

Morino Institute

The Impact
of Technology
on Youth in the
21st Century

An Address by Mario Morino
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The Impact of Technology on Youth in the 21st Century

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be here today and be part of such a distinguished panel. What I'd like to do in the time allotted is to share some thoughts on the brave new world of technology and its impact on our youth now and into the next century.

But first let me make clear what I'm talking about. The technology that is shaping our future and our children's is not, as many assume, the computer. These machines have been with us for decades and now, with their advanced multimedia capability, they deserve considerable credit for enhancing learning among people of all ages. But I propose that there is an even greater technology on the rise, whose power is far more encompassing. I am speaking about the new and emerging forms of interactive communications, such as the Internet, that allow us to capitalize on our greatest learning resource – the minds of people all over the globe. We are just beginning to experience the impact of this connection of people to people, and can only guess how transforming its effects will be in the coming years. I also contend, however, that if we make the right choices now, we can substantially change for the better how we and our children learn, and more important, how the young people of today and generations to come are taught to learn. To succeed at that task requires a concerted and coordinated effort – a partnership if you will – among our families, schools, youth organizations, and communities.

I say that because I am mindful that technology itself is never the reason things change. Rather, it is how people choose to apply technology – and whether they make wise decisions and address real needs – that makes the difference in the long run.

To help find out what some of those choices might be as they relate to the Internet, three years ago – when the Morino Institute was in the formative stages – we set out to better understand the potentially transforming power of interactive communications in human terms. Our approach was in contrast to the mass media's much narrower focus. Back then, the public was mostly

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hearing and reading about a wave of corporate mergers spreading throughout the telecommunications and entertainment industries and how they were promising such important and socially beneficial services as video on demand and home shopping. While others were drawn to the glitz and the headlines, we were speaking with people in Alzheimer’s centers, groups fighting substance abuse, youth centers in low-income neighborhoods, and scores of others in communities trying to heal themselves. We were left with a radically different and more promising picture of the Internet’s potential. In one of the Institute’s first policy statements on the subject we wrote...and I quote:

The real power of interactive communications is people as the ultimate source of knowledge. It is not the computers, the physical mass of wires, the complex of networks or the vast databases of information. Rather, it is people and their knowledge, relationships, insights, and spirit freely passed from one to another that engender the “magic” of this interconnected world that the Internet is making possible.

Today, the fundamental question is whether we will share this “magic” with everyone, or only a privileged few. The answer depends on the decisions we make and the actions we take from this moment on. We must come to understand that access to the Internet needs to be a reality for all our citizens, that the free and unrestricted flow of information and the ready availability of computers for everyone are not simply matters of “technology.” They are, in fact, one of the vital keys that will either open or lock the doors of opportunity for our children and ourselves.

It is within our power to determine whether this generation is to experience the rewards of self-discovery, a higher quality of life, and a renewed sense of community that derive from an interactive sharing of information and knowledge. If we make that leap, and ensure that every citizen has access to the Internet and the chance to learn the skills to apply these new technologies for personal advancement as well as the common good, America will make a successful transition to the millennium. If we fail, we may leave a legacy smaller than our own inheritance.

Let me explain what I mean by way of a story: In 1943, a boy was born into a family of western Pennsylvania coal miners who had moved to one of the ethnic neighborhoods of Cleveland. The boy's family had little money, but never considered themselves poor. To get by, his dad sold vacuum sweepers door-to-door, his older brother and sister went to work early in life to help the family, and his mom cleaned offices and houses, sometimes with her young son assisting her. The child was much loved and cared for by his parents and siblings and warmly embraced by numerous aunts and uncles and cousins.

The local school was tough, but a safe harbor for the boy – none of the guns or drugs that are commonplace today – and his teachers were good. Whenever possible, he played ball – at public rec centers, the nearby YMCA, and in neighborhood parks and hoop courts. Enveloped in love and grounded in support from those who believed in him, the boy always felt that “he could.” Lacking only money, he was rich in every other aspect of life.

