Equity (Guest Editorial)

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Each of us will read this month's The Computing Teacher within a context that gives the issue of computers and equity a special meaning for us individually. Some of us are concerned with computer equity across schools within a county or across the entire country, others with equity within a specific school or school district, still others with equity of computer use among the disadvantaged or between the sexes. However, remember that together these separate contexts are part of a larger context and a larger issue-equity of access to education throughout our entire society. It is within this larger context of the still unresolved educational inequity throughout our entire society that the problems of inequitable access to computers for education must be acted upon and solved.

Clearly, as a society, we are not providing our students equal access to computers. If we were, a recent National Science Foundation study would not have found that 31% of the students in affluent urban areas have access to computers in schools as contrasted with only 12% of their counterparts in rural areas. Nor would it have found that disadvantaged students and females are much less likely to have ready access to computers in schools. Rural, disadvantaged, and female students have generally suffered from educational inequities throughout this country's educational history.

The undeniable truth is that the specific issue of access to computers simply reflects the long-standing historical inequities operating within American education in general. But inequity is not simply an educational problem to be solved in our schools and by educators alone: it is a societal problem that is being exacerbated by the enormous educational potential of the computer. Once we realize and decide to face this larger social truth and this broader social-educational problem, we will find that efforts to provide equitable access to computers in schools can, at best, provide only a partial solution to a problem that goes far beyond classroom walls.

To understand the broad societal dimensions of this problem, all we need do is ask: to what degree are educators responsible for-or able to do anything about:

- Parents being told in magazines, newspapers, on television-and by each other-that they should be investing in a home computer for their child's educational use?
- Middle and upper-middle-class parents investing far more money in home learning via computer than lower-middle-class and low-income parents?
- Parents investing a lot more money in computers for their sons than for their daughters?

What is an educator's responsibility in the equity issue? How educators answer this question depends on how local school administrators and school boards view their school's role in the community and in society.

If one has a view that a school's role is merely to reflect society (i.e., the status quo within the communities that make up society), then one can argue that because some parents in the society

and within each local community will inevitably out-invest other parents when it comes to computers for their children, that schools, too, will inevitably reflect this discrepancy-and should take little or no responsibility for making overall (school and home) access to computers equitable for all students.

If one takes the view that schools should provide leadership in stimulating and operating cooperative school-home programs aimed at improving education for all school-aged members of the community, then one can argue that the school should provide equitable access to computers in the school and be an evolutionary force for equitable access in homes.

However, those who espouse and act on this second view are working in the face not only of the traditional interpretation of the school's role as a mirror of society, but in the face of a marketplace juggernaut driven by hundreds of millions of advertising dollars aimed at convincing parents that their child's educational success depends on that child's personal, at-home access to a computer-with no mention (quite understandably) of the equity issue.

Now, of course, one can take the position that this marketing will eventually saturate all levels of the society with home computers, just as, in time, all levels of society have become saturated with television sets. One might then argue that the problem of equity of access to computers does not need to be solved by schools stimulating and operating cooperative school-home computer programs because equity of access to computers is built into the workings of the free marketplace.

As attractive as this argument may seem, it is educationally, and therefore societally unsound because only a small portion of the potential of educational computing resides in computer hardware. The great educational value of the computer will reside in (1) high-quality software of educational merit and (2) effective educational use of such software by learners in school and particularly at home. "At home" is especially important because of the very great likelihood that market forces seem destined to succeed in providing one-to-one access to a computer for students at home long before schools can provide the same sort of one-to-one access at school-if, indeed, they may ever, or even should, do so. Recognizing this fact, schools should look to the responsibility they have to identify high-quality software that is fully integrated with the local school curriculum and facilitate parents' learning about and acquiring such software for their children's use at home. Local communities urgently need educational leadership regarding software and its use with home computers.

Educators should not only applaud but emulate those few of their colleagues who have begun to provide the educational and social leadership that is generating integrated, cooperative programs for the effective school-home use of educational computing. This sort of leadership is evidenced in three interrelated home-school education computing programs in the Houston Intermediate School District, one of which provides poverty-level families with after school parent/child training in computer use and on loan, at-home computers and software for these families. Other school districts in New York City, Ohio and California are developing similar community outreach programs. In some cases, local and state PTA's are getting involved in these efforts.

This month a national clearinghouse and electronic network to facilitate a flow of information and practices about such cooperative, school-home programs dealing with the issue of equitable access to computers is being established as part of the Excellence and Equity through Electronic Education Project funded in part by the San Francisco Foundation and

coordinated by EPIE Institute. Educators who want information about what school districts are doing about computers and equity or who would like to report on what their district is doing and join an electronic network of like-minded districts, should contact: EPIE 4E Project, Richard Wenn, P.O. Box 786, Kenwood, CA 95452. Telephone 707/833-4621 or CompuServe WCC111.

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