Wednesday, February 28. 2007

News Nuggets

UNICEF Report: USA and Britain the Industrialized World's the Worst Places for Kids!
Our children are our future.So, is our future looking pretty break?Aren't we spending more on education than any other country, even though we derive little to show for our "generosity?"What the UNICEF Report Reveals…National Public Radio (NPR) reported that the United States and (maybe "not so Great") Britain scored "dead last" among industrialized nations on "the best countries to live in if you were a child" report.
This rating for the US and GB was so bad that the NPR writers dubbed this study "The Worst Places to Live" if you are a child. Link to the NPR ArticleUNICEF measured 40 factors…
"UNICEF says an examination of 40 factors, such as poverty, deprivation, happiness, relationships, and risky or bad behavior puts the United States and Britain at the bottom of a list of 21 economically developed nations.
The UNICEF report sought to assess children's well-being in developed countries by measuring a number of factors, including health, education, poverty, family relationships, and bad or risky behavior. Children were also asked to say whether they were happy."Source: U.S. on List of UNICEF's Worst Countries for Kids:
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7407245
More results…"The United States fared worst of all 21 countries in health and safety, measured by rates of infant mortality and accidents and injuries. The United States and Britain were lowest overall in the category of behavior and risks, meaning that American and British children are more likely to use drugs, drink alcohol and be sexually active than children elsewhere."Source: U.S. on List of UNICEF's Worst Countries for Kids:
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7407245Other, poorer countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic were rated better than "rich countries" like the United States and Great Britain."Professor Jonathan Bradshaw from the University of York in England led the research into the project. He was scathing about the failures of successive British governments."We've failed to invest in child health, in child education, in child care," Bradshaw says. "It's the result of neglect, which other countries have not done… they've just spent more on their children, despite the fact they're not as rich as we are."Source: U.S. on List of UNICEF's Worst Countries for Kids:
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7407245The Testing Craze: The "Smoke Screen" that Obfuscates Our Lack of Investment In our ChildrenWe care about our children and their future, and we have plenty of laws, and bills, and the bills from our testing programs to prove it.
But tests fail to create a happy life for a child. And tests fail to create working-world skills that make happy employers delighted to hire our high school graduates. (See our January 2007 article Workforce Readiness: The Tripe Behind the Hype
The problem with this investment in testing not only is that we measure the wrong things, in the wrong way (See our article on The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing, but that test taking skills don't win jobs or make employers any money.
But, testing to show that we are making sound investments in education is a "smoke screen" for spending minimal amounts of money, and for spending money on the wrong things.
Testing to learn if we are making progress seems as though we are traveling on a rational course. But, does spending money on investments that will never pay off, pan out or bring in a reasonable return seem rational?
But, if wasting money on testing were the real issue, then we could overcome this obstacle by just "Saying No! to Tests".The Conspiracy to Commit "Stingyness"People who enjoy the highest standard of living in the world…people who consume more per capita of the worlds resources than anyone else…people who pride themselves on giving their children the "best things in life"…seldom face the fact that, while we are generous (to the extreme) with our own children, we are "tightwad, penurious misers when it comes to supporting the collective good of our children.
Why else have we not broken the shackles of our tradition of "providing education on the cheap", a process that has changed little since the days of the "unmarried school Marm" and the "one room schoolhouse?"
Why else do we allow bankers, real estate brokers, lawyers, physicians, mechanics, truck drivers, house wives, business leaders, even sanitation workers…instead of teachers…to run our schools?
A farmer, rancher, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, Native American Chief…can all be school board members; but a teacher cannot.
Why?
Teacher know what it takes to run schools andTeachers love children Therefore,Teachers will run up costs and "break the budget" by managing schools the way that schools need to be managedWhat the "Testing Smoke Screen" is HidingThe testing model scientific, psychological, valid; but the rendition perpetrated against children in our schools is actually a "quality control model that is borrowed from the manufacturing industry."
Ask yourself these questions:

Do we want every toaster, computer, automobile, light bulb, TV, VCR or DVD Player to…Live up to its own unique potential?
Be all that it can be?
Make its own space and shine for all to see?
Actualize itself?
Live longer, glow brighter, run faster, dance higher, play louder, be stronger, excel in a unique, special area?Or, do we want all products in the same cohort to:Work, act and operate the same?
Be like all the other members of the lot?
Meet standards, fit in uniform packaging, and contribute to "brand" recognition?
Distinguish itself with uniform quality?
Last at least as long as the warranty period, glow to specifications, run uniformly, play the same, be the same, excel in providing a uniform user experience?Marching children in lockstep to the cost-effective production drum, holding them to production standards (i.e., high-stakes test controls), and griping that non-standard products (such as Special Education students) cost to much…exemplify the lack of investment that the UNICEF Report identifies.
Here is a novel idea: "Let's spend just as much on our children as we do for defense, i.e., about 12% of our Gross National Product (GDP).
This would increase our investment in our children by three or four hundred percent. This would "cost a lot."
But, our children are worth the investment.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in News Nuggets at 11:00