Let's fast forward to the same neighborhood today. The streets are ominous – many of the shops have been boarded up. The library has closed. The rec center has been demolished, and the Y is gone. Where the Catholic school once stood is an empty lot. The boy's old public school has suffered over the years, but, as in any community, there are those committed to improving it. Still, the look on many of the youthful faces is one of futility. What promise does life hold out for them?

The child in the first scene is me. The things that made my life rich and the supports that meant so much to me growing up – a close, extended family whose values infused everything we did, the safe and nurturing places where my friends and I learned and played, and the mentors we found along the way – have almost disappeared in my old neighborhood – and in many such places today. Last year I read with anguish of a young inner-city girl who said she was saving her communion dress for her funeral. She had lost hope for the future, and at such an early age! A friend commented recently that it used to be okay to be poor in this country. People still had a sense of community...somewhere to belong...a reason to believe and a decent chance to make it – expectations that far fewer can harbor now.

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The odds against the poor today are staggering. One-fourth of children under the age of six live in poverty, surviving on an income of around \$15,000, or less, for a family of four. And it's not just a lack of money that keeps them down. Other realities have entered the picture. For example, the percentage of children who live with one parent has tripled since 1960. Couple that with a dramatic decrease in the size of immediate and extended families and a decline in cross-generational contacts. (In my day, grandparents were treasured resources and guides.) When you factor in a diminished social network and fewer institutions to provide positive gathering places for young people, you have a formula for despair, a condition in which people in the lower-income areas in our country can scarcely harbor a hope. It is no surprise to me that between 60 and 80 percent of our inner city youth are considered “seriously at risk,” unlikely to make it through a productive adulthood.

Unfortunately, a more frightening scenario awaits us. Like Dickens's *Ghost of Christmas Future*, and with as grim a message, I invite you to journey with me to the future. Let's look ahead just 10 or 15 years to my old neighborhood in Cleveland. What we see this time is irreparable blight. The much-heralded communications revolution I spoke about earlier – it came as predicted, and yes, it has transformed education, jobs, society itself. But not for everyone. Most in this neighborhood have been completely passed by. Unable to climb over the wall to a better future, they have been further shunted aside by those with the means and knowledge to forge ahead.

But, also, as in *A Christmas Carol*, this is a glimpse of the future that might be...not that necessarily will be. For we have the power to do right for many, to make sure that everyone who wants to come along on our journey to the digital frontier can. We can ensure that the networks of computers that connect us to an unprecedented volume of information and to others throughout the world are mainstays in each of our lives. We can all adapt to these new technologies, and in the process, fundamentally change the way we learn and relate to each other, reaping the rich rewards of this sea change.

If we fail, however, we will encounter a more devastating illiteracy than any we have known in the past, one that will create a gap in society deeper and more differentiating than any we have experienced. Ready or not, this transformation is coming. And when it does, it will no longer be possible to succeed simply by mastering certain content and passing standardized tests over a set number of years. (This goal has already eluded too many children, especially the poor.) Instead, we'll need to know how to acquire pertinent information from a vast sea of electronic data, how to evaluate it, how to synthesize it, how to use it as the need arises. We'll need to develop the inter-personal skills to reach out and speak with people of like mind and interest in virtual communities. Even more basic, we will have to learn how to learn, a process stretching over an entire lifetime.

As a nation, we have an obligation to use this new power to strike at some of our most vexing economic, educational, and social problems. To do so, we must prepare for the communications revolution that is upon us, opening the doors of learning and opportunity for our youth and for ourselves. And we must begin in our communities by coming to terms with a complicity to perpetuate the system, regardless of its merits, that extends from our city halls to the police, the schools, businesses, even to our non-profit institutions. This, we must agree, is no longer acceptable. Instead of bureaucrats intent on maintaining things as they are, we must turn to leaders who believe the status quo is the strongest argument for change.

Most of all, we must realize that this change is not about one more technological advance, as the typewriter was in its day, but about how we relate to each other, establishing ties to people we may never, in fact, meet; how we make ourselves heard without going through the usual channels; how we champion a cause; how we come together once more as communities; how we empower our youth to lead the way.

