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# Corporate Standardized Takeover and Wasted Tax Dollars: The Misappropriation of Technology in Public Schools and the Unfair Burden Placed on Teachers

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“Corporate Standardized Takeover and Wasted Tax Dollars: The Misappropriation of Technology in Public Schools and the Unfair Burden Placed on Teachers”

## **Introduction**

“Basically I just go along as far as I need to, to a point. I want to be positive and upbeat and think that people will realize it (technology and mandated online testing) isn’t working, but I’m not.” Jill Thackeray, a public high school teacher in Salt Lake City, is one of many educators and citizens who are concerned and dismayed by the current state of technological integration in the public school system. The social success of the Internet and online media has made technology a newly popular tool in public school classrooms, kindergarten through twelfth grade, and its presence as a staple in the classroom continues to grow. Following the social demand for more lifestyle technologies, public school systems in response have turned to technology to improve test scores and increase the value of a public education.

Although there are many vocal supporters who agree with the millions of tax dollars that are spent on implementing new technology, there is a strong opposition both in the public forum and throughout education communities across the nation. Monetary greed by profit driven big business, false value and top-down mentality have resulted in a system that is not effective, and in reaction has created a misappropriation of both human and technological capital. While technology can be an asset, its current presence dominates valuable teaching time and is often mandated by school district upper management and state legislators. Often, these district and state mandates for new technology are not supported by educators or students, and this misuse of funds becomes

a burden on the teachers and the students as they struggle to adapt to a system that does not work.

Throughout this article, I will be discussing the technological integration of computer programs, iPad infrastructure, and online testing into common public school state curriculums, grades kindergarten through twelfth. I will first explain how technology does not always have a negative presence, and how when used appropriately, can provide limitless new opportunities for both students and teachers. Then I will assess what the current common method of integrating technology is and explain why it isn't working in an effective way. Following my discussion of why the current system isn't working, I will discuss how the integration of technology in the public classroom has resulted in a surge of new online testing, why this not an effective or productive usage of technology as an education resource, and the increased burden that this places on the demanding responsibilities that are already given to public school teachers. Finally, I will conclude with a call for action in preventing further misappropriation of public school funding.

### **Technology In The Classroom Has Potential For Success**

When incorporated into the classroom effectively, online media has the potential to become a valuable tool for both teachers and students as they collaborate in the learning process. David Considine, Julie Horton and Gary Moorman, the authors of "Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy," argue that current level of media used in common high school curriculums is not extensive *enough*,

and that it is a mistake to disregard technology as a hindrance to education<sup>1</sup>. Although this article makes some convincing arguments, it fails to acknowledge the negative aspects of technology in the classroom. It emphasizes that it is an error on the part of the school system to overlook media as an asset and criticizes what these authors consider an existing small presence in the common curriculum. However, the authors do not present how online media in the classroom in some cases can be a distraction or at the very least, less effective than traditional methods of instruction such as written or oral lectures, and classroom discussions.

In order to support their claims that more online media is necessary in this classroom, the article provides an example of a model that effectively integrates media into the common curriculum. They present the T.A.P. (Text, Audience and Production) model, which is a system by which educators can engage and instruct students through both traditional and contemporary methods of media<sup>2</sup>. This model bridges the gap between the millennial way of thinking and the pre-Information Age method of education. They acknowledge that this method could be considered time consuming, but argue that the learning process that the students experience is the actual lesson and as a result of this learning process, the students will be able to create an organized source of information on the topic they are researching. This model holds potential for the future in appropriating technology in the classroom, because it acknowledges and addresses that there are multiple forms of media that are effective, not all of which are technology based.

In a rapidly changing world it is important to recognize when a new system can

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<sup>1</sup> David Considine, "Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no.6 (March 2009): 471-472

<sup>2</sup> Considine, "Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation," 475

be more effective than an old one, but it equally important to recognize that old systems retain value and can be used to create efficient methods that evolve with technology. Considine says, “These technologies have created an increasingly complex environment that millennials must navigate. In addition, their extensive use of ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) often creates a false sense of competency, as well as the misperception among many adults that contemporary youth are ‘media savvy.’ Hands on is not the same as heads on.”<sup>3</sup> Considine and his colleagues fully endorse integrating these new forms of multimedia based technology into the classroom and although they do not explicitly expose the current problems with the level of technology in our public school system, they recognize that we must take caution when altering the education environment, especially with today’s technology oriented youth.

Despite the authors’ disregard of important arguments regarding the negative aspects of technology in the classroom, their T.A.P. model holds potential as an applicable method for appropriately using technology in the classroom. The most important claim this article emphasizes is in the concluding statements, where the authors call upon the reader to be accountable for creating change in our school system. “As teachers, we must help all students to analyze and evaluate each media message for text, context, and impact to produce more knowledgeable, creative, and cooperative citizens for the Global Village.”<sup>4</sup>

As technology becomes increasing prevalent in our personal and professional lives, we must remain objective about its value. Although it is tempting to be attracted to socially successful trends, such as iPads, we must separate our personal biases and

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<sup>3</sup> Considine, “Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation,” 472

<sup>4</sup> Considine, “Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation,” 480

acknowledge when technology is valuable as a multimedia asset for teachers, and when it becomes an unnecessary usage of taxpayer dollars in the classroom. It is crucial that we come together as a global community and recognize that the world that public school students live in is rapidly changing. Legislators, educators, administrators and the public cannot disregard this, despite the intrinsic challenges that come with this technological change in classroom structure.

### **Current Technological Integration Doesn't Work For Teachers or Students**

In the education world, currently the most common method of technological integration is the “top-down” method, where state legislators and district superintendents mandate strict changes in both classroom technology infrastructure and online testing. This method, however, has been proven to be ineffective. Dominik Petko and his colleagues tested four different methods of implementing technology infrastructure in classrooms, such as computers, by evaluating significant classroom changes in seven different categories. The study's categories included various categories based on teachers' own assessment of their personal ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) proficiency, students' ICT proficiency, and finally, the motivation to use ICT infrastructure by both teachers and students as well as the frequency with which computers were used in the classroom. They discovered through a teacher questionnaire and other observations that the “top-down” approach, that is most common, must be statistically rejected as the most effective method for achieving the best results in their categories. However, Petko and his colleagues also rejected a second method, a participatory “bottom-up” and without a “top-down” strategy, because there were not only no significant differences in education, but there were actually negative effects on

the classroom environments. There was less technology overall in the classrooms that participated in this second method and both teachers and students were dissatisfied with the state of the changed classroom computer infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> Increasing the number of computers in the classroom did not improve the attitudes of the teachers or the students regarding changing policies on technology. Creating a classroom set of Chrome books, for example, is not a valid use of these funds because administrators, legislators and educators have not yet fully developed an integration method that is advantageous to the public school system classrooms. If neither teachers nor students benefit from increased technology infrastructure, legislators and district superintendents should stop financing these integration programs with taxpayer dollars.

A combined effort of teachers' own contributions and mandated administrative changes was evaluated to be the most effective method for integration of computer infrastructure and online testing in this study. The most positive result that Petko and his colleagues found was a combination of "top-down" and "bottom-up" integration, and was partially confirmed by the study. Teachers were overall more satisfied because they were able to control the types of interaction in the classroom, and students' reactions also improved with this process.<sup>6</sup> Petko's study demonstrates that when technology is incorporated into the classroom with the assistance of a teacher, the results are more successful than a forced update from departments such as the district office or state legislators because these divisions aren't necessarily involved with the students' daily education, or at least not as intimately as kindergarten through twelfth grade educators are.

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<sup>5</sup> Petko, Domink, "Digital media adoption in schools: Bottom-up, top-down, complementary or optional?" *Computers & Education* 84, (May 2015): 49-61

<sup>6</sup> Petko, Domink, "Digital media adoption in schools," 55

It is essential, however, to acknowledge that none of the four attempted methods in Petko's study were completely confirmed to be effective. Although a combined effort creates a partially successful integration of technology into the classroom, none of the current integration methods are entirely efficient. As our education communities progress in the development of ICT in the classroom, they must be aware that a new method of technology assimilation is necessary to create a positive learning experience for both teachers and students. It is crucial that our public school leaders and legislators listen to teachers as we move forward in this integration process in order to create a successful program involving technology infrastructure and online media. Throughout this process of development, it is our teachers who will carry the largest burden and who will be essential in determining what can be useful for educators, and what is a hindrance to the learning process.

