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In 2006, the Michigan Department of Education mandated that all high school students have some form of online instruction in order to graduate. The requirement may have seemed progressive at the time: the thinking was that our students would be better prepared to work in our information economy if they had at least some experience taking classes on the web. The requirement also fit well with both national and state technology frameworks, and was broad enough to include a range of possibilities. Online learning was, in the generous definition provided by the Department, "a structured learning activity that utilizes technology with intranet/ internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research, assessment, and communication." The Department suggested that online learning could occur in a number of ways, including self-paced online courses, teacher-facilitated technology instruction in face-to-face courses, and a kind of hybrid called blended instruction (Michigan Department of Education, 2006).

The explosion of smart phones and tablets has made the notion of learning life-long technology skills—a core principle of Michigan's online education requirement—both redundant and ridiculous.

In blended instruction, teachers meet less frequently with students, using online course management tools to expand and reinforce what they teach in the actual classroom. In theory, blended instruction offers the best of both worlds, letting students proceed independently while allowing the teacher to deal with difficult concepts in person.

But as with many cases involving educational technology, the rhetoric about blended instruction is not rooted in reality. First, research on online education in general has been ambivalent at best. A 2010 meta-analysis conducted by the National Department of Education reviewed thousands of studies and found that in high school settings, online learning—including blended instruction—is no more effective than face-to-face instruction. Notably, the same study did conclude that blended instruction can work at the university level, but only when students are given ample time to complete tasks, are provided additional materials, and are allowed to collaborate with other students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Beyond the scant research supporting blended instruction in secondary contexts, the mandate ignores socioeconomic difference, a key factor in any discussion of educational technology. Most suburban students have nearly constant access to technology: they spend more time on the web than they do watching television. The explosion of smart phones and tablets has made the notion of learning life-long technology skills—a core principle of Michigan's online education requirement—both redundant and ridiculous. These largely affluent students are already proficient at "accessing, analyzing, and evaluating information resources" and "incorporating communication skills" (Regional Education Media Center, 2006). Have you seem them on Facebook? Or texting their friends?

Most urban students, on the other hand, have less access to and less experience with web technology. And while the digital divide is narrowing, it is a reality that students of color and students from low-income homes are still disadvantaged when it comes to learning the 21st Century skills lauded by most technology frameworks. Teens with white, college-educated parents who make over $50,000 still have the best and most frequent Internet access (Purcell, 2011).

Blended instruction will do little to correct this inequality. Here in Michigan, in fact, blended instruction has been used to cut budgets in impoverished districts. This is the case in the Grand Rapids Public School District, where four of five public high schools are chronic underperformers on standardized tests, graduation rates, attendance, and other achievement measures. In the face of budget cuts, Grand Rapids Public has recently integrated blended instruction core courses, beginning with sociology and math. Students taking such courses typically receive a mix of teacher-led instruction, teacher-guided computer use, and solitary computer working time. The move saves the district money, allows it to continue operating for another year, but has been opposed by teachers, parents, and the Grand Rapids Education Association.

They argue, rightly, that struggling students need the best teachers; that blended instruction shortchanges teacher autonomy; that difficult subjects demand face-to-face instruction; and that the schools currently lack both the hardware and the teacher expertise to be successful in implementing blended instruction.

Meanwhile, in the suburban Grandville High School, blended instruction courses provide nearly three times as much teacher interaction and make use of the wealth of technology resources available on campus. This for students who, for the most part, are already technologically literate.

There is no doubt that Michigan high school graduates must be prepared to use a range of technologies—and particularly the ever-changing hardware and software associated with the Internet. But there is a crucial difference between learning—under the guidance of an expert teacher—how to write an algebra application for a tablet PC, and sitting in a computer lab, clicking through a skill-and-drill content module on the quadratic formula.

For this first scenario to happen, Michigan does need a few changes.

We need to train our pre-service and in-service teachers to use technology effectively in all disciplines. This can happen in our colleges of education, in the intermediate school districts, and in the state certification and continuing education processes. We also need our administrators to become more fluent in soliciting the public and the private sectors to fund the hardware and software many schools desperately need. We should also drop the attitude that suggests that, when it comes to technology, urban kids need to walk before they can run. Instead, give them iPads

and watch them run. And finally, urban and suburban schools alike must resist so-called appropriate use policies, which are meant to govern online interaction but end up greatly restricting student access to the learning tools of today and tomorrow—social networks, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and more.

Making these systemic changes, of course, is more difficult than handing down policies. And much, much more important.

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