Across this country I see growing evidence of a grassroots movement dedicated to preparing our young people for this very different future. These organizations are planting seeds of opportunity in the fertile ground they are tilling, not in lots staked out for them by others. The movement is made up

of individuals and groups devoted to enabling young people, especially those who might otherwise be neglected, to take part in and benefit from the new technologies. They're doing so right where the kids live, restoring the human bonds that were my salvation. What makes these efforts succeed is the mission they share with effective youth groups of all kinds. Their formula is simple yet powerful: provide young people with places to go, things to do, and people who care.

Let me give you an example. There's a community-based organization I'm particularly fond of called LEAP – Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership – that has eight sites for children in low-income neighborhoods in three Connecticut cities. If you were to walk through the organization's brightly decorated Computer Learning Center in New Haven, you might witness a scene like this one, which took place some months ago: A third-grader was cheerfully composing a letter on a MAC. When she finished, the girl was given the opportunity to place her story on her own LEAP World Wide Web page. During the next several weeks, she received e-mail from users elsewhere in the United States and also from foreign countries. Imagine her pride as she read the compliments – and the self-esteem she gained from the experience. The technology had allowed her to break out of the isolation of her neighborhood and make contact with people of different cultures and backgrounds. What is the social significance of such reach and connectedness?

But the real story of LEAP isn't just the technology. The essential ingredient is the people these youngsters get to be with. LEAP recruits students from nearby high schools and colleges to serve as instructors and mentors. They play a pivotal role in the children's lives, especially in the summer when they live in donated public housing units alongside the young people they're responsible for. This arrangement allows them to become extensions of their children's communities, thereby strengthening the bond between the counselors and the young people. As role models for kids who may have no other mentors, they coach, negotiate, intercede, and impart values for life.

Another person who has seen the difference adults can make in young lives is Geoffrey Canada, who runs the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families in some of New York's poorest neighborhoods. Says Canada, "Locate a resilient

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kid and you will also find a caring adult – or several – who have guided him....For some people it takes 10,000 gallons of water, and for some kids, it's just a couple of little drops.”

When you get right down to it, it doesn't matter what activities young people get involved in at youth organizations – from midnight basketball to fixing up a local park they care about – provided they're well-thought out so kids have a sense of ownership and accomplishment and, in the end, are left with the feeling, “I can.” Working with peers enhances their experiences, giving them a chance to see beyond their own skills and abilities and to develop a sense of group pride. I believe that when you add the new technologies to the mix, you can broaden that group experience significantly and create learning relationships for engaging youth which before have not been possible. Suddenly, young people have the opportunity to connect with an even larger circle of people who share their interests or to gain access to information about things that concern them. In the Williamsburg section of New York, for instance, youths at the El Puente community center use the Internet to research projects on local issues ranging from the pollution emitted from an incinerator overhead on the Brooklyn Bridge to the asthma that afflicts many of them.

In a similar spirit last summer at LEAP, 12 to 14-year-olds created what now appear on the web as Online Social Action Journals covering topics important to them in their different neighborhoods: teenage pregnancy, violence, graffiti, and giving back to the community. They wrote essays, interviewed their neighbors, created photo essays, e-mailed people, participated in video conferences. Using various telecommunication media, they got their stories out into the world.

These examples give us an effective model for education, a learning-by-doing process that depends on interactive communication and on collaboration. Our schools would do well to pay close attention. Some already have. Barry Vann, a geography teacher at the Liberty High School in Issaquah, Washington, reports that “With the Internet, my kids see history in the making. They were learning about the end of apartheid as it was happening from the kids in South Africa.” Just a few weeks ago, on a morning TV show, I saw a

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class in another school talking over the Internet to students in China about their reactions to the death of Deng Xiaoping. Just think of the implications of experiencing the news first-hand, at the source, from those living it rather than those interpreting it for others!

Another school that is taking advantage of the new communications technology is Dalton. At this ethnically and economically diverse independent school in New York, students participate in about 200 online conferences that grow out of classroom discussions each year. These ongoing electronic conversations give them a chance to post thoughts and questions that others can read and respond to at school or from home. Among the recent online dialogues was a year-long debate between an African-American girl from the Bronx and a white student from Manhattan.