Short Article

The Role of Technology in Technology Integration: It's not what "They (IT Departments) Think"
Technology "integration into the curriculum" has been thrust upon teachers for the past dozen years or so. But, what does the integration of technology mean, and why should teachers care?In fact, few teachers care as much as they should; and few teachers take sufficient advantage of the opportunities that using various technologies present. The reason: School districts approach the "technology integration" process "backwards."What's Wrong with the Technology Integration Process?Issues with the integrating technology into the curriculum go beyond the ordinary culprits, i.e.…Teachers often don't have up-to-date, reliable, working equipment
Teachers are expected to purchase their own equipment (and software) so that they can work at home without pay
Training is often after school or on weekends without compensation, release time or some system to make up for the teacher's investment
Subsidized personal computer purchase plans and employer-sponsored deep discounts are generally unavailable
There is a lot of stress in managing the logistics of cycling access for all students for the use of the limited equipment
Non-teachers purchase the technology without understanding curriculum and learning needs
Taking advantage of the "spur of the moment" student interest as it blossoms (or erupts) is difficult when you can't get to the equipment "on demand"
Teachers are "under the high-stakes-test-score microscope", and can't risk being labeled by their supervisors as anything other than being "test-score-power-productive" not computer power users
Teacher observations are "dog-and-pony-shows" where the variable of "unpredictable" equipment cannot be left to the "chance that it will be working"What is BackwardsWhat is backwards is that the technology integration efforts start outside of teaching (such as in IT Departments or state departments of education., of from the "Purveyors of Pork and Unfunded Mandates" in DC Fantasy Land)…SidebarHas anyone else noticed that "Pork Barrel Projects" never seem earmarked for local, public education?
Perhaps this is because…Teachers don't have sufficient disposable income to contribute to political campaigns, and teachers' political action committees either lack sufficient "influence-bidding-lucre", or, they support the other party
Teachers express disdain for alcohol, gambling, tobacco, cattle grazing, timber cutting and oil drilling (on public lands), price supports for pharmaceutical companies and a myriad of other lucrative sources of campaign funding for our politicians
The politicians are saving your money until they can pass a solid "Voucher System" that will engineer a "spirit of competition" against our lackluster public schools and force those lazy, no-account teachers to get off their collective back bumpers and teach (for a change)
There is the tradition of "local control of schools" which means that politicians will find local officials "weaseling" them out of credit for any inadvertent benefits that ensue from the pork project
The "Beltway Bunglers" fear that they may actually achieve a level of influence in our schools, and then be "tagged" and held accountable for their inept performance
Note: Just look at all the damage that only a nine percent federal "contribution-with-strings-attached" stake has upon public education (as evidenced by the NCLB mess). Imagine the catastrophe for public education if federal meddling increased. We would fare better turning public education over to the officers of the Titanic than we would by allowing our politicians to pilot our public schools.

These technology integration efforts are replete with…Non-instructional goals
Minimal assessment of what students and teachers really need
The belief that it is the teachers job to "do whatever it takes" to make these initiative successful
Minimal training, and sometimes minimal access to the software
No (legal) access to the software at home (where they do most of their planning work
No budget to make this happen
Little concern for providing the equipment, software or training that is required
Limited (if any) financial incentives (expect, possibly negative ones such as threats)
Limited understanding of what it takes to change habits of instructionWorse, the proponents of integrating technology failed to "do their homework" and cannot point to any definitive connection between technology and Students' learning
Test-score improvement
Any other observable, measurable, countable connection
Curriculum goals for student performanceThe vague goal for the integration of technology, at least for teachers, seems to be to appease employers who complain that high school graduates fail to live up to the "requirements of employability."
SidebarSee our article, Workforce Readiness: The Tripe Behind the HypeA Vision for CurriculumIf technology integration initiatives are to be successful, they must be build upon a vision for curriculum, teaching and learning, first and foremost.
The logic of:Students will graduate, sooner or later (maybe later, or maybe they'll drop out)
Most jobs (except maybe teaching) require the use of computer technology Therefore:
Teachers must integrate technology into classroom instruction (or students will be less employable than they are now)…fails to hold water.And by buying into arguments such as, "We don't know the technology, so we better let the 'experts' (technologists) decide", teachers have been complicit in allowing this backwards process to proliferate.
What every project manager knows is that the goals and objectives for successful projects must be framed, visioned, written, designed in business (or in our case) educational terms.
This means that"All educational technology projects need educational, instructional, student outcome goals
All goals and objectives must have student outcome measures
All educational technology projects must start from the needs of teachers and students
Technology considerations are secondary to instructional considerations
All equipment projects require:A software component
A training component
A programming infrastructure component
A guarantee of uptime and reliabilitySidebarIn technology jargon, this guarantee of uptime is referred to as a "Service Level Agreement" (SLA)
Note: Meeting the requirement of a service level agreement is evaluated by the end user, never by technology. (Letting a technology department evaluate a service level agreement would be like allowing the fox to maintain an inventory of the chickens in the hen house.)The True "Balance of Power"
Since successful technology integration initiatives in education need to substantiate an "educational case for launching the project," the place that these projects must start is with teachers.
It is the job of teachers to develop the requirements and specifications for instructional outcomes. Teachers should never prescribe technology, and the district's IT Department should never prescribe instructional outcomes.
Once instructional outcomes (as measured in observable student improvement targets) are developed, the instructional requirements and specifications are turned over to the IT Department for…Equipment, Software, Training, Infrastructure and Back-End Programming Specifications
The cost of the Equipment, Software, Training, Infrastructure and Back-End Programming for the project
A feasibility study and timeline
A detailed project plan
An estimate of the increased IT staff that are required to support the projectNote: "Service Level Agreements" and "Back-End Programming" are two "secrets" that most IT Departments "shield" from the eyes of…Teachers and Instructional Staff
Curriculum Staff
Training Staff
School District AdministrationThe reason given is that:Teachers and Curriculum Staff would not be able to understand the "complexities" of the technical issues
Administrators (even if they were "in the know") would never fund the project because "doing it right" would be too expensive and the project would never be approvedOf course, "doing the project right" is what has been missing from technology integration projects all along.SidebarBack-End programming and adequate technical support is crucial to the success of any technology integration project, but probably these required components are part of less than one percent of a typical IT project
The reason, (hidden from the view of Instruction and Curriculum), that Back-End Programming is not even suggested in most school district IT projects is that…The programmers with the skills required to convert Instructional and

