



Computer literacy a vital part of Michigan's education plans

by Laura Clewett

John Hansen says that when he first became a school principal in 1974, he "did what any good principal would do: I had a bake sale so the school could buy its first computer."

Now a legislator and vice chair of the Michigan House Committee on Education, Hansen says that, like the first computer he helped his school buy, the question of why computer literacy and

technology in schools are important has become out of date. He says the real question in 2002 is this: "How could they [students] possibly learn to survive if they didn't learn how to use computers?"

"The computer is part of everything — every job that you do," the Democrat from Dexter adds. "It has become a part of almost everything that we do in society."

Rep. Hansen's comments echo the findings in a report released last November by the Michigan State Board of Education. "Embracing the Information Age" is a result of the work of a task force charged with developing plans to make sure the state's students "are equipped to excel in the 21st century." Writers of the report say the state's most critical challenge is helping to equip "chronically under-performing schools."

"With a growing underclass of children all but assigned to failure, the cost of failing to act now is simply too great," the report concludes. "In our age, all workers must excel, all community members must be engaged, and all citizens must be knowledgeable participants."

Such arguments have become increasingly common in recent years as educators and policymakers search for ways to bridge the "digital divide." In the past, discussions about the digital divide have focused on whether or not students have equal access to computers and the Internet. However, as more and more schools have gained computer and Internet access in recent years, new questions have emerged, including the following:

- When computers are available, how are they used? Are they used merely for games and rewards for good behavior, or are they actually used to challenge students and teach them new skills?
- What quality of machines and Internet access are available? Can they handle large amounts of data? Do they have audio or video capacity?
- Are teachers adequately trained to use technology in ways that will challenge and educate students?

- Is there sufficient technical support and ongoing training for teachers and students?

Momentum seems to be growing in Michigan to make sure that students are prepared for "the information age." "It has not been a high priority, but I sense that is changing, to a

degree," says Rep. Wayne Kuipers, a Republican from Holland who chairs the Michigan House Committee on Education.

In November

2001, House Speaker Rick Johnson, a Republican from LeRoy, announced that he would dedicate the next three years to developing and implementing a comprehensive technology initiative for Michigan's schools. Johnson wants every student to have portable wireless Internet access by 2004. "I want Michigan to pioneer the use of technology in the classroom," he says.

The state already has made a one-time investment of \$110 million to give every teacher, in districts that wanted to participate, a laptop computer and Internet access. Machines were first distributed last spring with the expectation that 90,000 teachers would eventually be given computers.

The program is coordinated by Michigan Virtual University, which also operates the Michigan Virtual High School. It allows students in any part of the state to take courses online that aren't offered in their local schools, such as advanced placement, foreign language or college classes. In addition, the university offers free online information technology courses to students and teachers. Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota and South Dakota also either offer or are planning to offer online courses.

Kuipers says the virtual high school "probably has the ability to do more to transform what education looks like in Michigan from a technology standpoint than anything else that we have done."

"I think in the next 20 or 25 years, we'll be amazed at how many kids get their schooling online," he adds. "Education's not going to look like it does today. And I guess my response to that is great. I don't think it should look like it does today ... You change with the times."

Out in the distance

Distance learning and virtual communities are key components of the Michigan Board of Education's recent report. The task force believes schools need to "transcend the four walls" by integrating distance learning and other resources into the learning community. It proposes that chronically under-performing schools and districts create "virtual districts by which all partners share best practices and resources" and asks the Legislature to approve, by June, a program that recognizes and offers incentives (including financial rewards) for these partnerships. In addition, task force members are asking the Legislature to "provide clear funding directions" and make an appropriation for virtual districts by September.

Other key proposals focus on preparing teachers and administrators to use technology and on revising state standards, benchmarks and assessments to incorporate new skills. The board recommends that the state take the following steps: revise existing school codes when necessary; establish a professional development challenge fund to support teachers, principals and administrators in chronically under-performing schools; continue and expand the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund, which provides grants to low-technology districts; and

develop a program to give cash rewards and other incentives to chronically under-performing schools that exceed the new technology standards for teachers and administrators.

As they look for ways to support school technology initiatives, policymakers in Michigan might look to South

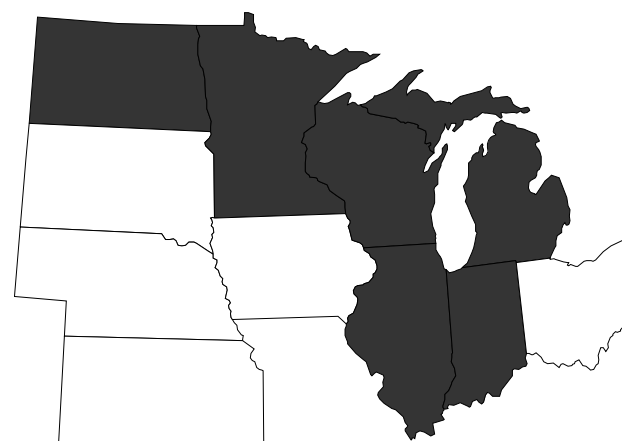
Dakota for ideas. In 1996, the state, led by Republican Gov. Bill Janklow, initiated a program called Wiring the Schools, which used prison inmates to wire education facilities for Internet access. Several other projects followed, including Connecting the Schools, which established a statewide intranet, now known as the Digital Dakota Network. In addition, Technology for Teaching and Learning Academies offer intensive technology courses for instructors.

Thanks to these and other efforts, South Dakota recently ranked No. 1 in education for the second year in a row on the Center for Digital Government's Digital States Survey. The Mount Rushmore State shared the first-place ranking with Utah and Illinois. 🚀

Literacy series

This is the second of a two-part series examining state efforts in the area of literacy. Initiatives aimed at supporting adult and family education in the "basic skills" areas of reading, math and writing were the focus of the first part of the series, published in last month's *Stateline Midwest*.

Technology in the classroom



States whose education standards for students include a technology component

Source: Education Week (2001)