In addition to the newly proposed and administered methods of technology integration, the current usage of technology in the classroom that has already been integrated, such as iPads and online testing, hasn't been proven to improve the education of public school students either. Matt Richtell of the New York Times discusses his visit and research of the Kyrene School District in Arizona in his article "In Classroom of Future, Stagnant Scores." The article's title is indicative of what Richtell encountered in the elementary school classrooms of Kyrene; a \$33 million investment in technology, while the district's math and reading scores remain at a similar level to the years before this implementation. While this district has received praise for its twenty-first century classrooms from the National School Boards Association and has been visited by one hundred educators from seventeen states, it is extremely important to mention that the

overall average scores in reading and math in Arizona public schools have risen, while Kyrene stays stagnant.<sup>7</sup> This is an example of the effects of integration without proof, and demonstrates that the current actions taken by school district leaders and legislators are wasting taxpayer dollars with little or negative results.

Despite the significant interest from state legislators and national education groups in investing tens of millions of state tax dollars into these developing integration and new curriculums, there is little proof that this onslaught of iPads and tablets will improve our public school system and further the education of public school students. And, from what we have seen from either actual case studies or scholarly experimentation, this approach of integrating iPads and tablets is either no more effective than traditional methods of teaching without technology, and can even be distracting from the overall learning experience of students. Our legislators and district officials must carefully evaluate which investments will benefit our students, and which investments are simply shiny and new.

### **An Increased Burden On Teachers**

As teachers attempt to adapt to these mandated changes, it becomes a significant issue in the classroom partly because there is a huge increase in the already extensive realm of teacher responsibility. Susan Meabon Bartow surveyed five teachers and concluded that technology is generally a disruption to the current high school classroom. One of the interviewees, Ms. Patel, finds that her new role as information updater has increased her responsibilities immensely, especially concerning social media. Other

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<sup>7</sup> Richtell, Matt. "In Classroom of Future, Stagnant Test Scores," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2011

teachers found that their burden increased for different reasons and with different effect, but an increased burden nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> The purpose for developing these new methods is not to make a difficult job, teaching in the public education system, more demanding; the purpose is to improve the learning experiences of students in this system. It is necessary that this development is a two-piece process, where both teachers and students approve, because without benefits for both teachers and students, a program cannot be considered an effective integration.

When discussing developments in technology we must also consider which schools in a public school district will receive the new programs, and the socioeconomic status of these schools. Although it is rarely considered a major issue by district leaders and legislators, often times it is only the wealthy schools within a district that are given the opportunity to work with these advances in education. Bartow articulates that "although formal education is but one factor impacting digital divides, whatever vibrancy is happening outside its boundaries will increasingly be available to those with access and transformative benefits the purview of only the more able and affluent."<sup>9</sup> In conjunction with Bartow's concerns with affluence and preferred schools for adaptation, I strongly believe that the public school system should not be a place where outside big business and other powerful groups enter the already low-budgeted public school system to benefit their own financial status. If only affluent students benefit, no significant progress is made because in general, it is the impoverished students in our public education system that need the most additional resources to improve their learning experience. New discrepancies have been created in our public education curriculum by allowing only

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Meabon Bartow, "Teaching with Social Media: Disrupting Present Day Public Education," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 1 (January 2014):49-50

<sup>9</sup> Bartow, "Teaching with Social Media," 41

certain groups of students, often socioeconomic groups, to use these new assets, we as civically engaged citizens are doing a disservice to the currently existing groups of disadvantaged students.