Curricular goals into "one click", usable packages are expensive. These programmers earn more than school principals, and even more than the superintendents of small school districts.
Almost all school district IT Departments are under staffed. And, this "under staffing" is in the range of a 50% to 66% shortfall at the technician levels, 80% shortfall at the levels of software and infrastructure engineers and database administrators, and at the 95% to 100% level for application and database programmers.It is more "convenient" for IT Departments to leave the complexity of the integration project "unstated" than to suggest that the district employ someone whose salary costs (is worth more) than the superintendent earns.
It is politically more expedient to claim that the failure of technology integration projects is caused by teachers (and maybe Curriculum staff) because they didn't fully support the technology; than to reveal that only, hardware and software; the easy parts of the project, were funded. What is left unstated in the project plan is that the parts of the project that would have "made it work" (and made it workable) were too expensive to garner administrative approval and backing.
Note: Since school districts will not or cannot fund technology integration projects at the appropriate level to guarantee instructional success, technology integration should probably not be done. Or, at any rate, responsibility for success should not be strapped (like targets) to the backs of teachers until the funding is available to do the project right.School district administrator should just explain their constituents that they don't want to continue…Launching under funded projects
Spinning "straw" results into "gilded, sounds like we administrators did a great job" tapestries of fantasy and self-importance
Blaming teachers (who are "innocent bystanders") in the failure of technology integration processSidebarNote: The problem was created because teachers were only bystanders, not drivers of these technology integration projects.National Recognition (Of Sorts) of the Failed Technology Integration ProblemOur federal, executive branch seems to recognize, although they don't come out and say it, that technology integration in public schools is "doomed." Evidence of this is the fact that, for the last several years, budgets sent to Congress have "gutted Ed Tech" funding. Congress, on the other hand, restored Ed Tech funding, but only to the level of "demonstration projects" that support state grants.
SidebarDoing Ed Tech "right" would require hundreds of billions of dollars each year instead of the "paltry" hundreds of millions that actually get appropriated and authorized.Strategic Technology IntegrationThe biggest and most important focus of technology integration should be on the management and delivery of instruction. Other efforts in the education arena should be toward streamlining of business processes and support services so that all the materials, equipment and support that teachers need is delivered on time, set up immediately, is tested and operational. [Business and support services often forget that their mission (while important and crucial) is secondary to the support that they must deliver to teachers.] Students, teachers and instruction define education…budgets, business processes and administrative overhead exist only to support students, teachers and instruction.
A technology integration project begins with instruction (teachers), principals, curriculum leaders…rather with the IT Department ordering the "best" computers that the budget allows.
These groups (teachers, principals, curriculum leaders) must create the requirements and specifications as measured in terms of receiving ample instructional and administrative support, and in terms of receiving ample funding
In fact, we might consider any technology integration project a failure if the IT Departments expects that just dropping some computers into a school is all that is required.
In fact, we can say that most technology integration projects have been "failures."
Here are the facts that "prove" that the integration of technology has been a "failure?" Most of these "efforts:"Were under funded
Originated from outside Instruction and Curriculum
Failed to contain the Back-End programming required to make implementation "One Click Easy"
Contained a training component as an after thought, if a training component was addressed at all
Were expected to operate by employing one third to one half of the technology support staff that were needed to keep the equipment upgraded, updated and working
Explanations for the integration projects' failures focused upon a lack of teacher "commitment" to the initiatives instead of asking why teachers were not driving the initiative with goals and students' instructional outcomes in the first place.
What this dismal record and lack of an educational case for technology integration really means is that those technology integration efforts failed to achieve critical mass and teacher "buy in." The Technology Integration "Movement" focused upon technology reasons for making instructional changes. This is backwards because instructional goals drive need to drive technology projects and change.
What any project manager will tell you is that you must create a "Business Case" (or in our arena, an "Educational Case") for a project. This is a major reason that the integration of technology achieved such a dismal track record when compared to the amount of funding that was authorized. And, this is a major reason that technology was such an easy target for budget cutting as school district revenues contracted. Technology failed to provide a clear, measurable, educational connection…from technology spending to student achievement outcomes.
And, don't fall for the ploy that technology will save money by moving to Open Source (free) software projects.
School districts are in business to spend the money to educate children. School districts have never been commissioned

to educate children "halfway, on-the-cheap, with as little cost as we can get away with"; so the Open Source argument doesn't hold water.
The next time that someone suggests that schools can save money by converting to Open Source software, ask this question, "What educational goals and what instructional objectives are driving this project proposal?"

All these are indicators demonstrate that Technology failed to do the job of delivering benefits for students and teachers, particularly in direct, measurable gains in student performance outcomes. Technology integration projects will succeed when technology departments can deliver on educational goals and when technology departments can provide educational mission critical applications.
"One Click" ease of use is not too much to ask. "One Click" applications, made possible by backend programming, is an instructional requirement, not a wished-for luxury.
Be sure that "One Click" requirements are in the specifications that drive your next technology integration project. And be sure that teachers are proposing that project.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

