

Not by laptop alone

GOVERNOR MITT Romney's proposal to equip all secondary school students in Massachusetts public schools with laptop computers is a necessary first step toward providing a 21st century education to all our young people. Such an initiative, properly implemented, can help raise student aspirations and assist them in developing the skills they will need to succeed in school and in life.

The 2004 report of the Special Commission on Educational Technology, made up of educators, business leaders, legislators, and representatives of the administration, supported a one-to-one student-to-computer ratio as a means to achieve equity and improved learning, to involve and communicate with parents, and to interest students in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills valued in our economy. This report, and the dozens of statewide and district laptop initiatives that have been implemented over the past five years, point to some important lessons about how to proceed and what to expect.

One lesson is the necessity of professional development for teachers. Laptops can catalyze positive changes in teaching and learning only if teachers take the lead through effective use of the technology to transform

classroom instruction, and if teachers and principals learn to use technology to help them make sound instructional decisions based on achievement data. This will require training and support.

Another lesson is to plan well for robust networking and to budget for the total cost of ownership of the hardware, including maintenance, repairs, upgrades,

Give students computers, yes; then teach teachers how to capitalize on them.

and technical support. We must make certain from the start that the choice of hardware and software supports the many dozens of applications that have proven effective. The governor's plan to make replacement laptops a yearly part of the budget in schools makes sense.

A final important lesson is that we will see "soft" results before test scores show any change — improved attendance, decreased discipline problems, and increased student engagement in learning. Evaluations thus need to focus on students' attitudes and what teachers find successful, not just on test scores. This is an investment in our future work force and the payback

will take time.

The controversy about the governor's plan to use low-cost laptops — being developed at MIT for schools in developing countries — has diverted attention from a key point: Whatever hardware we choose, Massachusetts must act now, or our students will soon be losing ground in the race for 21st-century skills to millions more potential competitors around the world.

Students will recognize this initiative as a vote of confidence. They see that the world is changing rapidly and that to compete they must master the computer and the Internet with newfound information age skills. If we challenge them to excel at writing, presentation, collaboration, analysis, and logical thinking — and give them the tools to meet those challenges — they will create a prosperous future for themselves and for our Commonwealth.

Andre Mayer is senior vice president for communications and research at Associated Industries of Massachusetts. Isa Kaftal Zimmerman is chairman of the Educational Technology Advisory Council and director of professional education at Lesley University.