Commenting on her experience, the former student said, “With the help of the forum, I’ve become more vocal...I like the technology here. I like it because education continues outside of school. There are topics discussed here, like civil rights or women’s issues, that aren’t even talked about in the classroom, or, if they are, they take second place to the bell or the course syllabus. And yet these things mean much more than the dates you memorize. They affect your life right now.”

In the spirit of collaboration that the new technologies often foster, Dalton has worked with other schools, sharing some of the programs they have created. One experiment was with the Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School in Chula Vista, California. Principal Connie Smith describes her students as “an eclectic mix of races, languages, even marital types.” After three years of using Archaeotype, a simulation of an actual excavation in Assyria, she has seen the positive results that come from an involvement in what the technology allows the kids to do. “I get to be the person in charge,” boasts one boy working on the dig. For him, Smith said, the project provided a leadership role that could easily have found a negative outlet. “Whether you’re living in the castle on the hill or in the shack beneath it,” Smith comments, “you say the same thing: I can have this rich opportunity.”

But the reality is that many of our young people will not have such a chance in their entire lifetime. Especially those living in the inner cities, where poverty cuts the deepest, the supports are the fewest, opportunities the rarest. The fate of these children is the fate of us all. As a teacher, as a parent, as a community worker, you have a huge stake in their future. And you *can* make a difference – a big one. Here are ten things you can do:

1 ***Focus on Human Outcomes, not Technology.*** Technology can only mirror the society it serves. While computers and the Internet can facilitate great strides in learning, they can't reinvent education. Don't be swayed by promises that it will. And don't confuse the means with the end. What is our priority, wiring schools or giving kids the skills and opportunity to learn?

We need to concentrate on the human outcomes we're striving for, the emotional, educational and moral competencies that we must help our children develop while they are young. The starting point is gathering all the resources we can muster within the community, then working together to help the young ones we care about. Only when we've settled on a plan of action to address all of a child's needs, can technology advance our goals.

A remarkable experiment in New York City proves the efficacy of such collaboration. The Children's Aid Society, one of the city's oldest social service organizations, in a unique partnership with the city's Board of Education, has formed four community schools, serving nearly 6,000 students, in the Washington Heights-Inwood section of Manhattan, an impoverished, immigrant community with one of the most serious drug and crime records anywhere in America. What is special about these schools is the combination of innovative education – two are composed of theme-based mini-academies and all have integrated computer labs – and complete health and social services for children and families. Weekdays, from 7 until 9AM and again from 3 until 6PM, a full schedule of extended-day programs complements what goes on in the classroom and offers additional activities like theater, Outward Bound adventure experiences, bicycle repair and recycling, and computer training. In the evening, more classes on new technologies as well as citizenship programs attract 400 adults from the community. Add to this, a variety of programs and

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sports options available on Saturdays and in summer and it’s clear why these schools are neighborhood hubs.

Parent Resource Centers are one indication of the emphasis given to the students’ families. More than 2,500 different parents take part in school activities and programs each year, 1,400 of them on a regular basis – compelling evidence of the powerful sense of ownership they feel. Parents have successfully advocated for a pedestrian bridge near a dangerous intersection and launched 25 small businesses as part of the Family Business Development Program. In fact, the schools and the community have become so intertwined that many of the school workers are from the same neighborhood as the children they help. “The same kids I see in the clinic, I see in the grocery store and in the Laundromat,” said a nurse practitioner at one of the schools.

It is no surprise that after its first full year in operation, Intermediate School 218 had recorded the highest attendance rate in its school district. And it’s no wonder that the community schools sponsored by Children’s Aid have become a model for three new school sites nationwide.

2

Get Involved with the New Technologies. Make it a priority. I imagine that getting access to networked computers and finding opportunities for practice and training on the Internet may not be easy for many of you. Investigate local community centers, nonprofit organizations, even corporations, who sometimes make space and courses available to the public. Or you might consider buying a recycled computer. Ask around. But don’t give up. Because once you have experienced what I’m talking about – instant access to information you can use and people with shared interests – you’ll begin to understand the power of this communications revolution.

