

# Education

## Who Will Ride The Information Superhighway?

BY BETTY J. TUROCK, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Today, powerful technology can connect a student to a library in another state -- or country. It can help you find a job, research a medical condition or get the latest stock market reports.

But what if a child's parents or school can't afford a computer? What if you don't own a computer -- or know how to use it? The information superhighway threatens to widen the gap between the "information rich" and "information poor" even as it revolutionizes how we live, learn, work and connect with one another.

The solution to public access exists in virtually every community. It's doable and affordable -- it's the library.

America's libraries have always been the great equalizer, helping people of all ages and backgrounds to lead better lives, regardless of their ability to pay. Over the years, their services have expanded to include not just books, but magazines, videotapes, CDs, telephone reference and computers. And they provide something more, the professional assistance of a librarian. In the age of electronic information, this role is more critical than ever.

The theme for National Library Week, April 14-29, 1996, celebrates the changing role of today's libraries with the message "Libraries Change Lives. Call. Visit. Log on." More and more people are getting access to information they need for their jobs, their health, finances and just plain

enjoyment online at their libraries. They are the lucky ones.

Nationally only about one in five public libraries offer public access to the Internet, the vast network of computer networks which makes up the information superhighway. Even fewer school libraries are connected.

How our government confronts the challenge of developing our national information network will test one of our most basic values in a democracy society -- public access to information. Just as not everyone can afford to buy all the books they need; some can't afford computers and expensive on-line charge. In fact, the most recent statistics show that only one in 10 Americans has access to the vast network of databases known as the information superhigh-

way. Political leaders as diverse as Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (who called libraries "the most cost-effective investment in learning that we can make") agree that our nation's libraries must be linked to the information superhighway.

We need more than words, however, if there is to be equity on the information superhighway. Many of those seeking to influence our nation's telecommunications policies are driven by a profit motive. They have deep pockets and access to power at the highest levels. Unless steps are taken to protect the public interest, the information superhighway will most likely be available only to those who can afford to pay the charge-

es. Nothing is more important to the future of our democracy than ensuring public access to information. We live in an information society. Our jobs, our education, the health and well-being of our families depend on it. Today, more and more of the information we need is in computers. That is why we need all of our nation's public, school, college university libraries online.

If Americans are to continue to enjoy the same open access to information that we do today, our communities, states and federal government must invest in libraries as centers for information in all forms -- electronic as well as print. The new provision for discounted telecommunications rates for libraries must be enforced.

Congress must also act to ensure that any change in copyright policy protects fair use of electronic information by library users.

If all people -- not just those who are rich enough or smart enough -- are to be able to ride the information superhighway, it will take leadership from our elected representatives of all political persuasions. And it will require those who stand most to benefit -- members of the public -- support, not just their local libraries, but all libraries in their efforts to ensure that all people have the information they need whether in print or online.

The 21st century is almost here. Americans can't wait for equity on the information superhighway. They need it now -- at their libraries.

## Problems For Minority Students

Continued from front

Foundation, is scheduled for June 1. The walk, in cooperation with the city's Rose Festival Association, is scheduled along the Starlight Parade route.

Organizers hope that these efforts would yield about \$15 million to help salvage some teaching positions. Even if this happens, the district would still need an additional \$7 million to help rescue the dying special education programs that have helped some students stay in school.

How will this shortfall affect the low-income and students of color?

The Education Reform Act for the 21st Century, passed by the state legislature in 1991, mandates school-to-work opportunities for every student. School districts have to help graduating seniors find jobs.

With the austere funding at-

sphere, it is unlikely that the school district will have enough funds to fulfill this mandate. In spite of the fact that unemployment in the inner-city is still twice the city average, according to the Northeast Workforce Center.

The state also has a law mandating textbooks be replaced every seven years with new material. Unfortunately, Portland schools have cut the textbook fund from \$3 million to \$1.5 million and the remaining money is no longer in the district fund. It is now distributed in block grants to every school in the city, which may spend it at their discretion.

In many schools this choice has pitted having needed technology against updating curriculum material. This is already a problem because the Portland District has a total enrollment of 57,266 students with

more than 10,589 below the poverty line according to last year's figures from the district's Research and Evaluation department.

Minority and low-income students are going to find it tough to make up for the shortfalls in learning materials. Jim Sager announced that teachers already have spent almost \$1.5 million last year on books, supplies, and other materials for their classrooms.

Another headache that these students will have pay with is the summer school program, which served 5,028 students in 1990 and only 707 students last year. Those students had to pay their own way this year.

