

## Techno-Titans by Choice or by Fiat?



For some inscrutable reason, at the start of Grade 1 my classmates and I were each given a black pencil as thick as a horse's leg. What joy when we eventually graduated to normal slender yellow pencils. In Grade 4, glory of glories, we got desks with inkwells and straight nib pens.

When I told my own kids about the inkwells, they thought I meant feather quill pens. They suspected I was born in the era of Louis XIV. And I guess the fifties are about that remote from how we do things today. Communication then was a page of flowing handwriting with the odd blue ink splotch.

Now we are in the Age of Technology. It goes without saying that word processing, e-mail messaging and access to the Internet have transformed communication.

A while ago the Alberta government mandated the integration of computers into the public school curriculum from kindergarten to Grade 12—a virtual revolution in education. Mandated computer instruction is only part of the government's ICT (Information and Communication Technology) strategy. The SuperNet, now under construction, will provide every library, hospital and school from Hairy Hills to Hobbema with access to the Internet. Every man, woman and child in Alberta will be able to connect no matter how remote their residence. We are to be techno-titans in the most wired jurisdiction on the face of the planet.

But many parents are concerned about their children learning on computers at school.

Children and adults are already suffering technology stimulation overload from video games, cell phones, message machines, e-mails, web sites, digital cameras, cam-

orders—not to mention the 500-channel television universe. Technology has wreaked changes on us that seem beyond our control. Technology alters our sense of self. “We’re being trained to operate at the level of computers, which are good at computing but not at all creative,” says Joseph Gold, author of *Read for Your Life*.

Where is the push toward ICT coming from? A more technically oriented school curriculum is closely linked to the needs of business and industry. The argument is that a technologically advanced population will put us on the “cutting edge,” will attract investment, will make us a vibrant economy—Silicon Valley North. Economic considerations are behind this drive for technological advancement.

It's easy to feel oppressed by a sense of the inevitability of this revolution. But must we succumb?

I'm no Luddite. I see the value of technology every day. We wouldn't be able to put this magazine together without computers and the Internet. But I wonder where our values are in this province when there's money for technology but not enough money for teachers, and no money for kids to study drama or music—sometimes no money for phys. ed.!

Most people I talk to don't know about the government's ICT strategy. It makes me wonder if this is something we've actually chosen. How widespread was the level of consultation on these initiatives? Democracy is about more than casting a vote every four or five years. Democracy is about open discussion and widespread involvement in decision making. Open debates on an issue this important would help communities shape their priorities.

I'd rather see kids running and playing and being read stories than staring at a monitor. I'd rather they had pencils as big as a horse's leg.