A teacher we know in Charlotte, North Carolina, took advantage of a service there named Charlotte’s Web, through which she was able to get access to a computer and the net as well as technical training and a free e-mail account. At the web site of the same name she found useful information on the entire school system, local resources she was unaware of, and professional meetings in the area that she wanted to attend. As her experience demonstrates, the Internet is a powerful tool for invigorating real communities, not just for building

virtual ones. Charlotte Web's success in using communications technology to enrich the lives of an entire region, including the underserved, so that everyone can participate more fully in community life, should inspire other cities and regions to embark on similar ventures.

3 ***Adopt a learning-to-learn approach.*** The information explosion means that our world will be one of continuous change, with obsolescence a daily fact of life. The Internet will be essential both for communicating with others and for acquiring information as you need it. As we move from an economy based on industry to one based on knowledge, excelling – even surviving – will depend on what management analyst Peter Drucker calls “a habit of continuous learning.” It will cut across ages as well as classes. In fact, it already is. Too many adults assume that this is a concern just for the young. Or that communications technology has little real impact on traditional theories of education. But the most skilled teachers, whatever the institution or organization, are those who view learning today in a very different light and are integrating new technologies into their everyday curricula and programs. That means that those in charge must be fluent in these matters, ready to impart their knowledge to others.

4 ***Understand the issues.*** Unless we provide all of our young people with access to interactive technologies and the training to use them, we stand in danger of creating another, even greater divide, this one separating the can-do's from the can-not's. Basic communications skills will soon include computer and multimedia competency as well knowing how to read. Some schools have begun to recognize this by turning librarians into media specialists and making them responsible for electronic as well as print resources. Going even further, a panelist at the World Economic Forum last month, suggested “an expanded notion of literacy:...the ability to navigate informational space.”

As much as we wish that our public schools could disseminate these skills to all those who need them, the task is too great. Fortunately, this void is being filled in part by community centers like the one in East Palo Alto, California, called Plugged In. By providing computer training and Internet access via EPAnet to those already at a disadvantage because of income and race, Plugged In, and other programs like it, are making preventive strikes against an even greater disenfranchisement in the future. And by becoming true neighborhood

community centers, they are acknowledging the importance of the human web to the electronic network, stressing the value of the users, their mentors, and their relationships with others in the community.

5 ***Ensure low-cost access for all.*** Access to networks must be available to everyone, for it will become the defining gate to opportunity next to one's own heart and drive. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 promised that deregulation would not only bring lower prices but so stimulate the market that the information superhighway would reach all of our doors. A year later, cable prices are nearly eight percent higher, competition is shrinking as telephone and media companies rush to combine, and the electronic bridge to the future may collapse before it is even built. The administration's goal of wiring every home and school in the nation is remote at best. If six percent of our homes are without telephones, what percentage will be without a "digital line" to opportunity and learning in the future?

Nevertheless, it is possible, as we enter the new millennium, for every one of our citizens to have public access – in our churches, our libraries, our schools and government buildings. All of us here have a stake in making sure this happens, no matter where we live or work. Let us not forget for a minute that we, too, are the very consumers of the services provided by the telephone and cable companies of today and those that the hybrids of tomorrow will be trying to entice us to buy. We can exercise our power and influence by letting it be known that we expect these companies to share a concern for and interest in the public's well-being. We should make it clear to them and to our legislators that the poor or otherwise "undesirable" areas must be served. It is our duty to carry this message to the state, county, and city level. Otherwise, our future will be determined for us.

In a recent Atlantic Monthly article entitled, "The Capitalist Threat," philanthropist George Soros addresses the need to satisfy the public interest even in a market economy. He says, "I see the open society as occupying a middle ground, where the rights of the individual are safeguarded but where there are some shared values that hold society together."

