

Computer impact in schools is modest so far

According to a survey conducted by Market Data Retrieval of Westport, Conn., 55,745 public schools now use computers in instruction. This is more than twice the number using computers just one year ago.

The survey also indicates more schools (31,069) began using computers during the past year than all prior years combined. Of more than 15,000 U.S. school districts, only 2,124 (14 percent) do not use computers.

In addition, there are 325,000 microcomputers in U.S. public schools. There are 110,000 in elementary schools, 55,000 in junior high schools, and 135,000 in senior high schools. The balance are in kindergarten-12th grade special education schools.

The leading brands of microcomputers used in schools are Apple, Radio Shack and Commodore. Schools are currently using more than 160,000 Apples, 68,000 Radio Shack TRS-80s, and more than 49,000 Commodores, Pets, Vic-20s and 64s. Next in the order of

units used are: Atari, IBM PCs and Texas Instruments.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, many public school officials were caught off guard when Education Secretary T.H. Bell criticized computer learning programs in schools as "electronic page turning" and said he will finance research on new ways to teach children algebra and how to write.

Bell said computer buying was almost a fad and that computerized educational programs on the market "leave a great deal to be desired." He said schools need programs that can analyze pupil responses, provide remedial tutoring, or move the pupil on to the next level, then give the teacher a printout showing how the pupil performed. Several computer programs in use do exactly what Bell is suggesting.

Educational uses for computers are big business. It has been estimated that schools spent more than \$700 million on computers in 1983. According to



high tech
Ronald R. Watcke

TALMIS, an Illinois-based marketing consulting firm, public school purchases of microcomputers have increased by more than 75 percent in less than three years.

The role of computers and microcomputers in education will continue to grow and is a fact that can scarcely be denied. What role they will play is a subject for debate.

MUCH THAT will take place with the computer in education depends upon the software used. Bell is correct when he says a considerable amount of the current software is of little use. Some critics have referred to educational software as "electronic flash-

cards" and little else.

There have been many studies on computer-based instruction. What is its impact on students? Does computer-assisted instruction help keep students in the classroom? Does computer-assisted instruction save time?

While there have been numerous research studies conducted on computer-based instruction during the past decade, much of the resulting data is unclear. The findings are fragile; they vary in confusing irregularity across contexts, classes, subjects and countless other factors.

EVEN THOUGH the findings of the

newer studies are not conclusive, it is possible to draw several conclusions about computer-based courses.

1. Computer-based instruction appears to have a modest positive impact on student academic performance.
2. There is no apparent correlation between aptitude and achievement in computer-based courses.
3. Computer-based instruction does not appear to reduce or increase the dropout rate.

A Troy resident, Watcke is dean of liberal arts at Wayne County Community College.

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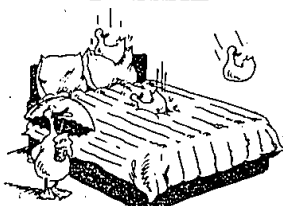
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