

Maria Wilson outlines five achievable areas for schools to begin improvement in digital technologies...

Here is an example of a typical school day for a primary school computer coordinator like me:

Before school, one of the classroom teachers needs help as there is no internet connection for the computer attached to the interactive whiteboard. Twenty minutes later, with some new cables and the reorganisation of desktops in the classroom, the issue is solved. During the morning, a student appears in the coordinator's classroom, his laptop does not work. The computer coordinator thinks, 'Do I stop teaching the 28 Year 4 children in front of me to try and fix this, or tell him to leave it with me'. The student really needs it now. Year 4 seems to be focused, the coordinator performs some magic and the computer seems to be working again, unfortunately Year 4 are not. Then, a phone call comes to the classroom. It is the teacher from before school explaining that now there is no interactive whiteboard software on the computer. The coordinator makes a mental note to download the software and relabel the desktop on the Department's Universal Desktop Management system.

The bell goes for lunch.

I am a full-time teacher and I also manage nearly 400 desktops, laptops, iPads and interactive whiteboards in my school. I am not an IT specialist. I am self-taught and readily admit to huge gaps in my knowledge covered by a lot of Googling, YouTube videos and telephone calls to people who do know. What I have observed over the last four years in this role is that while access to computers in schools has grown exponentially, the digital technology needs of primary classroom teachers and their students are not always being met.

Where to begin

I have carried out some anecdotal research with teacher colleagues from across the state into their IT needs and found the results are remarkably similar, no matter where they are teaching. The needs outlined below are not ranked in an order and instead reflect the range of immediate support that schools might pursue across most primary settings.

Newish computers and other hardware

'The internet is so slow' is a common cry in schools, and it is frustrating when computers take forever to do the smallest task. Rest assured it should not be an issue for much longer. In October last year, the Minister for Education, Sarah Mitchell, explained that over the following 18 months all NSW public schools would have high-speed internet (NSW Government, 2020). If that does not leave you resting assured, new Federal laws guaranteeing 'decent' internet speeds regardless of where you live and work in the state came into force on 1 July (Lysaght, 2020). If, however, the issue is not internet speeds but the age of the hardware that schools are using, then Houston, we have a problem. Age slows computers, well technically it is not age but newer software which takes up more space, lack of available memory, unused files slowing the processing speed and numerous other technical issues. This is the reason that private businesses replace hardware at least every five years. However, in schools we are more likely to play 'musical computers' with equipment that may be ten years old, and try another old device rather than

prioritising upgrades. While the current, annual Departmental rollout may replace some of the equipment which is beyond use or broken, most of us will continue waiting for a device to load, while breathing in and out slowly. This is an area where more efficient and timely programs for change are necessary from both the Department and school leadership.

Easy logins for K-2 students

I was recently preparing a digital technology team teaching unit for a Kindy class. I told the class teacher of my plans which involved students acting as robots, giving directions to each other and gradually advancing to programming Bluebots. My colleague looked at me wryly and explained that it sounded like a lot of fun but maybe we could start by teaching the students to log on to a computer.

Our Kindy students have 30-character logins. Some of these little darlings have only just worked out that their fingers can go places other than up their noses, yet obstacles such as these excessive logins create challenging hurdles that would turn off even the most patient of teachers who wish to use ICT with young students. This also applies to the online learning programs that many schools subscribe to. While often providing excellent learning opportunities, they come with sign-in requirements which take the first 15 minutes of computer time and test the patience of a saint, or, perhaps, a Kindy teacher.

Professional learning in commonly used technology

One teacher I spoke to about this article asked for a little less judgement of those teachers who cannot get the hang of the latest app/program/update after a five-minute explanation from a well-intentioned colleague preceded by 'Oh it's really easy, don't worry'. What is really needed is more meaningful professional learning in technology use for all teachers. Professor Pasi Sahlberg pointed out in his submission to the Gallop Inquiry "Technology can only be as good as the people who use it" (as cited in Gallop, Kavanagh & Lee, 2021, p.34). In my experience this is true. For instance, how many of us really use the interactive whiteboard in our learning space as anything more than a glorified whiteboard? Much of the technology that is now available in all classrooms does have incredible potential, yet without training, from experts in the field, and time to experiment, learn and plan using the equipment, teachers are prevented from realising the potential in both the technology and themselves. Professional learning in using technology is also a necessary requirement for meeting the Proficient Teacher standards under the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (NESA, 2018), so whilst the intention is clear, there is much to do in practical, planning and resourcing to support this important work.

Clear guidelines around the use of apps

On a recent Stage 3 excursion, one of the class teachers posted some photos of the students on her class Seesaw page. She almost immediately got a message from a parent saying that her child was not in any of the photos. The situation left me wondering when and how teachers became so accountable that they now feel obliged to post daily updates in apps such as Seesaw or ClassDojo, which may then be critiqued by parents?

Even before COVID, many teachers were using these apps to communicate directly with parents, sending reminders, newsletters and occasionally photos and work samples. There are no doubt benefits to these apps but for many teachers who feel obliged to use them, they have become a menace, with parents using them to communicate with the class teacher without limit. For instance, a child forgot their school hat, they are sick, unhappy, missing their pet, missing their lunch. These are all issues which would have once gone through the school office and been noticed and coordinated at a senior level, or might not have

been sent at all. They are now sent directly to teachers, sometimes involving long emails in the dead of night.

Teachers are committed to good relations with parents and thus feel obliged to respond and follow up every message. This is time consuming and takes up lesson planning time before and after school hours, as well as precious release from face-to-face time (RFF). Many teachers are desperate for strict guidelines, for parents and themselves, around communication and the use of such apps and this is something that could be addressed without additional expense or equipment.

Expert technical support

Potentially the biggest digital technology issue in schools is the provision of technical support. It is hard to think of any other similarly sized organisation that requires their employees to manage their own technology. A recent report on this topic, based on survey results from 259 schools from across the state, found that in the majority of schools, technical support was provided from among the teaching staff (Fogarty, 2021, p.11). That is teachers, like me, who put their hand up to take on the role and who are usually self-taught. Some get extra release time, but many are also using their RFF or time before or after school hours to fulfill the role. Of course, this impacts on the quality of the coordinator's teaching, yet if schools do not support technical needs, then teaching across the school is negatively impacted. This is a situation that need not continue.

Next steps

Reading this article, you may have noticed some factual errors around the working of computers, revealing that I am not a 'tech wizard'. In writing this piece, I want to make the point that whilst teachers can do a lot to support each other in effective use of information technology, every school in NSW should have the benefit of specialist, dedicated technical support along with the necessary, updated hardware and software to deliver and model truly modern and best practice for students. Coupled with this specialist technical support, classroom teachers should receive training from experts in the software and systems they want to use, ensuring the 'digital revolution' benefits our students. There is also a need for clearer guidelines, direction and support from the Department around new and evolving technology that connects us to our parent communities and the world beyond.

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Maria Wilson began teaching thirty years ago in inner London, she briefly ran a small school in the West Indies before settling in the inner west of Sydney. She has a Masters degree in Human Rights and had planned to become the Secretary General of the United Nations. In the event of this not happening she has settled for the other best job in the world. She currently teaches and coordinates computers at Kegworth Public School.