

## **Don't let computers distract us from good teaching**

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Education outcomes, not laptops, should be the centrepiece of Rudd's computers in schools policy.

Kevin Rudd has made computers in schools one of his first priorities. This is a truly valuable thing, and he should be applauded for it. But I hope he isn't so bedazzled by the technology that he compromises on the end result.

The goal, of course, is to give our students the best education possible. Unfettered access to the vast repository of information and ideas that is the Internet is a big part of this, as is building up general computer skills to equip them for the modern workplace.

Based on the election campaign, however, Mr Rudd appears to be taken with the idea of giving every child a laptop, which would not be the best way to deliver.

Firstly, laptops will soak up \$1 Billion dollars before you can blink. Compared to other devices laptops have high upfront prices and significantly higher ongoing costs. Being more complex and more fragile, they suffer breaks and faults more frequently, and being mobile, they have an unfortunate tendency to get lost and stolen.

Secondly, laptops top the list when it comes to the overheads of looking after them, and if people can drag their attention away from 'technology showcase' schools for just a second, they will find that we have a really big challenge in our public schools in securing the skills and resources to keep computers running. No one in politics talks about this, but 'looking after the computers' is all too often a job foisted upon some poor teacher who, not knowing what they were in for, volunteered to do it part time. In schools across the country this is a recipe for stress, frustration, lots of extra unpaid hours, and less than ideal education outcomes.

Rudd will get the best bang for buck by diverting more money into the fund set aside for networks to make sure every school gets, not just any old broadband Internet connection, but the very fastest connections available. Enough bandwidth so every child in every classroom can be awash in video, music, communication and creative work. This would make the most direct contribution to education outcomes, and it would be a long lasting investment.

This will also reduce the teacher resourcing problem. The world is right now changing the way it uses computers. The traditional scenario of buying and installing software is giving way to the notion of accessing software, and space for storing files, over the Internet. In my research I find business people consistently delighted with the results, because they are finally delivered from all the tedium associated with software installations, tweaking, fixes and updates. It lets them get on with, well, business. It also means any old computer with an Internet browser can access the richest applications out there—as long as it is plugged into a speedy network connection.

Having software managed centrally and accessed by schools over the Internet will free up teacher time, and the money will go further buying simpler devices, equipped with little more than an Internet browser, which are easy to manage and deliver the same education outcomes.

Infinitely more efficient than installing and maintaining software on five hundred thousand laptops, and paying salaries for a thousand dedicated IT managers.

None of this precludes students from bringing in their own laptops, nor individual public schools from buying them. The point is that the technology has moved on and laptops are no longer necessary for good education outcomes. Not when students can access their homework over the Internet anytime from any computer at school, home, in the council library, or at a local Internet café.

A bunch of Labor MPs have been busy doing their own homework, having been told by Rudd to visit their local schools and report back on what they see. Let's hope they stay focused on the ends not the means. The education outcomes will be much richer, the money will go further, and teachers will be allowed to get on with what they do best—teaching.

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