The most prevalent current trend in public school usage of technology is increased online testing, which is an added burden for both teachers and students. Teachers must take the time to teach this new method of testing and administer these tests, and students must make the effort to prepare for these exams, in addition to the previously existing curriculums. Jill Thackeray, as previously mentioned, is a teacher at Skyline High School in Salt Lake City, and is beginning her twenty-fourth year in the Utah public school system teaching English and Language Arts. Thackeray has been a vocal advocate for abolishing these mandated online tests, and has even been able to fight the school district and get her Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate students exempt from these tests. As Thackeray has argued time after time, the information provided by these tests is not useful, yet our teachers are still mandated by the district leaders and state legislators, who do not collaborate with students on a daily basis or at the very least do not have the personal relationships that teachers do, to incorporate these test into their already limited class time. “Our educational system is so interesting, as we make these advances in technology that could really do good things, we just go backwards in time and continue to do things that just don’t work, like test, test, test.”<sup>10</sup> As Considine argues, technology has a place in the classroom with multimedia tools like the T.A.P. model, however, the present movement for increasing mandated online tests is becoming harmful to the public school classroom and more importantly, the people within the public school system.

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<sup>10</sup>Thackeray, Jill. “Interview with Rachel Jepsen.” Jepsen, Rachel. August 10, 2015

Technology in the classroom should be an asset to teachers as they prepare our students for their future endeavors. The most important aspect to consider is how well these new, burdensome exams evaluate student intelligence. While a score reflects how prepared a student is for a particular exam or testing environment, it provides little to nothing about his or her overall abilities<sup>111213</sup>. Instead, it is often a hindrance and is causing resentment from both students and teachers as they struggle to adapt to a system that is ineffective.

An interesting and disturbing aspect of these tests is that the large textbook companies, such as McGraw Hill and Pearson, are making money off of them. As Jill says, “I don’t believe that public education should be a place that should be used to make loads of money. To me it goes against everything that public education is supposed to be. Can you imagine if teachers were doing things in their classrooms where they were profiting off of their students? Those teachers would be fired.”<sup>14</sup> As educators’ and the general public’s concern about increased mandates for online tests grows, we must examine who is responsible for this growing presence and evaluate the true usefulness of these exams.

### **Increasing Online Standardized Tests Is Not A Solution**

Although there is concern among the educator community about increased online

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<sup>11</sup> Leistyna, Pepi, “Corporate Testing: Standards, Profits, and the Demise of the Public Sphere.” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 73

<sup>12</sup> Kohn, Alfie, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: raising the scores, running the schools.* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000)

<sup>13</sup> Sturrock, Carrie, “States distort school test scores, researchers say. Critics say California among those that lower standards for No Child Left Behind.” *The Chronicle*, June 30, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Thackeray, “Interview,” August 10, 2015

standardized testing (Kohn, Thackeray, Lesitryna), there has been a considerable increase in the amount of tests our public students are given. In the last fifty years, testing has increased 3000%<sup>15</sup>. This shocking percentage is indicative of the direction our public school system is going, and after the introduction of No Child Left Behind, these tests have become increasingly present in the classroom. A troubling aspect, however, is the profit-based industry that exists as a result of this surge in online standardized testing. In 2006, public schools were giving almost 50 million tests a year to students Kindergarten through twelfth grade, and this market was valued between \$400 and \$700 million<sup>16</sup>. As Jill Thackeray expressed in my interview with her, corporate businesses should not be making money in the public school system, and if other entities besides these large textbook companies attempted to take a profit from the public school system, they would be promptly denied. Yet, this multimillion-dollar industry exists, and is depriving our students of resources that would otherwise improve the value of a public education, for example multimedia programs such as the T.A.P. model.

No Child Left Behind, an outdated and ineffective program, has assisted these corporations in taking control of the school system for a profit, and has damaged the integrity of the public school system by promoting this increase in standardized online testing. Although this program has been adjusted since its created in the Bush era, “the political machinery behind No Child Left Behind has effectively disguised the motivations of a profit-driven industry.”<sup>17</sup> Teachers are forced to take valuable class time and effort to instruct students with these new tests, and if they do not comply or succeed with these new mandates, they are punished and can even lose their jobs. It is concerning

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<sup>15</sup> Frontline, “The testing industry’s big four.” *Public Broadcasting Service (2006)*.

<sup>16</sup> Frontline, “The testing industry’s big four.” *Public Broadcasting Service (2006)*.

