State of the Nation: Western Australia

Mark Weber
ECAWA

It is interesting to reflect on where Information Technology (IT) in Western Australia is in relation to where it was ten, or indeed twenty years ago. In the mid 80’s, Western Australians prided themselves on being educational leaders in the field of Computers in Schools. The feeling here is that this lead has slipped, first to South Australia and the folk over at Angle Park, then Victoria and Queensland, and now maybe to Tasmania.

In an effort to position our students in a comparable position to others, our state government promised $100 000 000 over the next four years. The commitment was for primary schools to have a ratio of 10 students per computer and high school students to have a ratio of 5 students per computer.

With the injection of this government money, there has been an emphasis to have coherent, well thought out IT plans. Schools are required not only to plan for the physical hardware for a school site, but include a commitment to where it will be used in the achievement of educational objectives and how technology will be applied across the curriculum. Also, there is a requirement for a component of teacher training in the plan.

To this end, the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) has provided real leadership with a variety of initiatives. Such projects as Technology 2000, Train the Trainer, Tech Focus 2000 Project and others, have provided direction and support for government teachers in this state. They have insisted that such initiatives have web sites, and as a result, made this information available for remote schools and those in the private arena.

These initiatives have also involved the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), a facility which provides live-in accommodation and computers for teachers from both the city and the country. Teachers can come in from all around the state, stay on site, and put in intensive time learning with and about the new technologies. These facilities are available for anyone to hire, and ECAWA has availed itself of the accommodation to run its annual goal setting meetings.

EDWA has also made available to all government schools the Technology Planning file based on a Victorian document, reworked for a Western Australian focus.

This of course has meant the usual huge learning curve for those who are “lucky” enough to be IT coordinators. ECAWA, through its Flying Numbats, online listserv Echalk, web site Ecaweb and many conferences and workshops, has been to many parts of the state delivering it’s message of educational computing. ECAWA have also been proactive in identifying issues and have a think tank, the Computers in Education Special Interest Group, to investigate and report on developments.

The major issues we are looking at as a group at the moment include:
• What is a computer literate teacher?
• Is computer literacy a right or responsibility?
• What is the role of an IT Coordinator in the school?
• What is the role of an IT Coordinator in the school?
• Who sets the standards and conditions for IT teachers to work in?

A further question we will face in this state in the near future is that of IT competencies. It is already a condition of employment in some schools that teachers meet some criteria regarding IT. This will no doubt filter into the general arena, possibly in the next five years. There are a few issues to be thrashed out in this area, and ECAWA is pleased to be part of the ACCE initiative in contracting Dr. Graham Ferres to prepare a national position on this issue.

However, it must be remembered that there is an aging population in teaching. Some fear declining standards for entry into undergraduate education courses and increasing uncertainty as teachers no longer are given permanent tenure mean more able students in our secondary schools are rejecting education as a career. It may well be that future teachers may not be interested in developing advanced skills in computing or indeed IT.

Another issue that has surfaced in this state is that of Training versus Education. Training sits nicely in the Vocational Education realm, where classes of students all sit at individual machines and the instructor tells them when and how to open a file. Educators give the students tools and skills, and set up an environment for learning to take place. The question is where should a school emphasis lie?

Some administrators have the view that computing and IT will somehow serendipitously and magically permeate the teaching learning process, and that IT will take over or change the teaching style. There is a view that the future of IT and or Computing Coordinators is limited and somehow those who have put the time, commitment and passion into the introduction of these new technologies will go the way of Morse code operators. It will be interesting to see how the outcomes of this theory develops.

In conclusion, IT seems to be a lot healthier in this state going into the year 2000. The Numbats are encountering more teachers, especially in the primary service, forming a critical mass that embrace the technology. Schools have an emphasis on planning their IT and providing teacher training. Many primary schools have at least one class conducting a collaborative project like a travel buddy, and digital cameras are becoming “must have”. The EDWA and state government initiatives have provided real and meaningful IT development.

However, there is real concern for the long term future of not only technology education, but whether administrators can staff all areas relating to maths and sciences in the next ten years.