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There is more to access than getting to the network, however. Knowledge is the key. We need to have centers big and small, from YMCAs to churches and senior centers, where those in our neighborhoods can enjoy access in a safe and nurturing environment – places that encourage learning. A number of grassroots initiatives are already doing so. The United Neighborhood Houses of New York, for instance, has created “family rooms” with Internet-connected computers that are available to the public and are also used by participants in the programs sponsored by five separate settlement houses, classes that range from Head Start for the parents of young children to English as a Second Language for immigrants. By integrating technology into such basic services, the project invites the digital underclass to take part in the information revolution.

Staff and volunteer development are a constant concern of people like Mel King. The M.I.T. Community Fellows program he founded in Cambridge puts special emphasis on training and supporting those working to provide technology access in underserved communities. Though he retired from M.I.T. last year, King is the driving force behind a new computer center in the city’s South End area – just one of his many projects.

Access is leverage, as digital initiates soon discover. On the Internet, individuals and groups can make their messages heard far more swiftly and effectively than ever before. Let me give you an example. In San Francisco, Parent Advocates for Youth issues a report card that grades the city on matters that affect their children. A recent one, sent to the mayor and publicized in the group’s newsletter, gave a C+ to the 21 recreation and park programs that serve some 50,000 city kids. Imagine the pressure on city officials if the same survey were conducted – and the results published – on the Internet. Then think of the force your group might have in a truly networked society.

6 ***Claim your “citizen’s right” to information.*** As new users quickly discover, the most compelling reason to go online is the abundance of the information you find there. It belongs to all of us. We must encourage those with valuable intellectual assets to make them available on the Internet, and we must demand that certain kinds of information remain free, or inexpensive. Our country’s public library system was built on just such principles.

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Data collected by our governments, by our educational institutions, and especially by the non-profit sector, are vital to our long-term future. If you need convincing, just take a look at what’s available right now at sites on the Internet maintained by NASA, the Geological Survey, the National Archives, The State Department, or the National Parks Service. But it is local information that affects us most directly. And there is plenty of it on the web. You can analyze statistics on toxic waste or research other issues that affect your life on The Right to Know Network, while reports on local crime, legislation, community programs, jobs, and much more can be accessed on programs like the Tallahassee Free-Net in Florida.

Now imagine that at each stop you had to pay a fee. How many of us could stay online?

We must not allow opportunity and learning to become a toll-booth process in which each new level of inquiry requires another half-buck. If we do not resist the impulse to privatize what is now basically a publicly supported service, ultimately, information monopolies will build up around our most valuable intellectual resources and will vest in a few the ultimate power of an open society – the free flow of ideas.

7 *Investigate new economic opportunities.* At the risk of sounding like I’m negating what I said to you a moment ago about the need to avoid being nickled and dimed every time we download a file or fact, I also see the need to encourage the proper mix of fee-for-services on the Internet. I believe this can be done without any conflict with people’s basic right to free access. The difference is allowing enterprising business people to charge for simplifying, synthesizing, and repackaging information that adds value that others are willing to pay for. Tony Raymond, a former web page manager at the Federal Election Commission, takes raw statistics that come directly from his old agency, sifts through and sorts it, and, in the words of a former colleague, “puts the hot stuff right out front.” Want to see who in your home town donated more than \$200 to a political candidate? You’ll find the names, and much more, right there on his site, provided you’re willing to pay for the service so that you don’t have to spend hours culling the data that you, or anyone, can get for free.

I think we need to treat the emerging communications technology the same way we once viewed the nation's interstate highway system. The opportunity to truck goods from one end of the country to another meant people in different regions could have access to products that used to be far too expensive – or impractical because of what it would cost when it got there – to ship such distances. The emerging technologies that have created new careers and jobs for skilled professionals can also support those of different social and economic levels, people who have ideas that can be turned into potentially profitable businesses with relatively low investments. Already, we've seen the growth of online newsletters, magazines, and other information-based services that might otherwise be too impractical to consider. The key, and challenge, is to match your skills with the promise and opportunity of the new technology. Consider the story of Anita Brown, a former secretary who turned to marketing nostalgia T-shirts over America Online. As she puts it so eloquently:

“As steel is to Pittsburgh, information is to Washington, DC. Good secretaries there have been expert at locating, sorting, storing, guarding and disseminating sensitive information before and since the time PCs appeared on every employee's desk. I was an information manager, a content developer, a community builder, and a communicator before ever sitting down to a computer.”

