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The rapid spread of computers in schools has been widely promoted as a great step forward. In truth, it is putting today's students at greater risk than ever.

Award-winning journalist Todd Oppenheimer reports on how the rampant misuse of technology is dumbing down the academic experience, corrupting the schools' financial integrity, and fostering a defective federal education policy.

THE FLICKERING MIND

The False Promise of Technology in the Classroom and How Learning Can Be Saved

Todd Oppenheimer,
National Magazine Award-winning journalist

In **THE FLICKERING MIND: The False Promise of Technology in the Classroom and How Learning Can Be Saved** (Random House / On sale: October 14, 2003 / Publication date: October 21, 2003), journalist Todd Oppenheimer explores a new crisis in American education. To an institution struggling to handle its most basic responsibilities, education and political leaders have now offered their biggest and most expensive promise ever—the miracle of computers and the Internet, at a cost of some \$70 billion just during the decade of the 1990s. In this news-breaking account, Oppenheimer reports that technology is doing far more harm than good, by shrinking the academic experience, opening the schools to manipulation by industry, and furthering the deterioration of children's ability to reason and imagine. According to Oppenheimer, every time we computerize a science class or shut down a music program to pay for new hardware, we lose sight of the fundamentals of learning. "We are breeding generations that are teetering between two possible directions," he writes. "In

one, today's youngsters have a chance to become confident, thoughtful masters of the modern tools of their day. They can also become the victims of commercial novelties...whose ability to reason, to listen, to feel empathy, among many other things, is quite literally flickering."

Oppenheimer crisscrossed the country for three years—from Harlem and the hollows of West Virginia to the wealthy suburbs of Washington, D.C. and San Francisco—investigating dozens of public schools considered leaders in the way they use classroom technology. Poring through reams of literature and interviewing hundreds of teachers and education leaders, Oppenheimer carefully sorts through the subject's two polarized camps—one of which sees technology as education's messiah while the other treats it like the modern plague.

Through a collection of vivid school portraits, and investigations of surrounding trends that shape these schools, **THE FLICKERING MIND** tackles a wide landscape. Oppenheimer not only explores the many ways teachers struggle to adjust to technology's rapid and chaotic changes, but he also details how the technology industry is corrupting both the financial and intellectual foundations of educational institutions across the country. He demonstrates how all too often, schools spend scarce resources on machinery that is soon to be obsolete; now, they're investing in costly but faulty computerized systems that assess student achievement, to follow new rules from the Bush Administration. In addition, Oppenheimer reveals that a federal program called the "E-rate," which has provided poor schools with roughly \$2.25 billion a year in subsidies for new Internet networks since 1996, has become a fertile ground for technology companies to inflate their costs and institute corrupt payment schemes that further drain school coffers.

Despite these shortcomings with technology, Oppenheimer finds, many school districts throughout the country have been cutting back on curricular mainstays to make room for still more computers. These mainstays include physical education programs, shop classes (ironically, a better preparation for technology jobs than time in front of a computer screen), art, and music programs—this despite firm proof that learning to play an instrument enlarges important areas of the brain. Forcefully, **THE FLICKERING**

MIND illustrates that with the states' growing budgetary problems, these curricular trade-offs are only getting worse.

Below are the most commonly heard selling points for computers in schools and what Oppenheimer discovered to be true in classrooms across the country:

False Promise: Computers prepare youngsters for the increasingly high-tech jobs of tomorrow.

Oppenheimer's findings: "Education's technology promoters have the situation backwards. Students actually do not need extensive computer experience to handle technology's challenges (employers prefer teaching most of those specific skills themselves). What employers do look for is an extensive set of people skills: the ability to listen and communicate; to think critically and imaginatively; to read, write, and figure; and many other capabilities that schools are increasingly neglecting." (Chapter 6, pp. 177-185.)

False Promise: Computers improve both teaching practices and student achievement.

Oppenheimer's findings: Educators, parents, and politicians frequently invest in new education programs, both high-tech and low-tech, based on highly questionable research put forth by the technology companies. For example, Renaissance Learning, the nation's largest purveyor of reading software, has built its success on what it maintains is a solid array of research proving that its programs increase student achievement; however, independent researchers have found their methods stunning in their dishonesty. (Chapter 9, pp. 259-263.)

False promise: Increasing the number of computers in the classroom will decrease the "digital divide" between the rich and the poor.

Oppenheimer's findings: For decades, most media attention on the subject of computers in schools has focused on efforts, led by both government and private interests, to close what's been called "the digital divide." (The term ostensibly describes the situation wherein poor children have less access to high technology than wealthy children do, and thus fall increasingly far behind.) In reality, this campaign has

increased the true divide between rich and poor, by putting poor students at further intellectual disadvantage. By and large, computers have given schools an easy way to neglect the hard work of teaching and learning, replacing it with shortcuts and high-tech tricks that have entranced both teachers and parents. What we've done, Oppenheimer argues, is "fool the poor with computers." Aggravating these intellectual inequities are continuing financial inequities in the schools, which have widened in recent years. (Chapter 2, pp. 62-95.)

False Promise: Computers are necessary to bring students valuable connections with a global education community.

Oppenheimer's findings: This pursuit operates on two fronts: through encouraging student research on the Internet, and through online "Distance Learning" courses—the latest craze in high-tech schooling. Despite the allure (and cost-effectiveness) of online courses, students frequently complain that these classes are not interesting, and only increase their sense of isolation. As for Internet research, problems of control here are serious. Schools are now required by law to purchase "filtering" software that protects children from illicit material. But many schools can't afford these systems, which can cost \$50,000 for a tiny district. When schools do pony up the cash for filtering systems, the software often doesn't work, and students regularly hack through it anyway. (Chapter 2, pp. 69-71; Chapter 3, 103-11; Chapter 8, 220-223.)

Oppenheimer concludes by examining a number of education's bright spots. Some are schools that concentrate computer use in the older grades, using them to teach students how computers actually work (an obvious but largely missed opportunity); some are schools that use computers only sparingly, as mere supplements to a curriculum that is steeped in the arts, in historical analysis and scientific inquiry, and other rich experiences that Oppenheimer calls "enlightened basics." **THE FLICKERING MIND** will not only contribute to a vital public conversation about what our schools can and should be—it will define the debate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Todd Oppenheimer won the 1998 National Magazine Award for his *Atlantic Monthly* story on this subject, and has received numerous other awards during roughly 25 years in journalism for both his writing and his investigative reporting. His articles have also appeared in such publications as *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *National Journal*. He lives in San Francisco.