

Own or Loan?

Should students or schools own the computers in 1:1 computing scenarios?

Own

Policies should be adopted that permit students to own their laptop computers. Student laptop ownership policies confer greater responsibility on students, further engage families in the learning process, and support the goal of bridging the digital divide.

It is important to recognize that the cost of computers is plummeting. The MIT laptop initiative seeks to provide students with durable, capable laptop computers for \$100 each or less starting in 2007. The refrain “our schools can’t afford laptops” is no longer a legitimate position in the debate.

The primary reason schools should purchase laptops that students own is the responsibility that this policy can confer on students.



By Wesley A. Fryer

Human beings tend to naturally value and care more for things they own. Schools can leverage this by making students own and be responsible for their own laptops. Schools currently leasing specific laptops to students across their educational careers have found that they take better care of them. Students know it

Loan

In today’s increasingly digital world, students and teachers are using technology to engage each other in powerful conversations. But, the changes aren’t happening fast enough. We’re limited by our approaches to teaching and learning, emphasis on high stakes accountability measures, almost as much as we are by technology access. If schools invest in laptops for people, would the investment be less powerful if they have to return them at the end of the school term?

Teachers now see students struggle to form words on a blank page, one poorly formed letter after another. They work alone, bound



By Miguel Guhlin

by place and time, unable to touch each other’s minds and hearts, to engage with apt analogies and emotional exchanges around relevant life issues. At the end, what makes us real, is how we communicate with others, solve problems together, and create common solutions relevant to our situation. The

will be theirs again next year, so they take better care of it. This dynamic is even stronger when the prospect of laptop ownership on graduation is factored in.

A common goal of technology immersion projects is to increase levels of parent/guardian involvement. Parents/guardians can be required to sign forms acknowledging responsibility for the laptop computer, and this involvement can serve to further emphasize (in the mind of each student) the importance and responsibility of caring for the laptop.

A third reason to permit students to own their laptops at school focuses on the digital divide. Schools must take responsibility for helping students acquire needed digital literacy skills, for immediate educational needs as well as the long-term interests of the U.S. workforce. Twenty-first century digital literacy skills highlight the importance of all students acquiring and refining

these skills. By owning their laptop after school graduation, students can move into the workforce equipped with not only the knowledge and skills but also the hardware and software to participate fully in our networked economy and culture.

Former Maine Governor Angus King articulated the reasons we want students to have 24/7 access to laptops. King said we want students viewing them as “an extension of their arm. . . . It is the first thing they think of to solve problems, to work together, to collaborate, to communicate, to gather data, to manipulate data, to present data, and it is when those kids use this thing every day, all day, that then cool things are going to pop out.”

Laws and school district policies in many parts of the United States do not permit students to keep technology resources purchased at taxpayer expense. These laws need to change. Students need to be equipped with the

digital tools for lifelong success, and this means a laptop computer they own today and can own tomorrow.

With digital tools, the horizons of learning opportunities for students are unlimited. Those horizons should only be starting when students graduate from high school, and that is why laptop ownership is essential.

It is not acceptable to contend we want our students to merely survive in the 21st century. That must not be true. We want them to thrive. To do so, students must be provided with the tools as well as the instructional leaders who can take them into worlds of change and learning we can only begin to imagine.

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best learning comes from questions, questions that we ask of ourselves and others, drawing upon a world of information. It's obvious that K–16 education must go through a transformative experience and that technology, yet again, is seen as the catalyst.

To speed this transformation on, some argue for putting laptops in the hands of teachers and their students. But, unlike previous models—such as textbooks that are loaned to students for a year—they not only want students to make the technology their own, they want them to own it outright. This must be a hardware-vendor induced vision, a perpetual stream of cash flowing from taxpayer wallets through government coffers straight into the pockets of hardware/software companies. We seldom get our money's worth out of desktop computers and expensive software now. Suc-

cess is in the implementation. K–16 educators have proven unable to use existing technology to transform teacher, learning, and leadership.

Better that students and teachers borrow cheap, wireless laptops loaded with free, open source software (to avoid expensive licensing, digital piracy, and upgrade costs). Even then, the logistical issues will be legion. Insurance, obsolescence, inappropriate use of the network by students, all these increase exponentially with more users on the network. Loaning them the equipment results in the same benefits as giving it to them to own but enables schools to recoup the taxpayers' investment.

Like their parents, children want to connect with others, to make technology their own. Loanership of technology can do that, each successive generation of students using their laptops

as keys to a digital world of conversation. Let's reexamine the core of what it means to be educated and how we can make available to our students what they need—a cheap laptop with free software—to be used for communication, collaboration, and creative solution construction.

We must loan laptops to our children and adults in K–12 schools. Only then will they be able to tap into the collective conversation that spans racial, cultural, continental, and yes, digital divides.

Miguel Guhlin currently serves as the director for instructional technology for the San Antonio, Texas, school district. A bilingual educator, he is always looking for ways to transform teaching, learning, and leadership through the strategic application of technology. Find out more on his Web site, <http://www.mguhlin.net/>.