

South Dakota Legislative Research Council

Issue Memorandum 97-4

The Wiring the Schools Program

Introduction

Attempting to keep apace with educational technological advancements in the 90s, school districts all across South Dakota are investing heavily in equipment for use in the classroom. Probably the easiest picture to conjure is that of a school district buying computers for its classrooms. All school districts are doing this to some degree, with more than a few making what is their first serious attempt at “wiring” all their classrooms. For a few districts, these are the first significant technological purchases in years, or perhaps ever, but this time they’re getting some help from the state.

What is “Wiring the Schools?”

“Wiring schools” actually has several meanings. In last year’s paper, *Technology in the Classroom* (Issue Memorandum #96-05, May 14, 1996), “wiring schools” would have referred primarily to investing in and installing computer technology, including both hardware and software. In this paper, however, “wiring schools” has another meaning, that being the acts of planning, coordinating, and installing the proper infrastructure so that schools may properly and

efficiently use the technology they’ve purchased. Wiring the Schools is now the name of a state-funded program leading this effort.

As discussed in last year’s paper, what has transpired in South Dakota’s schools to date under the banner of wiring schools (i.e., updating the technology vis-à-vis the computers and software) has heretofore been largely at the schools’ own discretion and design. Local control and initiative have been key in wiring schools, and schools have been able to buy into the new technology when and how they wanted. Clearly, there was no legislation or regulation from the state level, or even any strong or significant departmental guidance.

Last year’s paper touched on how so many of the schools in this state did not have even the physical capacity to be able to operate banks of new electronic equipment. The Wiring the Schools program “has confirmed previous suspicions that few schools are adequately wired to support the electrical needs dictated by current educational technology.”¹

Until the current fiscal year, there were no direct state appropriations to support technology updates, either, so there were no strings put

on schools in regard to what kinds or forms of technology they could or should buy. True, there were entities offering advice--when asked--but most advice was from vendors wanting to sell goods and services to the schools. Hence, the schools were completely free to invest as they saw fit or as they thought they could afford, which had the potential for a giant mishmash of different approaches and capabilities.

State Government Gets Involved

Just before the end of state Fiscal Year 1996, however, state government got into guiding school technology improvements in a big way. Using what, at the time, was the almost unbridled authority to transfer legislative appropriations, Governor Bill Janklow diverted \$2 million of welfare money toward the purpose of "wiring schools to use up-to-date technology."²

This money had not been appropriated by the Legislature for this purpose, but actually had been appropriated to fund the economic assistance programs Aid to Families with Dependent Children (now Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF) and Medicaid. When the state's welfare caseloads took a significant downturn, though, considerable state money was destined to revert at the end of the fiscal year.³

Using state general fund dollars that would have otherwise reverted into the Budget Reserve Fund⁴, the Governor put significant state resources into improving the technological infrastructures of

local school systems. Thus was born the Wiring the Schools Program. The program, it could be said, became *official* when the Legislature recognized its existence this year by writing it into the General Appropriation Act. The Legislature continued the program and funded it at \$2.3 million general for FY98. The Legislature placed this new line item under the Department of Education and Cultural Affairs.⁵

The Mechanics of Wiring the Schools

The program is actually operated on a contractual basis. The Department of Education and Cultural Affairs (DECA) has contracted with Mr. Ray Christensen of the Sioux Falls school district to serve as Project Coordinator. The program has no actual state FTEs, and according to the administration there are less than ten state employees who get involved in any way with the week-to-week activities of the program. Those employees represent the Department of Corrections, the Bureau of Information and Telecommunications, and DECA.

Essentially, schools apply to the program specifying what they want to accomplish, then must assist with the planning and design of their local application. Once all the plans are drawn, the work is done in most districts by South Dakota prison inmates under the direction of a local, contracting electrician. There are currently five crews of six to eight inmates each. The plan calls for eight crews. At least one

of the crews is all women. The selected schools must provide a local contact person, as well as feed and house the inmate laborers. The state pays for the wire, inmate labor, and tools needed to place the wire in the building. As mentioned in Issue Memorandum 96-05, since so many schools need improvements in their basic electrical wiring to accommodate improved technology, Wiring the Schools also takes care of that. Thus, there is also the contracting of a local electrician in each district to conduct day-to-day supervision of the crews and assure that state and local electrical code requirements are met.

Progress

As Governor Janklow stated in his FY98 Budget Address, the program began “with the small schools...for several reasons.” He said the crews are learning as they go “and to go tackle a Sioux Falls or a Rapid City school system under those circumstances would be folly.” Colman-Egan, the first school done, was completed by December, 1996. Hill City, Lemmon, and Wessington Springs followed quickly thereafter. As of July 7, 19 schools are done: Artesian-Letcher, Beresford, Britton, Colman-Egan, Custer, Dakota Valley, Deuel-Clear Lake, Douglas, Elm Valley, Flandreau, Garretson, Hill City, Isabel, Lemmon, Mt. Vernon, Volga, Warner, Wessington Springs, and Winner. There were five in progress, those being Chamberlain, Eagle Butte,

Harrisburg, Hot Springs, and Madison. The program has identified the next two to be done as Baltic and White River. Weekly updates on the program’s process are registered on the Internet’s World Wide Web by the project’s coordinator. (The site is <http://wts.state.sd.us/> and is easily reachable from South Dakota’s homepage on the Internet.)

