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Subject: Silicon Valley CEOs and Education

Tom:

Here's an article from today's L.A. Times on one of the projects that I have been working on with the high tech CEO coalition. We need to get together and brainstorm on some more.

Tim

Online Network Planned for Public Schools

Education: Project, to be unveiled today, would allow campuses, teachers and parents to link up.

By ELIZABETH SHOGREN, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON--A consortium of high-tech executives assembled by the White House has developed an ambitious project to link public school parents, students and teachers in a nationwide interactive computer network.

The plan, to be unveiled today by Vice President Al Gore and about a dozen of the most innovative minds in the computer industry, would enable parents to monitor their children's attendance, check their grades, correspond with teachers, participate in chat sessions and arrange computer-based tutoring.

The Silicon Valley companies participating in the venture have promised to underwrite the initial costs of establishing an Internet site and distributing software that would enable schools to post information and communicate with parents.

The "Education Dashboard," expected to be available nationwide within six months, is the result of a challenge Gore issued to a small group of high-tech executives during a working dinner in Los Angeles four months ago.

A prototype of the project will be demonstrated today at the sixth annual Gore "Family Reunion" conference in Nashville. President Clinton will also attend.

Education experts were intrigued by the concept because of the strong corollary between parental involvement in schools and children's academic success. But they warned that public schools and many families, particularly those with low incomes, will find it difficult to take advantage of the Dashboard.

"There seem to be so many pros and cons," said June Million, spokeswoman for the National Assn. of Elementary School

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Principals. "Who is going to do the inputting? I can't imagine a classroom teacher sitting down and every day writing a report on each student."

Darrell Rud, principal of an elementary school in a low-income area of Billings, Mont., said many parents there do not have telephones, much less home computers and Internet access.

"It sounds like something that would only be accessible to the middle class or the upper class," Rud said. "But some students in the lower classes need this even more, and they're the ones who are less likely to get access to it."

Creators of the Education Dashboard said they are aware of the obstacles facing some schools and low-income families, and are working hard to come up with ways to make their brainchild more accessible.

"We want to make sure that poor and lower-middle-class families can take part, but we don't have the answer yet," said Gilman Louie, chairman of Alameda-based Spectrum HoloByte, a computer game company, who worked on the Dashboard.

Its creators designed it to be easy for schools to use, hoping that would encourage them to make data on individual students available to families and students. Participation in the project is voluntary, but any school will be able to obtain the necessary software for free.

Schools also will be able to determine the level of their involvement.

If schools and families used the Dashboard to its full capacity, parents could use the Internet and secure passwords to learn whether their children are doing homework, compare their children's test scores with state or local academic standards, and communicate with teachers about how to improve their children's performance.

But if schools decide not to go all-out and input data on individual students, teachers and families still could participate.

For instance, teachers and parents could use the Dashboard to communicate with one another via e-mail. And parents, students and teachers would still be able to visit the national education Web site, access computer chat rooms and locate academic resources.

Teachers would be able to communicate with other teachers to share ideas and discuss successful problem-solving techniques. Parents would also be able to discuss--online--difficulties their children are having. Then, other parents who have struggled with the same problems could share the solutions they found.

Americans have grown accustomed in recent years to hearing technology promoters make claims about how the Internet can radically change certain aspects of life--only to see no impact, or results that fall far short of expectations. But the White House and the CEOs involved in Dashboard argue that their effort has real potential to revolutionize communication between families and schools.

"The Dashboard is a significant step," said a White House official familiar with the project. "No one has ever pulled together technologies like these before and made them available to every school in the country."

The White House and the business leaders maintain that despite the obstacles, the conditions are ripe for making the Dashboard a

successful tool for families and schools. Almost half the nation's families with children have personal computers, and almost 20% of all homes are online. Earlier this year, the federal government made a commitment to wiring every school to the Internet by 2000. The CEOs also stressed that cheaper access to the Internet for those who do not have computers is becoming available through Internet television and computer game devices.

The Silicon Valley executives said they decided to accept the vice president's challenge to come up with concrete ways to improve education for a combination of philanthropic and self-interested reasons.

"A lot of this is a desire we have to improve our country," said Kim Polese, president of the Palo Alto-based Marimba and coordinator of the Dashboard effort. "We realize we have resources that can be put to good use. It's very exciting to use our programs in schools. It makes us feel good."

But another factor driving their effort was clearly the chronic shortage of employees needed to fill high-tech positions in Silicon Valley.

"Many of us who were educated in public schools are frustrated," Louie said. "We see all this young talent out there, but they're not getting the kind of resources necessary to be successful when they graduate from schools. We firmly believe that we have to have smarter kids coming out of our colleges so we can put them into this new work environment. The pool of employees is a lot smaller than the available [high-tech] jobs."

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