Feature Article

Application and Performance: The "Flip Side" of Planning
Application and Performance (AnP) are crucial for teaching success. Yet, school districts spend little time and money in perfecting instructional management and instructional delivery.The reason that only proclamations and directives target improved application of research-based skills improvement and performance is that improving education delivery is time consuming and expensive.
Note: See our previous article: The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark TestingMyths or Realities?Teachers are trained to plan, not to apply the plan and perform…College and university professors assign a report for the semester
Teachers-to-Be spend months creating a 15 to 20 minute PowerPoint(TM) presentation, maybe with some "Show and Tell" objects
In the real world, teachers spend 45 or 55 minutes teaching a lesson, and must be ready for another instructional delivery session the next day
Once the teacher is employed, the ability to plan, apply, execute and perform on cue is assumed
Administrators assume that because they pay more for one Teachers Edition than they can get by donating two pints of plasma, that they have provided the necessary and sufficient condition for teacher's instructional performance…As long as teachers turn in lesson plans on time in the required format
If instruction is shoddy, just push teachers to spend more time planning!But, Application and Performance (AnP) takes longer than planning. And, "AnP" takes more effort than just knowing what to do.Parameters of "AnP""AnP" is a process, not an action or step. "AnP" is only effective when habits, knowledge, attitudes and skills of the teacher are integrated into a seamless performance.
"AnP" involves students in active dialogue and interaction, it has little to do with parroting (or paraphrasing) the words of the Teacher Edition.Obstacles to "AnP"There are many obstacles preventing "AnP" from becoming an integral, integrated, indivisible part of instruction. Here are some challenges… Changing is difficult
No one advised teachers as to how difficult or long the changes would take
Information sharing among teachers is not easy or automatic
Behavior and performance goals for improvement are vague and unclear
Directives and instructions are unclear because supervisors are not teachers, or cannot tell others what it took for them to learn successful instructional "AnP"
There is a lack of teacher training in "AnP"
Administrators don't sell the effort for improvement as a benefit for teachers and students. Stress for changing is often threatening, punitive or negative. And, even when the directive to improve is not negative, teachers perceive it as odious
There are no real institutional rewards for teachers who excel
Directors and principals have to know what to do before they can assist teachers; but some of the "help" that they provide to teachers is harmful to instruction, counterproductive or "just plain stupid"It's the Outcomes, not the Results, that CountThis sounds like a play on words, but what it means is that the power of "AnP" comes from internalizing skills, attitudes and performance ("SAaP") behaviors at the habit level.
Here are some challenges…Teachers don't understand how difficult it is to improve "AnP", mainly because most of the improvement stems from other than cognitive skills
Teachers are left to their own devices to improve "catch as catch can", and they receive little informal help and almost no formal help
Colleagues provide help by "bragging about how well they do" under similar circumstances
School districts focus limited funds on professional development (See our article) Professional Development: Fast-Track to Empowerment or an Energy-Sapping Seat-Time Rut, but provide little funding of the follow up required to create

changes in "AnP"
Changes toward "AnP" best practices are subtle and often take years to perfect, so a change process never launches
School districts and educational leaders fail to provide models of outstanding "AnP"These patterns mean that even talented teachers find that they are ill equipped to perfect their "AnP" skills in the world of work.What to Do?Here are the strategies that teachers need to take to build these capacities on their own. (Teachers cannot count on the school system employees to provide what they need for personal improvement. Develop a model for improving "AnP"…including: habit, skill, management,delivery and follow-up for effective instruction
Understand that the "Plan into Action" completes only part of the "AnP" process…there is an internal executive component to executing at a more proficient level
Change the culture of teaching so that teachers don't work alone
Change the roles of principals and "bosses" to one where these folks answer to teachers in terms of the delivery of classroom support and instructional needs
Factor in student (and other influences) so that answers to the "What's in it for me?" provide student motivation
Develop structures for mandatory sharing, coordinating, "strategizing," and implementing a curriculum framework with a clear focus upon "AnP" best practices
Teach empowerment and leadership to teachers instead of squelching their initiatives through the "chain of command."]The Role of PlanningPlanning creates a framework and guidelines, a model, a roadmap and a timeline for "AnP." The plan, the plan documents, the plan graphics (such as Graphic Organizers and Mind Maps) keep the "AnP" process on track.
Strategic planning ensures that the tools, tactics and techniques are targeted…efficiently and effectively. Strategy is the key.Key StrategiesUse…Technologies
Resources
Mind-Sets
80-20 Rule Procedures…to…Manage Change
Coordinate Learning Attitudes
Develop Teacher Leadership
Build a Culture of Excellence in Learning
Provide Latitude (freedom) within Boundaries
Institute Controls and a Risk Management PlanA college or university education provides a diploma, a "Ticket to Play" in the educational arena. It is "On-the-Job" learning that molds a teacher's raw talent into elegant skills.
But, this process of building Application and Performance" (AnP) skills, habits and behaviors takes time.
Let's give our teachers all the help that they need to make these changes in their instructional planning, instructional delivery and instructional management.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Quick Tips

Teacher Stamps and Designs
Teachers need hands-on materials that are affordable.
And, teachers and school extra curricular clubs and organizations need fund raising ideas that pull profits.
Here is a source for many of these needs.Link to the Teacher Stamp Company (TSC) site…What's On Offer?TSC Design carries affordable art and crafts materials such as stencils, papers, kid safe inks, glitter and
But, even if you don't want to buy arts and crafts materials from TSC Design, check out their Website for how-to craft-project and fundraiser ideas.Low Prices - High DemandHow can we tell that this stuff is good?
Answer: TSC Designs has an exhibitor's booth at the Texas Computer Education Association Convention in Austin, Texas each year.
And, the TSC Booth is always "swamped" with teachers.
Why?
There is a high demand for low priced materials, especially from teachers who have to pay for classroom materials out of their own "affluence-challenged" pockets.Check out the WebsiteTSC Designs offers a dated, but effective Website.
The site design is clean and the site is simple to use.
Unfortunately, the site does not offer an automated (virtual) shopping cart, and you have to order the "old fashioned way."
The TSC also accepts school purchase orders, but because of the "archaic& school district purchasing laws in Texas, we can guess that the company does very little school district business (at least in Texas).
Most of the sales will be direct to teachers, clubs and school organizations who are not subject to the silly and stifling rules that Texas school districts are "heir to."Why Fundraising?Low cost raw materials can be turned into objects of perceived high value with he materials that TSC sells.
Any holiday, any occasion where you can take a nickel's worth of materials and sell the resulting craft for $0.25, $0.50 or $1.00 is a money maker…as long as each item doesn't take too long to create.

Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Sweetheart's Day…any excuse really, where students can create an affordable, attractive message for a special someone.
The cards and designs are money makers. And, these are money makers that provide real value because…Commercial cards are over priced and too expensive for children
Hand-made, attractive art delivers sentiment and the receiver's smile perks up, while stylized commercial art delivers a "Ho Hum!" and a half-hearted, "I-know-I-have-to-smile" grin
Children can create something prettySidebarThree dimensional objects capture attention. And, embossing is a technique for adding depth to a flat piece of paper.
For example, a child would have to paint a picture in the style and technique of a Rembrandt, da Vinci, or Monet before parents give it a fleeting glance as they tack the gift to the refrigerator with magnets. But, parents display three-dimensional "pieces of love" in a place of honor, and they exhibit three-demensional work to any relative or neighbor who comes within their grasp.
So, check out the TSC Design Website, and see if any of these low cost supplies can pay for themselves in your classroom or on your campus.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Quick Tips at 08:00

Top Tips

Free Online Tools for Educators
Here are two sites that offer free online tools that you (and your students) can use for instruction.One site is a giant (Google.com), and the other is a flea (Answers.com); but size does not equate to benefits. A little site can be better than a humongous site if the site delivers what you need.
Google for teachers delivers, but when the "king of search engines" offers tools for educators, you can bet that these tools will be impressive, and free.
Of course, Google™'s aim for world domination stretches from the Internet to the desktop of every computer, and you don't know what information Google™ is collecting as its "searchbots" search your computer system.
Of course Google™ is not in this game because it is altruistic. Besides caring for our teachers and youth, Google™ would like to move paying customers away from a dependence upon Microsoft™ and to a dependence upon services that Google™ will provide, instead.SidebarWhether we move to a world where there are few stand-alone, individual computer programs…and only online services remains to be seen.
Something has to change before this "plan/ scheme/ wild idea/ ?" becomes feasible.But, Google™ would convince you to join them in moving to this online software use model, thereby clobbering (and maybe) "blind siding" Microsoft™What is the Bait the Google™ sets to Capture your Devotion?"Google™ Tools for Educators" offers an impressive array of free services…
These include:Tools for your classroom
Teacher CommunityThe Tools for your Classroom service contains links to a lot of other resources, for example:
Lots of "search" resources…Book Search
Earth
Maps
A Teacher's Personalized Home Page
A Tutorial on Google™'s Advance Search FeaturesOther tools include:A Blogging Tools
A Shared Calendar
Online Word Processing and Spreadsheets
A Picture Sharing Program (Picasa)
A 3D Modeling Program (Sketchup)You can have fun registering for these services and exploring for hours.What about Answers.Com?If you check on the services at Answers™ .Com, you may find that smaller might even mean "better." Or, at least more usable for every class that you teach.
What does Answers.Com Provide?Free Tools
1-Click Answers
Teacher Toolkit
Free Poster Center
Research Right
Teacher Newsletter
Mission Possible MovieDecide for yourself which of these sets of tools is more useful for your students and yourself.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 08:00