“Rather than legislate, we must educate, teaching our young people to evaluate information and to discriminate among offers made in cyberspace, just as they do in real life.”

Until two years ago, when she took the electronic plunge, the 53-year-old Ms. Brown had never ventured into cyberspace. Today she spends much of her time there, counseling other African Americans about the importance of computer literacy and access to the Internet.

We cannot minimize the challenge posed by the new technologies to those in the traditional service and labor jobs. Few will benefit directly, it is true. But the coming changes may trigger a booming economy that leads to a demand for their services. It is also feasible that in the future we will see levels of barter established again, thanks to new efficiencies in matching need to supply.

Such arrangements are already creating what Dr. Edgar Cahn calls “social capital” in some cities, where a range of services from hair styling to auto repair can be purchased with “Time Dollars.” In Chicago, for instance, the Cross-Age Peer Tutoring Program is built around mentorships that earn grammar school kids Time Dollars and give them preferential access to summer jobs, recycled computer equipment, and other perks. For 100 Time Dollars you can earn a computer – the goal of many inner city kids.

8

Maintain an informed, balanced view. While the digital world beckons with opportunities, it presents risks as well, especially to our youth. Dangers range from banal to serious. I recently read in the *New York Times* about a Dartmouth sophomore who pursues undergraduate life without leaving his chair: he orders pizza, arranges dates, contacts professors and even talks to his roommates a few feet away on the campus e-mail system known as Blitzmail. Another recent story in the media told of students at a different university establishing an electronic network to exchange term papers and a “service” to transmit answers by way of pagers to students taking tests. While there is an admirable ingenuity in all this, there’s a real lapse in values and ethics, too.

More troublesome is the use of e-mail to send hate messages, particularly against Asians, at a number of U.S. campuses. Using the addresses of others and masking their own identities, the senders are hard to snare. The Prejudice Institute near Baltimore says that their research to date indicates there is no

more harassment by e-mail than by telephone or mail. But abuses like this, and the looming presence of pornography, lead some to advocate censorship.

Still, freedom of speech is a right we must guard as vigilantly in this medium as in any other. So are the other values embodied in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Rather than legislate, we must educate, teaching our young people to think critically, to evaluate information, discriminate among offers made in cyberspace, just as they would in real life, and to choose their virtual companions as carefully as they pick their real-time friends. While we must safeguard our younger children with controls that we feel appropriate, we should resist dictating the behavior of others to conform to our own.

9 ***Support community learning centers.*** They're called by different names and are housed in a whole range of settings, but in all such places you'll find mutually supportive efforts aimed squarely at helping a child develop the skills he or she will need to function as a competent adult. Some of the most effective efforts in this movement have been organizations collaborating with neighborhood schools. Claudine Taaffe, for example, develops programming at New Haven's K-5 Helene Grant School in a relationship that LEAP's founder, Henry Fernandez, established when the principal Jeffie Frazier, came to him for help. Ms Frazier says quite forthrightly, that she wants all the resources she can find for her school. Evident in that declaration is her strong sense of leadership. That, coupled with LEAP's project design to train every staff person that works with the youngsters there, helped create the receptive atmosphere that was essential for adding electronic communications to the school's culture.

"We are all committed to serving the same audience – kids and their families," says Taaffe. "Let's be clear: you don't serve children effectively without working with their parents. At Helene Grant, the school is the center – for children and families – from which all learning stems. It is inside a circle that is complete only when community-based organizations, social service agencies, businesses, libraries, and universities (in our case, Yale) work in concert at the place where kids spent the most time."