These updates give very brief synopses of the program’s status in regard to the numbers of teams operating and the schools being done. No financial information about the program or any of the individual projects can be found on the Internet, although there is discussion of specific materials. The weekly updates refer to bid lettings for materials, (e.g. the May 11 report mentions that bids were let for “two million feet of Cat[egory] 5 wire”) but they do not reveal the suppliers. According to §5-23-21, since the state is purchasing the materials and these materials are not for “prison industries for the manufacturing of products,” the Bureau of Administration should be advertising for bids from vendors wanting to supply the materials. However, §5-23-21 does exempt from the bidding chapter the purchase of “computer hardware and software” by the state. The weekly updates do mention the electrical contractors who are getting involved, however, and Muth Electric and Clites Electric are local companies which have furnished electricians for some of the schools’ projects.

With regard to the nature of the materials used by the program, the

South Dakota Electrical Commission became involved in the approval of the use of certain nonmetallic components. There was some debate on this because of the high cost of using only metallic "raceways." The issue was resolved to allow nonmetallics to be purchased if the price is right. Christensen mentioned on March 2 that the state has established and published on the Internet "standards...[to] help schools pick appropriate equipment to make the best use of the wiring" that gets installed.

With a whole-state approach, the schools are not applying for wiring or infrastructure improvement on a competitive basis. Rather, the application process is more to assess the actual resources necessary and coordinate each local project, as well as to help the Wiring teams move around the state in an efficient and geographical manner. There are no Administrative Rules governing Wiring the Schools, and definitely no actions have been taken by the Legislature other than the continuation of the funding. Any eligibility decisions made, such as the decision that buildings with fewer than 25 students will not be wired, have been made internally by the state agencies involved.

Despite the massive amount of work involved, the program is running ahead of schedule. According to the June 22 update, the Governor "has asked that the speed [of the program] be doubled" so that all "176 [public] K - 12 districts can be completed in 18 months" (since the program's inception and beginning in the

latter half of calendar year 1996). The project will then turn to updating the nonpublic schools. As of July 3, according to the Governor's Office, a total of \$1,569,928 had been spent on the program: \$889,522.65 on materials and wiring done for 14 schools, \$127,326.35 just on materials for another ten schools, and \$553,079.46 on associated items and statewide costs.⁶

Inmate Labor

Essential to the success of the program is the use of inmate labor. The program's mission called for completion of all school districts by the end of calendar year 1998. This means that most of the work has to be done during the school year, and even during the school day. The Wiring the Schools program must assure anyone concerned that the inmates are carefully selected. They can have no problems where children or any kind of sex offenses are concerned. According to the program, the workers "will typically be persons convicted" of nonviolent offenses such as driving under influence or bad check writing.

The school districts are responsible for feeding and housing the workers. They may feed them in the cafeterias, if the districts wish. The workers will bring cots when they are staying overnight, and the schools may provide space for them in their gyms. The schools must provide security, but whenever possible the inmates will be returned to a Department of Corrections facility for the evenings if one is close. The state transports the workers.

School districts do have the option of refusing to use inmate labor. According to the February 23 weekly update, "several schools are working on their own. The [program] is furnishing the wire for [their projects]." Vermillion is cited as a district that chose to install its new wiring on its own. One benefit, albeit perhaps an accidental one, of using noninmate labor may be the absence of competing demands for the workers' time. For example, during March and April, teams of inmates had to be pulled away from their assigned wiring projects to work in flood control situations at

places along the James River and at Watertown's Lake Kampeska.

Conclusion

South Dakota state government has taken significant steps to help and coordinate the efforts of local school districts trying to improve the technological state of their educational art. By providing labor and materials to improve local electrical and electronic infrastructures, the state is giving schools the necessary foothold for bringing their technological capacity into the 90s.

NOTES:

¹“Telecommunications Infrastructure in New School Buildings: The Basics of Cabling and Connecting, Ten Most Frequently Asked Questions” by Ray Christensen, Dennis Ninceheler, Jim Edman, Dr. Jim Parry, and Harris Haupt, an article compiled and distributed by the Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, available from <http://www.state.sd.us/state/executive/deca/wtsfaq/q5.htm>.

²Budget Transfer #JB96052.

³See LRC Staff Report *Transfer of Appropriations*, October 30, 1996, for a further discussion of this issue from a vastly different point of view.

⁴SDCL 4-7-32.

⁵When the Legislature did not pass legislation which would have raised State Aid to General Education three percent as it was introduced at the request of the Governor, general fund dollars became available. These dollars were appropriated for the new line item, Wiring Schools.

⁶According to the Governor’s Office and DECA, costs for individual projects were as follows:

Materials and Wiring: Artesian-Letcher, \$12,375.10; Beresford, \$59,101.92; Britton, \$73,175.76; Colman-Egan, \$56,850.47; Dakota Valley, \$41,052.60; Deuel, \$22,624.08; Douglas, \$239,274.14; Garretson, \$30,277.61; Hill City, \$82,366.56; Isabel, \$8941.70; Lemmon, \$101,369.80; Mt. Vernon, \$31,453.92; Sioux Valley, \$73,564.66; and Wessington Springs, \$57,089.33.

For Wiring Only: Alcester-Hudson, \$5,077.18; Castlewood, \$5,115.51, Faulkton, \$1,377.95; Huron, \$17,465.90; Iroquois, \$3,949.79; Spearfish, \$2,716.58; Timber Lake, \$11,791.66; Vermillion, \$18,317.61; Wagner, \$4,747.75; and Watertown, \$56,766.42;

“Other Expenses” have been: \$138,793.25 for inventory; \$243,667.09 for “current projects”; and Statewide costs of \$170,619.46.

Subtotals above are \$889,522.65 for complete projects, \$127,326.35 for wiring-only projects, and \$553,079.46 for Other program costs.

This issue memorandum was written by Mark Zickrick, Principal Fiscal Analyst for the Legislative Research Council. It is designed to supply background information on the subject and is not a policy statement made by
