Technology in Classrooms: A Cautionary Tale

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The Jennings School District bought more than 2,500 hand-held computers back in 2006. Now, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports, the district is getting rid of them. They were purchased with high hopes:

Students could use them to graph math equations, take notes, draw charts, and even, coupled with external probes, measure temperature and pH.

The north St. Louis County school district, now with about 3,100 students, bought one machine for each third- through 12th-grader.

Jennings made two mistakes when it bought all those devices. First, it didn't have a specific purpose for the technology. The things students could have done with the computers, like taking notes and studying equations, were tasks they could do already with pencils or calculators. Teachers aren't going to adopt new technology when the old technology does the job just as well. It's no wonder most teachers said they didn't use the computers and don't intend to use them.
Second, the district bought the computers for too many students. It would have made more sense to introduce the devices to one grade, and wait for results before giving them to other grades.

Districts can easily get carried away by dreams of quick technological fixes, so I don't blame Jennings for being so ambitious. What's puzzling is that Jennings doesn't seem to have learned from what happened. The district plans to get rid of the devices by giving them away to graduating students over the course of several years, even though the devices are almost obsolete and will probably be worthless in a year or two. It's like Jennings can't give up on its expectation that students will use the computers — if not in school, then after they graduate.

Jennings should sell the computers once and for all. And remember the moral of the story: More gadgets aren't always better.

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