

Bridging the Digital Divide - One Neighborhood at a Time

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What is the Digital Divide?

What was once predicted to be an information glut as we approached the latter part of the 20th Century is now a 21st Century explosion. The shrapnel from this explosion takes the shape of cyber information, propelled by a bewildering arsenal of technology. Where school teachers once toiled over keeping students on track to develop reading skills, the fundamentals of the three R's have given way to mastering technology in even the earliest of grades. But the exponential growth of information access, and the technology to deliver it, is only exacerbating the fundamental problem of the last century: how to develop the new, 21st century contemporary academic skills - reading, writing and computing.



A six year old going "online" for the first time at the Sunset Gardens Lab.

This acceleration is also creating a more serious phenomenon -- the digital divide -- among the haves and have nots; or rather, the accessed and the not accessed (Heuston 2003; Schroder 2003). In the last century, a student could spend time reading at home and with the help of parents. All that was needed were a few relatively inexpensive tangible items: paper, books, and pencils. In this century however, the schools mirror the societal shift toward the intangibles of information technology and connectivity. Many school assignments are anchored to the computer and Internet and those that go home without that vital connectivity access have no alternative except to find an open and available public library.

Here within the digital divide, there is a developing harbinger of an increasing crime rate; the growing inequity of cyber connectivity within communities. As students fall behind in reading skills, they are less likely to share a slice of the academic and success pie. The more they live within a world of cyber inequity, the greater the probability they will have a job future characterized by despair and disparity, perhaps left further behind than those of a similar plight in the last century. The distance is greater as it becomes more imperative to be skilled in a technologically fluid world. The rapid pace of change is difficult to cope with for all, even for those on the right side of the divide whose daily lives are attuned to it. For the sake of those on the wrong side of the divide, we must strive to achieve parity of life skills and opportunities – by reducing the gap between those that have convenient cyber access and those that do not.

The bridge for this digital divide can be built by community volunteerism and the span takes the physical shape of donated computers and residential, on-site locations.

Selecting the site to bridge this divide is easy. Simply identify key neighborhoods where kids go home without access. The vision that buttresses this bridge is framed by the city of Hillsboro, Oregon's "2020 Vision" statement focusing on this digital divide: *Promote and expand extracurricular, after-school programs for students to assure structured, wholesome activity for youth; Create new entry level jobs and apprenticeship opportunities for youth, minorities and low income residents; create more outreach from public safety agencies (Jensen 1999).*

The Hillsboro police department translated the city vision into what we wanted to accomplish:

- *We will continue with innovative programs to teach cyber responsibility to our youth and also to take steps to reduce the digital inequity we see occurring within our neighborhoods.*
- *We want to take steps to help keep all youth on track with developing those vital skills of how to navigate in our expanding cyber world. (Wochnick, 2003).*

A youth falling behind peers, one whose future is doubtful, is the most susceptible to becoming part of the criminal justice system – as a victim or perpetrator.

In this Hillsboro paradigm, the bridgehead selected was a low income, predominately Spanish speaking apartment complex. This 107-unit complex, known as Sunset Gardens, is home to approximately 200 school-age kids. It is also a neighborhood with a higher crime rate, greater poverty, and dependence on social services. However, no matter where kids live in Hillsboro (the high tech hub of Oregon), they have the same homework and many students now receive CDs instead of books to take home and study.



Older youth help the younger youth.

This site was selected because Pinnacle Management Corporation, the owners of the apartment complex, and apartment complex manager Ms. Margarita Martinez, donated a secured room within the laundry and activities building. Once the space was secured the challenge of equipment was tackled. Changing technology guarantees growing heaps of discarded “older computers” (they become old after about three years!). Quality older computers were generously donated by the manager of Hillsboro’s hometown Columbia Community Bank who stepped forward to offer seven, recently surplused computers (Rollins 2003).



HPD School Resource Officers assist in a Lab Session.

So, now with the site and the computer problem solved, the next challenges became: who will implement and sustain the project?

A unique group of 32 software engineers, college professors (from Portland State University) and all around cyber-smart people – the Police Reserve Specialists (PRS) volunteered for the project. The PRS mission is: “through use of specialized reserve volunteers, to augment, broaden, and increase the effectiveness of the Hillsboro Police Department in its mission to form partnerships with the community and enhance our quality of life” (Wochnick 2003). These 32 cyber community volunteers initially stepped forward to assist the Hillsboro Police in solving cyber crimes. After a thorough background and application process, 32 out of 116 cyber applicants were accepted. They then received indoctrination and familiarization with the criminal justice system, supported by the Washington County District Attorney’s office (Heuston 2002). In addition to high tech crime fighting, these volunteers developed computer ethics and responsibility training for kids, first launched during the summer of 2003 at the Hillsboro Boys & Girls Club in partnership with the Hillsboro School District.



Officer Germaine Kollias and Instructor Edwin Pilobello teach basic programming and Lego Robotics in the NPD West Precinct Learning Center.

The PRS group converted and loaded the donated computers with Linux open source operating systems, complete with games, homework software and browser capability. Internet access is filtered with parental control. The PRS volunteers also developed cyber introduction and tutoring protocols, volunteering their time throughout the week and on Saturdays for tutoring, training and program development.

During these open cyber hours, kids can be seen either playing computer games, surfing nets (with appropriate safeguards designed by the PRSs) or completing homework assignments.

Our next challenge will be to replicate this success elsewhere in our growing community of 80,000 plus people, covering 24 square miles.

The city of Hillsboro provided a 700 square foot community learning center in the new Hillsboro Police West Precinct, situated in our largest Latino neighborhood and retail business community. The center is directly connected to the public lobby, allowing users to come and go without disrupting police operations Intel Corporation (also based in Hillsboro) will generously assist with the development of the learning center, donating the latest wireless technology.

Other plans include a Mobile Police Community Center equipped with four wireless computer sites as part of a soon-to-be-designed 33 foot trailer. This Mobile Center will have office space for the Chief of Police, neighborhood patrol officers, as well as community service specialists such as code enforcement, crime prevention and volunteer coordination specialists.

The Mobile Center will visit other neighborhoods and special sites, such as migrant schools and housing complexes. Partnering with the ever present PRS volunteers will be other community groups who will assist to identify and attract kids and parents to the Mobile Center: Boys & Girls Club programs and events; bicycle safety fairs for donated, reconditioned bicycles to be distributed and safety helmets personally fitted (supported by local Rotary and Optimist clubs); crime prevention activities (supported by the Chamber of Commerce and community grants); sporting events (supported by the Hillsboro School District); rock climbing skills building (supported by our local Oregon National Guard); and, Police Cadet activities (supported by a police department-managed endowment fund).

The bad news is that the digital divide gap is widening. The good news is that there are volunteers, community organizations and business community members willing to step forward and help build an even greater community.

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