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The Best Ways to Use Technology in Private Schools
An Interview with Steve Bergen of Summercore

By Blythe Grossberg, About.com Guide

I interviewed Steve Bergen of Summercore about how independent schools can best use new technology to help students learn. Founded in 1982 by Steve Bergen and Lynne Schalman, Summercore has helped more than 3,000 teachers and administrators from over 550 independent schools integrate technology into their curricula.

Steve Bergen has been a technology educator for over 30 years. In addition to serving as head of the math department at Wooster School in Danbury, Connecticut, and as the Computer Coordinator for Concord Academy and The Noble and Greenough School, in addition to other schools, Steve is the Executive Director and co-founder of The Tech International Charter School, grade 6-8 school in the Bronx, New York. He has lectured on technology topics for the National Association of Independent Schools, or NAIS, and at hundreds of schools throughout the country.

Child with iPad
Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Question: What are some of the newest technologies being implemented by independent schools, and what is the right way to implement them?

Steve Bergen: More than software and hardware, the most important thing is the word "humanware," a term I made up in the 1980s way before we had the Web. The question is: What are the kids and teachers actually doing with the stuff? For example, schools have SMART Boards, but they're not really being used in the right way. They are mainly being used as projector screens. They are wonderful technology, but they don't get used well because schools don't spend money on professional development. The SMART Board can create an interactive environment in which teachers and kids are modifying stuff. There are activities galore in English, math, science, and other areas, and kids can even create SMART Board lessons. The reason it doesn't happen is because schools don't spend money on professional development.

Another promising form of technology is the iPad. The advantage of using an iPad over a laptop is that there's no hiding. Kids can hide behind laptops in the classroom. With the iPad, that can't happen. The iPad is a phenomenal computer. Schools are doing neat things with iPads. For example, kids can use it to do research. With iPads, kids can get differentiated instruction. Kids can use iPads to make videos to share with international partners. They can also create blogs to see their words published and share them around the world.

Question: What helps teachers implement technology effectively?

Steve Bergen: Professional development helps teachers use technology effectively. There are two approaches to professional development. For example, you can teach sixth and seventh graders different skills on the SMART Board, including how to create a lesson, move Web pages, and create interactive tools. Their homework is to find a teacher and spend 15-20 minutes with the teacher. When a sixth grader comes up, the teacher will say yes to learning how to use the SMART Board; a teacher won't be rude to a sixth grader. A computer is like a violin. You can't just give the average person an instrument and expect good things to happen. The person only gets skills if someone is helping and supporting and teaching.

The other way to do professional development is to identify a good person who meets regularly with faculty once a week. If a person who is knowledgeable has a one-period time slot once a week with a teacher, the teacher will start to take advantage of the time. The school has to say, let's stop spending money on the latest and greatest technology and make sure teachers can use it through creative ways to train them. Schools can bring someone from the outside or have a person on staff train teachers. It has to get done. Professional development has to be part of the flow of the day.

Question: How can students use technology to enhance their learning?

Steve Bergen: Everyone born before 1984 is a digital immigrant. They grew up without many computers. But kids today have always had computers. They have relationships with computers that adults can't always have.

But to learn from technology, kids have to push the envelope. The Web is basically a magazine. Do you want kids just looking at magazines? People do that at medical offices in the waiting room. Who thinks that should happen at a school? That's not using technology. That's flipping through magazines. Kids have to learn stuff and then create, or demonstrate. There is a time for recreation. Kids have to use technology to create material and get smarter at subject matters. These two areas compete at times. There's nothing wrong with drills, or using computers to get the child to be smarter. There's also nothing wrong with open-ended multi-media projects. Computers are for both teaching skills and for creating.

Question: How can parents best teach kids to use technology well?

Steve Bergen: Parents need to be in partnership with schools. Schools need to encourage parents to be involved. Most parents are clueless about cell phones, pictures, and Facebook. Schools should teach parents--they are interested and want to know more. A school needs to see the parent body as part of professional development as well so parents get smarter about technology--for example, about security issues and what's appropriate for Facebook. It's a win-win for schools to do parent workshops. Getting parents to be more savvy about technology helps kids.

The bottom line is that technology is exciting. Each year, we get more people to understand that computers can support differentiated learning--that is, letting kids work at the level they are capable of.