Teacher Resources

Microsoft™ Offers Free eLearning Content

SidebarSome advocates of the Open Source movement criticize any mention of Microsoft(TM), but more Open Source software that is useful to teachers runs on Windows™ than any other platform.
And, although few school districts will roll out Microsoft's updates and new products anytime soon, Microsoft™ has free online learning available for the next 90 days. Take advantage of this offer…After long delays, Microsoft™ is releasing a stable of new products. And, Microsoft™ is offering free online courses associated with these new products for three months. These courses will eventually cost $29.99 each, but for now, you can study them without paying.
So, check out all the free course offerings that Microsoft™ is providing as it launches its updates and new products. And, send your students to these courses as well.What are the Courses and How do I Access Them?Here are the links located at Microsoft's Website…
Link to the Free eLearning Course Portal (i.e., Link Page) Learn about the new user interface and customization tools, and discover how to improve the way that you do everyday tasks.Course 4697: Introduction to the New Microsoft Office User InterfaceDiscover how to create and populate an Office Access 2007 database, and learn about the great new tools available to analyze your data.Course 4622: What's New in Microsoft Office Access 2007Determine how Office Excel 2007 can help you organize and analyze information. Put new features, such as conditional formatting and enhanced business intelligence analysis tools, to work for you.
Course 4623: What's New in Microsoft Office Excel 2007
Learn how to convert your existing Microsoft Word and Excel forms into Office InfoPath 2007 forms.Course 4624: What's New in Microsoft Office InfoPath 2007Use Office OneNote 2007 to manage your text, voice, and Tablet PC-based notes in one place. See how to share your notes with others to create a collaborative work environment.Course 4625: What's New in Microsoft Office OneNote 2007Strengthen your e-mail communications, calendar, and task management expertise by taking advantage of the new user interface for messages and appointments.Course 4626: What's New in Microsoft Office Outlook 2007Discover the latest features for creating dynamic and engaging presentations.Course 4627: What's New in Microsoft Office PowerPoint 2007Prepare to use the new, intuitive interface and navigation tools of Office Word 2007.Course 4628: What's New in Microsoft Office Word 2007Use the latest features of this business and technical diagramming program to quickly create flowcharts, process diagrams, and organizational charts. Learn what Pivot Diagrams can do for you.Course 4629: What's New in Microsoft Office Visio 2007Discover how to create and manage Office Groove 2007 workspaces for sharing files and project information. You'll also learn how to support effective team communication and how to collect information using forms.Course 4698: What's New in Microsoft Office Groove 2007You have to register at the Microsoft™ site to be able to access these courses.Free eBook from Microsoft™, tooMicrosoft™ is also offering a free electronic book (eBook) at the same site.Link to the free eBook…Why Keep "Up to Date" about Microsoft™ ProductsEven though your school district may not update your computers with Microsoft&#8482's latest product until the Summer of 2007, if at all, teachers need to follow the evolution of productivity software.
The reason that teachers need software such as Microsoft&#8482's Windows software and Office Productivity software is because these software programs have become "standards." Because the programs are "standards", other program developers create connections to these programs. Other vendors integrate their products into standard products.For Example…For example, a mind mapping program might be able to export mind maps as a word processing outline file, a slide show or a project plan. This saves lots of "cutting and pasting" ; work. Another example would be a program that converts Office Productivity files to the PDF format. These programs can change the menu items of standard software programs so that you do not need to load a separate program to save your work in both formats.Another Reason to Keep Informed: Know What to Request from Your District's IT DepartmentThe reason that you might not have access to new Microsoft™ software at work is that…It takes time to roll out new software
New software should be tested thoroughly to ensure that the new product is compatible with all other products
Classes are ongoing, and you and your students are in the way of a change over of your PC
The IT Department staff wants to protect your files because, during the update process, all existing data is "wiped out"
No budget exists for purchasing new softwareNote: There is a subscription fee process (something like an insurance policy, in fact, it is called "Software Assurance" where all updates can be installed when they are released; but your district may not have paid for this subscription The computer in your classroom is a "piece of junk" that lacks the memory, speed or other resources that are required to run the new softwareSidebarSee our article in this issue of Classroom Toolkit The Role of Technology in Technology Integration: It's not what "They Think"

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Resources at 06:00

Book Review

The Power of Innovative ThinkingAuthor: Wheeler, JimISBN: 7607-4552-8Format: HardcoverPub. Date: 1998Publisher: : Barnes and Noble BooksPages: 125Cost: $10.99 (List) Available: Amazon at as low as $0.33 (new) - Why bother with eBay™ with the price of a new copy so low?Subtitle: Let New Ideas Lead you to SuccessThe Books' Topics:Thinking Styles
Strategic Thinking

Power Thinking
Creative Thinking
Analytical ThinkingThe central themes of this book are:We are not born knowing how to think, but we can learn
Strategies for thinking can be developed in a systematic way
There are four major types of thinking
People develop their own thinking style, but this style can be improved uponKeywords:Re-thinking Thinking
Power Thinking
Problem-Solving, Opportunity Thinking and Decision-Making
The Thinking BoxMain Idea:Each type of thinking skill involves specific tools and techniques that can be learned, practiced and perfected
The types of thinking are:Strategic Thinking
Power Thinking
Creative Thinking
Analytical Thinking
The "Thinking Box" involves considering…One's Personal Life
One's Career
Problem-Solving
Personal GrowthQuotes:"If you keep thinking in the same old way, you'll arrive at the same old conclusions and leave behind a well-worn rut of business-as-usual decisions. Trains must go where the tracks lead; they cannot follow unplanned routes." (p. - 7)
"Thinking is the conscious use of our minds to reason, deliberate, debate, predict and reflect on a subject. By better understanding why humans think the way they do, you'll learn how to approach problems in ways that lead to better decision-making. By smoothing out the ruts that have formed in the past, you'll be better equipped to "re-think" your responses when faced with new problems and opportunities. You don't need to be a victim of doing what has always been done." (p. -
"Human beings have built-in survival filters to prevent sensory overload.…We also have memory filters that serve as our 'auto-pilot. They let us perform routine tasks while we're consciously thinking of something else…Memory filters are time-savers that can cause us to make mistakes and miss opportunities. " (p. - 13)
"When forced to make a decision, people take different mental routes to arrive at that decision. Like travelers you may know, some take the most direct route to get where they're going. Others think of all the routes available, select the best one and then go. Still others take the scenic tour and enjoy the journey. And, some people jump in the car and just go, giving very little thought to direction or destination." (p. - 27)
"'Power' is being able to influence people or situations. It's not reserved for people in authority or those with the biggest stick. Power is something we all have and should be seen as neither good or bad. When we abuse power, it is bad; but when we use power to turn vision into reality, it is good." (p. - 69)
"'Strategic' means planning for the future, and strategic thinking is thinking about planning for the future. When you know where we are going, why you're going and how you're going to get there, you will get there, successfully--and strategic thinking tools will give you the where, why and how. Successful people learn to user their thinking skills so that their actions will not go astray, but will lead to desired goals." (p. - 51)
"In order to maximize your power-thinking skills, you need to be positive about yourself and your abilities…How you see yourself and the confidence you have in your ability to be successful will influence your power-thinking skills.When we see ourselves as successful, we will be successful. The power of positive mental pictures has been recognized for a long time. Athletes and public speakers are some of the people who practice their skills with positive mental images of success." (p. - 84)
"'Creative thinking' is using your thinking skills to make new and useful connections--creative solutions from information that you already know…All people are creative, but in different ways. You may be creative when it comes to putting words on paper while an associate is creative in designing buildings. Once you recognize that you are creative, you can apply your thinking skills to come up with new solutions to problems." (p. - 89)
"'Analytical thinking' is the mental activity that helps us make correct decisions. We can use our creative thinking skills to come up with hundreds of solutions to our problems, but we need to use our analytical-thinking skills to select the best solution." (p. - 107)Issues Addressed by the Book:The author distills thinking skills to a variety of strategies and models that are useful for teachers.
Teachers could purchase this book for $0.33, place the book in the classroom library. Teachers could also develop an "applied curriculum" using the basic patterns that are described and outlined in the book.
The benefit that teachers derive of the brief nature of the book is that it is easy to refer to, easy to extract patterns and information from, and easily to apply in almost any content area class.
The strategies, diagrams and outlines presented in the book are easy to adapt to specific lesson plans and classroom needs.The Book's Shortcomings:The book presents only a single exercise or two for each of the various types of thinking. Teachers would appreciate lots more variety and more exercises for applying the principles that the author presents.
Also, since the book was geared for a business readership, the application of thinking skills to test-taking is not

