

## **Technology and the Teacher/Parent Relationship**

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When the personal computer first hit the market, it came with promises to make work easier, reduce paper use, and improve communication. Many teachers, especially those who are more “seasoned”, tend to feel that those promises have fallen far short of fulfillment. They will often complain that it is nearly impossible to keep abreast of the rapid developments in the world of technology, thus making their job much more difficult, especially when they are required to integrate this foreign component into their curriculum. The promise of reducing paper use has admittedly turned out to be a real joke in most cases. The ease of producing forms, reports, and other documents with the computer has led to an increased demand for “hard” copies of everything imaginable. Some would even assert that communication has not improved either. Their students frequent internet chat rooms where identities can be hidden, allowing conversations to pursue questionable content, and the participants use a jargon that is totally unintelligible to the uninitiated anyway.

Schools are now experiencing something that was unimagined ten years ago. There are now new teachers coming into our schools who grew up with the personal computer and it is as much a part of their lives as is the 3-ring binders and file cabinets to their older colleagues. This does not mean that the more experienced teacher is an outdated relic who should feel threatened by this new generation of teachers. It must never be forgotten that the personal computer is simply a tool that everyone can learn to use with varying degrees of skill. Software and internet programs have been developed that are so intuitive to use that many individuals rarely have to refer to the accompanying instruction manuals. In fact, many do not even include printed instruction manuals, but provide interactive help files. Even as I sit here composing this article, there is a little cartoon cat curled up in the corner of my screen waiting to be asked any questions I might have about the program I am using and will eagerly pounce with a suggestion if I do anything unusual.

It is simply the fear of the unknown that keeps some teachers from embracing this valuable tool. Our young students have no such fears and dive right in. Many adults are afraid that they will inadvertently “mess something up” if they do not possess the knowledge of a computer programmer or a software engineer. Children don’t worry about such things because they aren’t even aware that such people exist. They just go ahead and use the thing and become increasingly more proficient over time. Everyone knows what a hammer is used for and yet no amount of instruction will prepare a person to efficiently drive a nail with it. Only much practice and a few mashed thumbs enable one to wield a hammer with skill. So, dust off that keyboard and put the computer to work.

The Ontario Conference Office of Education has undertaken the initiative to make a technological tool available to all of the teachers in our conference schools. The initial setup cost was covered by the Office of Education technology fund and the affordable yearly maintenance fee is being shared between the Conference and the schools. This

new software is web-based and does not require schools to bear the expense and technological challenges of maintaining an on-site database. Using **RenWeb.com** enables parents to view student's grades and assignments on-line. The teachers record their grades, homework and lesson plans in this software package. The minute they record a grade, it is available to be seen on the Parent's Web Site!

Parents access only their child's information by logging into **www.renweb.com** and signing in with their unique password and email address. Now, when a child gets home from school, a parent can view his/her homework assignments on-line, rather than digging through backpacks or relying on his/her memory! This also comes in handy when students are absent for the day. Parents can also see how their child scored on a test taken earlier in the week, or quickly identify assignments not turned in.

Following are some other features offered on the site:

- Parents can take a school survey on-line .
- Parents can re-enroll on-line.
- Grades and averages are broken down by term, class and specific assignments/tests, including weighting.
- Student's attendance history.
- Student's daily homework assignments.
- Teacher's lesson plans.
- Teacher email address – point and click to send an email to a teacher.
- All-school announcements as well as calendar events.
- Specific teacher announcements and calendar events.
- Report cards.
- Community service records.
- Accounting information (tuition, fees, lunch charges, etc.).
- Parent Association information.

Teachers can also communicate with parents more often through emails, which they can access directly through their **RenWeb** grade books. They have the capability to send detailed progress reports weekly through emails. The many features of this program do

put some pressure on teachers to faithfully use it. For those who are “paper oriented”, it challenges them to make more use of their computers, but teachers quickly realize the benefits with improved communication and significant saving of time when preparing report cards.

We are definitely deep into an information age. Parents, students, and administrators expect timely, relevant, and complete information to be available at all times. This new tool that has been implemented in the Ontario and Alberta Conferences is one solution that is proving to benefit all concerned. Properly used, it will help make the teacher’s job easier, reduce paper use, and significantly improve communication between the home and school.