<sup>17</sup> Leistyna, Pepi, “Corporate Testing,” 65

that a federally mandated program can cause teachers enough distress that they would falsify their students' scores in order to keep their jobs. Damany Lewis, a math teacher at Parks middle school in Atlanta, felt that he needed to protect their students from these exams, and that he couldn't "let the state slap them in the face and say they're failures."<sup>18</sup> After administering the state-mandated test, he and a colleague retreated to an office and sat in silence, erasing and re-writing bubbles for an hour. If our teachers are reduced to these demeaning methods, something is outrageously wrong with our current methods of education. Teachers cannot teach material if there is consumed by teaching to these tests, and students clearly are not learning.

In addition to failing our students by devaluing their education, increasing standardized tests has produced a massive opportunity for corporate greed, as I briefly mentioned before. Although No Child Left Behind is not as current an issue as it was six or seven years ago, the precedents it set for corporate and federal online testing were fundamental in causing the currently declining state of our public school system. Not only have we created a demeaning and ineffective system for evaluating our students, but we have also cheapened the job of public school teachers to nothing more than a translator between students and computers. By reducing a teacher's value to a fixed amount of subject matter knowledge, the online testing industry has specified the required skills with these new policies. The public school system is no longer concerned with how our students and teachers learn, and whether this is effective or not, and is now only concerned with what material is learned.<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that the creators of these online tests, corporate textbook companies who created a multimillion-

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<sup>18</sup> Aviv, Rachel. "Wrong Answer: In an era of high-stakes testing, a struggling school made a shocking choice." *The New Yorker*, July 21, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Leistyna, Pepi, "Corporate Testing," 65

dollar business in the public school system sector, determine the material that goes on the test.

As we move forward in the development and usage of online testing, it is crucial that we demand accountability not only from our teachers, but from our public as well. Informing the public and educating oneself about this reality, that is, the privatization of the public school system, is the moral obligation of the civically concerned individual. Although there is already unnecessary pressure on our public school teachers, it is important that they continue to protest these mandates and advise the public to do the same.<sup>20</sup> This burden is placed on individual students and teachers, but more importantly, it is placed on the public school system as a whole, and is diminishing the worth of this invaluable establishment. Leistyna powerfully explains how morally wrong it is to allow these tests to take over public classrooms:

“Leaving public education in the hands of for-profit corporations would be like letting HMOs and pharmaceutical and insurance companies tell doctors what to do; it would be like letting Exxon/Mobil and construction companies like Halliburton make decisions about whether or not this nation goes to war.”

This corporate takeover is an unacceptable misappropriation of technology in the classroom, and should not be allowed by our legislators, teachers, and public citizens.

### **Concluding Statements**

Although there has been significant interest in increasing the amount of technology in schools from both the public and scholarly world, there is little evidence that this works and a large outcry from teachers and others in the education public system to stop throwing money into something that is not yet fully developed in an effective

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<sup>20</sup> Leistyna, Pepi, “Corporate Testing,” 75

way. Our state legislators, district administration, and their corporate counterparts continue to try the same methods and expect different results, while blaming the teachers for a level of incompetency that is in reality caused by their irresponsible investments. A continuing dialogue needs to exist before any more education-altering measures are taken that effect our school system on such a severe level. Near the end of my interview with Jill Thackeray, she stated something that reminded me why this conversation about the future of education is so important.

“A teacher in the front of the classroom engaged with students, fuels students and fuels teachers, and that creates a good environment, and that’s where people learn. It’s not always about things on paper, or I guess the computer now, or even the things on the test. It’s about being human and being compassionate, having understanding, and learning to get along with people, and computers can’t test that.”<sup>21</sup>

Allowing textbooks companies, and other self-interested advocates of increasing expensive technology, to take over public classrooms in the name of corporate greed is unacceptable.

Despite the existing surge in social popularity in online media and technology, the public classroom is not a place where we should be testing its effectiveness. We cannot risk the education of our public school students for the sake of research of something that has not yet been developed effectively. Teachers, students and the global community will suffer if further action is not soon taken to minimize the ineffective, costly aspects of new computers and online testing in the classroom. We must maximize tools that make both teaching for teachers and learning for students easier. Until there is proof that our current method of technological integration works, we should not continue to force this burden on our already overburdened public school system.

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<sup>21</sup> Thackeray, “Interview,” August 10, 2015

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