addressed.
In addition, the book could have provided additional strategies for communicating the results of strategic, power, creative and analytic thinking, i.e., with graphs, charts, graphic organizers and other communication aids.Comments:The book focuses upon thinking skills for business, but, "thinking is thinking" and the skills apply to teaching and learning just fine.
The book's concepts, such as the "Thinking Box" are readily adaptable to most content area subjects.
The book's format lends itself to easy skimming and easy adaptation for most classes.
The book is also easy enough to comprehend that upper elementary, middle school and high school students can us it for project-based learning assignments.
The author points out that everyone is different, and that everyone thinks differently. This is a lesson that teachers need to remind themselves (and our politicians) about. The author missed an opportunity here to explore "Multiple Intelligences" and provide many examples of these divergent thinking skills in successful, real life applications.
Summary:This book can be part of most teacher's classroom or reference library. The price is right, and the book provides a good start.
The author writes in a personal, conversational style that aids in understanding the concepts that he presents.Rating (Four Point scale):Useful - 3
Applicable - 4
Relevant - 4
Innovative - 3
Original - 3
Interesting - 3

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Overall Rating - 3.3

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Book Review at 05:00

Site Strategy

Classroom Toolkit .Com is Moving
The Classroom Toolkit .Com site is moving to a new Web hosting company. The change over should take effect within the next two weeks.We don't expect this change to affect the functioning of our site, and we expect that the new arrangements will help our visitors in the long run.
Of course, several minor issues may develop, so please let us know if you encounter an error during the transfer process.
The change will allow Classroom Toolkit to offer additional benefits at less cost, and allow Classroom Toolkit to deliver several new services.Change of FocusThe current Web host, SiteSell.Com, was selected because we planned for many teachers to join our Open Source for teacher materials effort with their own contributions. We also expected that several teachers would want to create Websites of their own, especially since SiteSell.Com provides a service that builds Websites without needing to know HTML programming or page coding of any kind.
However, since we are still awaiting these volunteers after a year an a half, we are embarking on another strategy.
We'll announce the additions to our site in this Classroom Toolkit newsletterClassroom Toolkit Newsletter: Staying Put!This newsletter is remaining right where it is at. If fact, the success of this newsletter; hosted with Open Source Serendipity software is one justification for moving the Classroom Toolkit.Com site
You can rely on our newsletter to provide the "tell-it-like-it-is", stress-management, teacher-time-saving information that you can't find anywhere else.
So, be sure to tell your friends and colleagues about our newsletter.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Site Progress at 04:00

Open Source for Education

Open Admin for Schools: Are Any US School Districts Using this Free Program?
Convincing school administrators to save money should be easy, right?
So, what about a school district and campus administration program that could save a school district multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars?
Why not replace expensive school administration programs with this free, Open Source alternative?What can this Free Software Do?Link to information about the Open Admin for Schools program…Here is a list of the components that are available in the secure, Web-based Open Admin for Schools product:Demographics - Stores student and family information that can be viewed and printed in a variety of ways. The student demographics are extensible; you can add your own additional data fields to store important information about students in your school(s)
Attendance - Attendance can be entered either by secretaries in the school office or by teachers in the classroom. The software has the ability to do different numbers of periods per day for elementary grades vs high school and middle

