

America's high-tech elite flock to low-tech schools

10/26/11

If you've been following the occasional series in The New York Times about the efficacy of technology in the classroom, "Grading the Digital School; Unfulfilled Promises," you were probably not surprised by Sunday's article, "A Silicon Valley School that Doesn't Compute."

Interestingly, some of the finest minds at high-tech companies such as Apple, Yahoo, Hewlett-Packard and Google are enrolling their children in technology-free schools that teach through the time-tested methods of hands-on exploration and project-based learning.

Instead of employing pricey iPads or specialized software to teach or reinforce skills, students learn math through the complexities of knitting, they grow vegetables in the school garden, and they read real paper books.

As I said, this makes perfect sense if you've been following the Times' series, which has found that neither classroom software solutions nor the addition of technology-based teaching methods has had significant impact on students' academic success.

An earlier story, "In Classroom of Future, Stagnant Scores," found that "something is not adding up — here and across the country. In a nutshell: schools are spending billions on technology, even as they cut budgets and lay off teachers, with little



proof that this approach is improving basic learning."

The story about Silicon Valley's elite choosing low- or no-tech schooling for their children casts much-needed light on the bottom line of excellent education: basically, "great teachers with interesting lesson plans."

Sure, that's way too simplistic — but only as simplistic as the current belief that technology will be the magic bullet that gets America's educational system on the path to greatness. Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently reinforced this notion by announcing an initiative called Digital Promise, designed to make it easier for public schools to get more technology into their classrooms.

Worse than the promise that presenting engaging multimedia content is all that's needed to overcome the life challenges that students bring to school with them each day is the view that since technology underlies so many aspects of both adults' and children's worlds, it's irresponsible to not use technology at school.

"It's (consumer technology) supereasy. It's like learn-

ing to use toothpaste," Alan Eagle, a Google employee with a child in a tech-free school, was quoted in the Times' article. "At Google and all these places, we make technology as brain-dead easy to use as possible. There's no reason why kids can't figure it out when they get older."

But alas, the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, a private school where children learn — much like the engineers who put the first man on the moon did — from information chalked on blackboards, from thick books, and with hefty doses of intrinsic motivation, is also pricey.

That's the irony: Families with little or no choice but to send their children to struggling neighborhood public schools are asked to put their faith in new classroom computers while the affluent can afford to travel back to a schooling era when content, and not the delivery method, was king.

Education policymakers could stand to learn a little from the parenting philosophies of the technology elite: Old-school methods such as high-quality instruction and hands-on experimentation must take precedence over the theory that today's children aren't capable of learning without the aid of fancy electronic devices.