Policy Brief

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Introduction

Despite the face of public education in British Columbia, and much of the larger world as a whole, changing and adapting as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, growing and developing utilization of educational technology has not been universal.

Please Explain

Despite widespread changes in the way which educational learning opportunities have been presented in the wake of the global pandemic, not every learning organization has been quick to adapt to the changing learning needs of their students. Regardless of the growing importance surrounding the availability of technology in classrooms, there have been a number of public education institutions that have not adequately met the needs of the changing educational landscape.

Photo courtesy of Hans News Service © 2019

In B.C.'s Fraser Valley, the most obvious of these has been the Chilliwack School District (SD33). When being compared to neighboring communities, SD33 has dramatically underinvested into their digital and technological resources, contributing significantly to what many researchers refer to as the "digital divide." Despite enjoying some of the most significant population growth throughout all Canadian municipalities, (Statistics Canada, 2021) infrastructure investment, including education (and more specifically digital resources for education) has not followed suit.

This brief will highlight findings from a variety of sources, and thereby further illustrate the need for SD33 to further invest funds into desperately needed technology, as well as the subsequent training(s) required surrounding these information and computing technologies (ICT).

Research Methods

A qualitatively based approach was utilized to analyze a variety of financial statements from three neighboring school districts. These included the Chilliwack School District (SD33), Abbotsford School District (SD34), Langley School District (SD35). Ranked 3rd on this list regarding student population, the 2022-23 *Statement of Financial Information(SOFI)* from Chilliwack highlighted the discrepancy between it and the other school districts, regarding technology spending.

THE 'DIGITAL DIVIDE'

Still frequently understood in terms of a hardware divide, often as a result of a lack of resources and funding.

The *Digital Divide* encompasses three major dimensions: motivation, possessions and skills:

Motivation- defined as the individual's attitudes towards learning ICT & the willingness to devote effort to the acquisition of ICT skills.

Possessions- Refers to the actual availability of and access to ICT devices.

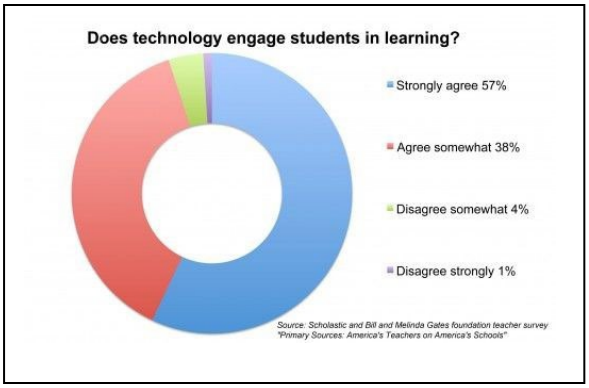
Skills- The individual's ability to deal with ICT devices, but also the availability of help and support in their social network.

- Source: Lebens, M. Graff, M. & Mayer, P. (2009) "Access, Attitudes and the Digital Divide: Children's Attitudes Towards Computers in a Technology Rich Environment." *Educational Media International* 46(3), 255-266.

To ensure consistency, SOFI information was compared from the same school/fiscal year and line items were measured directly against each other

within each school district. As a result, inequities in spending per student were made clear and further showed the gap in financial expenditures between school districts regarding classroom and student access to technology.

Findings



In the 2022-23 school year, SD33 invested less than 65 dollars per student in terms of digital hardware resources, roughly approximating only 40% of the financial total of neighboring school districts SD34 and SD35. This investment in technology in the neighboring school districts echoes Hall (2024) that policy-makers sometimes express hope that more technology in education will also lead to greater equality in education outcomes.

This is clearly demonstrated when viewing Grade 12 *completion rates, as* well as post-secondary preparedness and *acceptance rates* between the three highlighted school districts.

Statistics on the BC Ministry of Education *Student Success* website echo this sentiment: Chilliwack has a trending 88% Grade 12 completion rate, with only 75% of indigenous students graduating which is decidedly low, when compared to Abbotsford and Langley with 93% and 95% completion rates respectfully, and indigenous learners also enjoying higher rates of graduation at 82% and 88%.

This trend is extended when viewing statistics regarding entrance to BC post-secondary institutions: only 42% of SD33 students enter post-secondary, while 55% of SD34 students and 56% of

SD35 students enter some form of post-secondary in BC.

Table 1: Grade 12 Completion Rates and Post -Secondary Entrance in B.C.'s Fraser Valley

District	Completion Rate (%)	Indigenous (%)	Post-Secondary (%)
SD33	88	75	42
SD34	93	82	55
SD35	95	88	56

These grade 12 completion rates and post-secondary entrances in the above table show a direct correlation between long-term academic success and proactive educational spending, including funding specifically targeted towards computer technology. It is stated that 90% of empirical studies have found an overall positive effect of increased school spending (Jackson, 2021) including in technological spending, and that policies, (including proposition to increase digital spending in SD33) are linked directly to higher student outcomes, including high school completion and post-secondary entrance.

Photo courtesy of Abbyschools.ca/digital learning

Conclusion

As a result, despite claims that using financial resources to invest in technology will come at the expense of other inputs that can also affect learning (Hall, 2024) it has become increasingly difficult to refute the overwhelming importance of technology and digital education in today's global landscape. As such, educational institutions like SD33 need to modernize and embrace the importance of computers and classroom technology in the everyday lives of their students. Otherwise, if they continue to fail to do so, it will only continue to put their students in an increasingly disadvantaged position.

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