Your computer is capable of providing simple solutions for many complex tasks.

Frank Buck
Nearly 70 years after its release, *The Wizard of Oz* remains one of the most beloved movies of all time. We are enchanted with Dorothy and the seemingly impossible task of finding her way home to Kansas. In the process, she enlists the help of three misfits, tangles with a witch and winged monkeys, worries the life out of a poor wizard, and nearly gets her entire entourage killed before she learns the magical power of her ruby slippers.

As irreverent as it might be, I cannot help but wonder how different the movie would have been if Dorothy had only figured out the secret of the slippers early in her quest. As a principal with a passion to use the power of technology to reduce trivial paperwork and give teachers more time to teach, I cannot help but see the story of Dorothy and the ruby slippers as a metaphor for the power of technology to simplify complex tasks. Here are some examples from my experience.

**Handling Money**

I saw the face of Dorothy whenever I walked into a classroom to find a teacher trapped behind a desk, trying to write receipts while conducting a mini-research project to determine which students paid for a yearbook, field trip, or lost textbook. Determined not to burden teachers with such an activity, I collected all the classroom receipt books in our school and set up a simple database to record transactions.

At the beginning of each day, any child with money to submit was sent to a location where two staff members received and counted it and placed it in the database, which would automatically assign the next receipt number, date-stamp the entry, and print out a receipt. If we needed to know which students had purchased a yearbook, for example, a simple search of that database would provide us with the needed list.

An added benefit of moving to a centralized, computer-based system for receiving money was the almost total elimination of the section on “handling money” in our faculty handbook.

**Rewarding Achievement**

Children love to be recognized for their accomplishments. There’s nothing like a certificate to put a smile on the face of a 7-year-old. But the prospect of typing several hundred certificates for an awards ceremony does not put smiles on the faces of the school secretary or the teachers who have to prepare them.

Again, a very simple computer database was the answer. We did away with preprinted certificates and bought some that were totally blank except for a border. We then designed our own certificates on the computer screen in a handsome Old English font, merged student names from our school administrative package, and printed out great-looking certificates.

**Collecting Data**

During my first year as a principal, I was impressed by teachers’ efforts to track various types of data from year to year. Each teacher had a set of folders into which data would be dropped throughout the year. The idea seemed...
relatively simple, but it turned out to be a paperwork nightmare.

Constantly thinking about collecting data and remembering to file it in the correct folder was a highly inefficient procedure, resulting in a formidable collection of papers.

I realized that virtually all of the data they were attempting to collect could be generated from our school administrative package. In one sitting, a single person could produce all of the data that it had taken an entire faculty a full year to collect. Today, the teachers can access a data trail extending over a nine-year period.

Simplifying Administrative Tasks

A generation ago, the best way for a principal to manage a great deal of data was to divide it among the faculty and let everyone share the load. Today, the school administrative package loaded on office computers enables the principal to produce honor roll lists, average end-of-year grades, address envelopes, or conduct any of 100 other clerical tasks that were so time-consuming not so many years ago.

My observation is that the difference between principals who use the power of technology and those who don’t rests with their mind-sets. Before I asked teachers to assimilate data, I always asked myself, “Can I get the computer to do this for me?” The answer was usually “Yes.” The habit I developed of looking first to technology saved my teachers countless hours.

Storing Data

For centuries, preserving information was a matter of storing paper. And even though the capability for storing information digitally has existed for almost three decades, it should come as no surprise that many of us still think of filing systems in terms of paper and metal file cabinets.

As principals, we can show teachers how to save time and space by storing information on a computer hard drive rather than in a file cabinet. The tech-savvy teacher can create a parallel filing system in the computer’s “My Documents” folder. For example, when a colleague hands him or her a good lesson plan on the solar system, the file cabinet is the logical place to store it. But when the teacher comes across a good lesson plan on the solar system on the Internet, the logical storage place is in “My Documents.”

Digital filing offers speed, efficiency, and economy of space. It requires only some thought into how to set up the filing system—and some trust that what is saved will not be lost. Therefore, an integral
part of a good digital filing system is a regular backup routine. A flash drive is small, inexpensive, easy to use, and holds more than a box of floppy disks. Using it to back up hard drive files gives a teacher the peace of mind that comes in knowing that what he or she has saved over the course of years will not be lost in a split second if the hard drive crashes.

Communicating Digitally

Schools are accustomed to using newsletters to communicate with parents and other stakeholders. Those of us who have produced them realize how time-consuming and labor-intensive the effort can be to provide a publication that most likely will not be seen by anyone outside of the school community.

Technology provides principals the power to communicate the same messages at little or no cost, and with a fraction of the effort. I eliminated the need for print media by creating two blogs. I used one to communicate with faculty and staff, and the other to communicate with parents and the community. These blogs enabled me to communicate school news as fast as it was happening. I also could post digital images minutes after they were taken.

John Porter, an assistant superintendent in Montgomery County, Maryland, recently said, “There’s not enough time in the day: Our enemy is time, and technology is the only way [to combat that]” (Esposito 2006). I would like to go a step further by suggesting that by making wise use of technology already at our fingertips, the harried school administrator can turn time into a friend.

Reference


Frank Buck, a former principal, is supervisor of curriculum and special education for the Talladega City Schools in Alabama. His e-mail address is buck@talladega-Cs.net.

Professional Development from NCTM

NCTM conference events and programs are created by educators for educators and bring together respected speakers from around the country.

Expand your mind, identify new techniques, and build your professional network—Join us at an upcoming event!

NCTM 2007 Annual Meeting and Exposition
Atlanta, Georgia • March 21–24, 2007

2007 Regional Conferences and Expositions
Richmond, Virginia • October 11–13, 2007
Kansas City, Missouri • October 25–27, 2007
Houston, Texas • November 29–December 1, 2007

For more information on NCTM’s events, visit www.nctm.org/meetings or call (800) 235-7566.