years. Elementary classes can have two classes per day (AM/PM) with a homeroom teacher. Higher grades can have attendance done on a per subject period basis (and be subject-based). Attendance reports are integrated with report cards/progress reports. A variety of attendance reports are available
Discipline - A discipline module that tracks student discipline events and track outcomes is integrated in the Open Admin for Schools product. Administrators can categorize and post incident behaviors and print statistical reports
Report Card System - a flexible reporting system (with up to 20 subject objectives is integrated with attendance reporting. All report cards are printed as PDF reports and may include a school logo. All subjects may have unlimited length text comments, and can have any desired ordering. Attendance reporting will record number of school days, individual student's enrollment days, days absent, and the number of times that a student is tardy
Special Education Individual Education Plans (IEPs) -- The Open Admin for Schools program is integrated at the school district level so that special education teachers can tailor individual student programs with required modifications. These Individual Education Plans (IEPs) can be viewed by all authorized personnel. This function includes the ability to add student medical history, testing data, student team assignments and members' responsibilities. Objectives are chosen from lists of thousands, and these can be categorized in a variety of ways. Up to 32 objectives are allowed per subject and each 'subject' is specific to the needs of an individual studentThe Open Admin for Schools system can generate progress reports (for use with the report card system) as well as build a comprehensive IEP report containing the yearly plan for the child. This IEP can also viewed and monitored by authorized campus and district staff to ensure compliance with all Special Education requirements
Export/Import Modules - Allows students to transfer schools within a school district without having to re-enter demographic information. The program can also export data to other programs using an XML transfer system
Online Gradebook -- Allows teachers to enter grades and assessments online, from school or home. The program can group and weigh assessment items, and post directly into the report card system
Parent Viewing -- The Open Admin for Schools system allows parents to view attendance, gradebook data, and report cards. These features integrate into existing school Websites with little effort
Online Daybook -- Allows teachers to plan and and post their lesson plans
Upcoming -- Multi-language support, Family functions, Parent-Teacher Interview Scheduling, Wherever schools want to go...Wow! What doesn't the program do that needs to get done?
Answer: The lesson plan posting module is weak.
In addition, the program needs to become School interoperability Framework (SIF) Compliant so that data can be shuffled into and out of the program (be shared, prevent the need for entering duplicate data into several programs) with other programs.
But, Open Admin for Schools will remain on the world-wide adoption list, but find limited traction in the USA (except for parochial and reservation schools). Here's why…Saving Money this Way: A Hard Sell in the USAThe Open Admin for Schools program is free, but convince your school district administrators to ditch the high-priced administrative, finance, and management programs that they currently subscribe to in favor of a cheap alternative.
You won't find many (any) takers.
So, who is attracted to the Open Admin for Schools program?
Schools (world-wide) and people who manage these schools effectively are attracted to the simplicity, low processing requirements, and solid, basic functioning of the Open Admin for Schools program. The Open Admin for Schools program seems to be indigenous to Saskatchewan, Canada.Canadian Red TapeApparently Canadian schools have less red tape, fewer reporting requirements, smaller budgets, and maybe a manageable bureaucracy (oxymoron?).
So, in the United States, this product is not apt to catch on, despite the fact that a school district could save from $90,000 to multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars, the insane, obscene amount that is the going price of commercial administrative software.
But, don't take our word for it. Check out these online demonstrations to see what this free product can do…Link to the Open Admin for Schools Administration Module demo…
Link to the Open Admin Teacher demo…
Link to the Open Admin Parent Module interface…
Link to the Open Admin Special Education Module…Free, but Priced out of the Market!What prices the Open Admin for Schools software out of US school district markets, except maybe for Parochial Schools, Charter Schools or Native American Reservation Schools?
Two answers:Reporting Requirements
Funding Source AccountabilityApparently Canadian schools don't have to report an array of data that would tax the logistical skills of Alexander the Great or Napoleon.
For example, do Canadian schools have to report to their executive and judicial branches of government?
Are there Canadian province database codes for identifying each discipline infraction that is referred to the campus office, codes for the ethnic background of each student, and reporting requirements (to the federal authorities) to discover (i.e., incriminate yourself or your staff, subject yourself to audit, lawsuit, and conviction in a trial by mass media) if minority students receive more severe punishments for similar behavioral infractions?
Does the Canadian Federal Government contribute nine percent of their school districts funding and demand 109% effort in data tracking and reporting in return?

If so, a product designed to track the basics of school management, such as Open Admin for Schools does quite well, "just won't cut it."
Does the Canadian government reimburse school districts for meals that are provided to children of lower-income families?
Do schools in Canada have to track each meal that they provide, and, if a child somehow needs to pay for a meal, but forgot their lunch money, do regulations require that the child must go hungry…then require that the food service workers throw the uneaten food out (because ineligible students cannot eat free food)?What Motivates US School Districts to Keep Subscribing to the High-Dollar Administration Products?Support for the Open Admin for Schools program costs only $63 USD per hour.
The cost of maintaining high-priced commercial school management products is from tens (to hundreds) of thousands of dollars a year.
But, school districts can't afford the Open Admin for Schools program while "not blinking, not flinching, not balking" when paying for the commercial products. Why?
School district administrators spend the extra money to "Armor Plate their Backsides."
"Bullet-proofing" the administrative "soft-side" is more important than saving the huge sums that the commercial products cost. In fact, no expense is spared if it shields an administrative "Gluteus from the Boot."
As far as US school district administrators are concerned, Open Admin for Schools, means "open season" on administrators if "spinable," self-preservation-related data is not as easy to access as student records.Audit ProtectionOne thing that politicians, bureaucrats and school district administrators know (despite the separation of church and state) is that "he who lives by spin, dies by spin." This "self-evident" truth means that any report, analysis or audit can be "spun" in creative ways if there is enough camouflaging data. The findings of the same audit can allow a politician, bureaucrat or district official either to "live or die," either to "be promoted or demoted," either to "gain commendation or censure," either to be "praised or pilloried." The spin that can be generated about the data is more important than the facts.
What the high-priced school district administration products offer is "Audit Protection," and folks of a bureaucratic ilk know that…They are vulnerable
Their only defense is "spin"
They are compelled to "take the fall" for "higher ups"
Any money, no matter how much, is well spent if it offers "positive spin capacity" and some "negative spin repellent ammunition."This is the reason that "budget-hoarding, bureaucratic tightwads" trip over themselves to morph into "luxury buying spendthrifts" when shopping for "Audit Protection."Open Admin for Schools: Offers what Administrators Need, not what they WantSo, no matter how good Open Admin for Schools becomes, no matter how much money a school district could "save" by adopting this product…Open Admin for Schools will fail to catch on until it offers school district administrators what they want instead of what they need.
What school district administrators need is an easy to use, low-cost, quality product that covers all the basics.
What school district administrators want is a product that can spew whatever numbers are required to "make themselves look good, and to make their decisions appear to be sound", no matter what evidence to the contrary.
So, Open Admin for Schools will continue to enjoy a world-wide following; except in the United States, where "spin management" trumps effective management, every time.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Open Source at 03:00