King School ran its own summer school for 90 students last year through federal and private grants fundraising. Organizers say it took too much time to put

together and the program doesn't have a reliable financial back bone. It's certain that low-income students who rely on this program will miss out.

Already over \$1 million has been yanked from the special education budget in the past three years and the majority of those involved in this program are poor folks.

Sally Johnson principal of Alameda Elementary School summed up the frustration. "We will try and pick up the pieces as best we can. Most of us (principals) don't have the counseling skills. Only the most critical will be handled by the counselor," she says.

It is still not clear how many teachers won't be back next year. But the school district is optimistic about resolving this impasse.

"Long term solutions is the right way to go," says Frederick.

## School Aid Proposal

Commissioner Earl Blumenauer's announced his school aid proposal last week to add approximately \$3.8 million in school aid to the City's two-year fiscal budget. In addition the plan makes an ongoing commitment for school safety and athletics. Blumenauer addresses three concerns: program restoration, equity, and continuity.

The \$2 million Community Challenge Fund will directly restore innovative programs and protect class size. Portland Public Schools are currently cutting teaching positions, including some of the best and brightest educators in the district. This Community Challenge Fund compliments the effort underway, through school foundations, to secure revenue for the current budget shortfalls of Portland and Parkrose school districts. Individuals and businesses in the private sector and

other governments are strongly encouraged to make contributions to this Community Challenge Fund. "It is critical that talented, new teachers and their students not give up hope," Blumenauer said.

By adding \$1.8 million to the \$200,000 currently proposed by the Mayor, Blumenauer's plan balances City funds promised to the Portland Public School District with Portland's other school districts. David Douglas, Parkrose, Centennial and Reynolds represent 22% of Portland's children enrolled in public school.

Blumenauer summed up his proposal by stating, "My bottom line is to treat all our children equally and do more to avoid unnecessary reductions in their educational opportunities while we struggle The City of Portland's budget for FY 1996-97 and FY 1997-98 already includes \$2 million per year."

## Free Scholarship Awards

Are you a High School Senior, College, Trade School or University student? Are you or your family experiencing financial difficulties in meeting the cost of your College, Trade School, University, Pre-professional or Professional Licensing education? American College Fund may be the answer to your dilemma.

American College Fund Scholarship Programs have set goals and are seeking yearly to award over 9,000 Scholarship Awards. Awards ranging from \$250 to \$15,000 per year are awarded nationwide

through the organization's American Citizens Scholarship Program, Middle Class (Economically Disadvantaged) Scholarship Program, Minority Scholarship Program and worldwide through the organization's International Scholarship Program.

Scholarship Awards are being awarded to High School Seniors, College, Trade School and University students based on a grade point average of 2.0 or above on a 4.0 scale (or equivalent).

A Typewritten essay of 250 to 500 words explaining "Why the Student believes he/she should receive an

American College Fund Scholarship Award" and "What new opportunities will become available as a result of receiving a Scholarship Award." must be submitted.

Financial need (as determined by the student's American College Fund Registration Application and Student Scholarship Form) will also be considered.

For Registration Applications send a self addressed envelope with 2 stamps to: American College Fund, Office of Applications Registration, 9357 S. Burnside Avenue, Ste. 101, Chicago, IL 60619.

## Dropout Retrieval Programs Bring Students Back

Dropout rates in Portland high schools are going down, although the district's success in bringing dropouts back to school caused an increase in the overall annual dropout rate recently reported by the Oregon Department of Education.

"We went out and aggressively recruited dropouts and we got hundreds of them back into our dropout retrieval programs," says Carol Matarazzo, director of Portland Public Schools' Alternative Education Programs. "We expected our rate to jump this year because it's the first time the state has included all students in Portland's alternative programs in their dropout figures."

Portland's overall dropout rate for 1994/95 is 9.04 percent, compared to 7.25 percent for 1993/94. During the 1994/95 school year, however, Portland enrolled 2,571 students in dropout retrieval programs and nearly three-fourth of them remained in school. Of some 630 students who are listed as dropouts from those programs, 100 earned GED's but are listed as dropouts under the state's reporting system.

Dropout rates for minority students in Portland Public Schools also continue to decline, in part because

of the success of some 55 district and community-based dropout retrieval programs, according to Matarazzo. District figures show the dropout rate for African-Americans students at 5.8 percent in 1994/95, compared to 9.7 in 1993/94; for Hispanic-American-

icans, the rate dropped to 15.2 percent from 17.6 percent.

Jefferson High School, which has the district's largest minority population, posted a dropout rate of 7.3 percent in 1994/95, compared to 13.4 percent in 1993/94.

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