Recognizing that support for parents as well as kids must begin early, the Children's Aid Society in New York sponsors programs like Mommy and Me

“Youth organizations that have the most success in changing lives are the ones that act like families and communities.”

and Para Padres that lay the foundations for constructive learning at the toddler stage. Even such early interventions may not prevent the later learning “disabilities” that are sometimes more reflective of the outside world than inner inadequacies. For once inside the school system, many of our youths falter irretrievably, and help must come from different places in the community – other centers of learning and belonging.

In their landmark study of more than sixty effective neighborhood youth organizations, the authors of *Urban Sanctuaries* took the novel approach of first asking children themselves, rather than the experts, for suggestions and guidance. They learned some good marketing tips – if you want to entice kids to get involved in learning activities outside of the traditional classroom, don’t use terms like “after-school” or “out-of-school” programs. Too many inner-city youth already view their schools as places of discouragement and rejection.

From their conversations with these street-wise youth, researchers also heard about what does appeal to young people and what works for them. Above all, they want to go to “places of hope,” where they are treated not as problems to be handled, but as resources to be encouraged. More than that, the youth organizations that have the most success in changing lives are the ones that act like families and communities. As one adolescent commented: “Kids can walk around the trouble if there is some place to walk to, and someone to walk with.”

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Give Youth the Power They Need. Teenagers today have a lot of time on their hands – about forty percent of their waking hours, if they live in the inner city. Contrary to what many believe, getting in trouble is not a goal for most kids, it’s a substitute for meaningful activity. Last year, Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth took a poll of young people living in San Francisco. “Positive alternatives for youth” ranked number one as the way to “reduce juvenile crime.” And when asked what equipment they considered most important for a youth center, the city’s teens gave the highest priority to computers – ahead of pool tables, swimming pools, even video games. Young people sometimes see the future more clearly than adults. And often they know what they’ll need to get there.

What many of them already know they need is knowledge of the net – now. It was no surprise to read in the *New York Times* that at 4:30PM one cold day last month, scores of young people lined up outside of the Flatbush branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, some waiting sixty to ninety minutes for a half-hour session at the computers inside. To meet this demand, we must extend public access to far more neighborhood centers and allocate the resources necessary for training staff and volunteers, under whose guidance older students can hook into a service like Telementoring, which links up high school girls with practicing professionals in fields that interest them.

We must also find those gifted individuals who can make the electronic experience compelling for youth who may find technology intimidating, leading them to online ventures like the Jason Project, which links kids from around the world to Dr. Robert Ballard and his team of ocean scientists in the undersea habitat Aquarius, or to CitySpace, where young global participants construct an environment of the future, collaborating with adult artists, mentors, and other kids. Also on the Internet they can create publications – a book of stories, an art gallery, a web site of their own.

Experiences like these are as captivating as they are instructive. One last example: In just three days, many lucky kids who rarely travel beyond their own neighborhoods will join the “learning community” that is forming around Linda Finch’s recreation of Amelia Earhart’s heroic flight. It’ll take Finch and countless young cybernauts on a trip that spans five continents. Commenting on the adventure, the editor of the online newsletter NIIITeach wrote, “Amelia Earhart taught people to dream and to turn those dreams into reality, in spite of every day adversity.” What more empowering lesson could there be?

Those are my thoughts, my suggested actions. By no means is it a complete list but a place to start.

I’d be remiss, though, if I didn’t acknowledge a question that is probably on many minds. That is, what gives me such confidence about the power of the new technologies to transform education and society so dramatically? After all, many innovations in computers and technology have come and gone over the

past 150 years. The answer is that this technology is far different from any other in its impact on human lives. The technology of interactive communications will change the status quo with or without your involvement. The question is how and to what end we will use it – to help people empower themselves and give those at every social and economic level a voice and an option, or to trigger a division among us that may never be healed.

That's why I'm here today...to urge you to become part of a movement made up of those who recognize that we have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to offer new hope for our youth and ourselves as we enter the 21st century.

As Marian Wright Edelman herself has told us, we need to ensure our children a head start in a difficult and forbidding world. Our mission, on the eve of the digital age, is to use the new technologies to make sure that happens and that our youth are given what they need to become the best they can be.

I'm ready for that challenge. What about you?

Thank you.

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