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Connecting some dots...and moving your cheese

*(Addressed to the district's Technology leader at the time)

The articles in this morning's Post, and then the discussion at today's *Leadership Team* meeting, prompt me to share some more 20,000 ft. thoughts -- this time in the form of some *good* news and some *bad*.

The good is that I feel your *pain*.(..and see some possibilities for dealing with it.)

The bad is that to get to the good, you have to understand what's really behind any push back you are, and will, feel as you begin to deal with system implementation issues -- especially around costs and priorities as you move to *district-wide* service.

One way of understanding this is to picture two tunnels. Each of these tunnels provides a powerful way of looking at and understanding the *work* of schools … and you have to determine which one to go down to get to the "cheese" you want.

Some call the choice you have to make between these two as content vs. process. Others, as curriculum vs. instruction. In terms of district priorities, they usually become "either-or" issues, and when resources are limited (which they always are in schools) it becomes a *zero-sum* game. And the "content/curriculum" one always wins because people looking down that tunnel see kids associated with it. In the other tunnel, they mostly see adults -- teachers, administrators and other staff. A seemingly easy choice to make if you "care about kids."

Now, in your case, in the first tunnel (content and curriculum) computers are dealt with as "content" -- ends in themselves. That's what the Post articles today were all about. In this tunnel, numbers of students per computer, and equity become strategic criteria. Training and curriculum integration are seen as major barriers to be overcome. And most district "strategic technology plans" mainly focus here also.

However, there is a fundamental difference at the end of the other tunnel (content-free instructional processes). There is a *different* cheese -- information.

This is the information that teachers (and the teaching process) critically needs to respond (as James aptly phrased it today)...not to bodies, but to *individual* children. And today, computers are the most effective and efficient means to make that information accessible when it is needed. This is not just to inform proactive "planning", but more significantly, to inform "actions" at the more frequent times when decisions must be reactive.

But what does this have to do with the issues I see that you will face?

"…and so these men of Indostan disputed loud and long.	Each in his own opinion Exceeding stiff and strong.	Though each was partly in the right, They all were in the wrong!"
		The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant

In some ways, the situation is similar to the one that emerged from the *Workforce Excellence* discussion today. As you recall, there is <u>no</u> research that can directly link staff development to student results because in any situation with multiple factors influencing it, changing just one has little sustained effect. But, because funders want "results" to justify costs, people keep trying harder to "prove" what's unproveable -- instead of, as Betsy I think suggested, *"working smarter."* Again, what does this have to do with your technology implementation concerns?

John, you know a little bit about my background in this area. And as someone involved with research on the effect of technology on learning since TV-in-the-classroom days, I've often wondered why no one looks at the three-word common conclusion across close to 45 years of major research studies about the effect of technology on learning -- i.e., technology (regardless of what type) produces *"No significant difference."*

This only drives technologists and researchers to try harder next time to prove what they believe should be just a common sense conclusion. After all, they've seen it work in other settings, and often have personal experience with its power to teach. What most (with the possible exception of Stanford professor and former Arlington VA superintendent Larry Cuban) are missing is that in the *context* around the technology that's producing that "no significant difference" result …<u>there is nothing that is different significantly</u>. As they say in the Internet world, "content may be king, but context is the kingdom."

Nevertheless, *this* tunnel -- with computers, the cheese at its end-- is the one that the rest of the world will be looking through when they have to make decisions about your priorities and budgets. The cheese they want is technology in the hands of kids.

So what might be a *working smarter* approach? The good news is that the cheese at the end of the tunnel you want to go down -- *information* -- has now become the cheese for several other major district efforts to drive data-down to the classroom and building for formative (instructional management) decision-making by students, teachers, principals and even parents. This includes, at a minimum, the formative component of the *SSA/R*, the pilot efforts to apply *Baldrige* criteria and processes to develop integrated learning management systems in classrooms, and the common core of information management skills that underlies the *90/90/90* approach.

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The strategic question this line of thinking this raises for me then deals with how - in the present context where each of these initiatives is being planned relatively independently -- can their *interdependence* be addressed? How can these other "information-needing" district strategies -- that aim to inform the teaching process-- become engaged with the possibilities that your systems offer as the <u>only</u> ways to make <u>them</u> *systemic* -- i.e., you offer them a capacity to reach <u>all</u> MCPS classrooms more quickly?

Naturally, I have some ideas for how to do get this started... but that's another issue.

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The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant