the policy." That simply isn't possible if every child doesn't have working technology. Creativity is limited: Does every child have a device with a camera? Appropriate video editing software? With BYOT, the chances of this are poor; in fact, some schools where every child has a device do not even have this option.

And a final issue to address here is the lack of training, for students and teachers. Teachers in Newville ISD who are frustrated at not knowing how to implement such a policy. Absolutely no professional development was provided to help teachers understand such an environment. Nothing about the curriculum was modified. There was no preparation for the change, no expectation established or conversation encouraged. Mrs. S., a 40-year veteran with multiple teacher of the year and national awards on her résumé, asked, “How do I make these kids - who need this more than the economically [privileged] kids - see that there is a life in which they have choices, and they can be successful if they would just care about their education???” The teachers have not had the opportunity to ask this question in a safe forum where they can find solutions.

Is BYOT a bad policy? When it creates a barrier between the “haves” and “have nots,” it perpetuates an equity issue and is a bad policy. When BYOT is used as a substitute for a responsibility that belongs to the district, it perpetuates an adequacy issue and is a bad policy. On the other hand, if equity and adequacy are met already, then BYOT is an acceptable enhancement. Technology is ideal in schools, but we must ensure that our policy really helps to achieve what it is that we say we are achieving.

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