

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

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## MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 19, 2004

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 51 :COMMENTS ON TIME MAGAZINE ARTICLE ON THE WIRELESS SOCIETY: OLD SCHOOL, NEW TRICKS

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Mayor Euille has asked for comment on an article in the November 3, 2003 issue of Time Magazine titled, Wireless Society: Old School, New Tricks - Students at Brooklyn's Packer School are Field Testing the Wireless Future. This article directly relates to the Alexandria City Public Schools budget initiative to extend the laptop initiative to all students at T.C. Williams next school year.

Because this article focused on schools, staff asked the ACPS's Director of Information Technology Services, Chris Sieger, to comment. Here is his reply:

"There are some obvious similarities between the description of laptop introduction at the Packer School and at ACPS, and some very obvious differences. Without question, the description of the transformed atmosphere - students using the laptops constantly - in class, in the cafeteria, sitting in the lobby - is very similar. Our children will leave our schools thoroughly adapted to the electronic age.

"That, of course, was one of the key factors in our decision to pursue 'one-to-one' computing, as it is now called. While one parent quoted in the article notes that it 'leveled the playing field' for her special needs child, it should be noted that the children attending this school could afford to purchase laptops - and would have every educational and cultural advantage possible available to them. In the Alexandria Public Schools, this is obviously not the case. Consequently, we very consciously have attempted to provide the same electronic advantage to ALL of our students.

"Our biggest challenge will be extending the wireless campus beyond the school building. Minnie Howard is wireless now. TC Williams will be wireless by fall (it will actually have both a wired infrastructure and wireless access). It is not feasible to provide dial-up internet access to every Alexandria student. Finding an alternative means of providing safe, off-campus internet access to all students is critical if we wish to maximize the benefits of the laptop initiative. A wireless metro wide network would be the ideal.

"As TC Williams is torn down and reconstructed, our wireless capabilities will present both a challenge and a solution. It will be a huge challenge to keep both our wired and wireless infrastructures fully operative during the construction. On the other hand, we

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expect to be able to provide the students who have to endure three years in an educational environment under construction with a high quality technology program - a far better environment than we could provide without student laptops and a wireless network. The wireless notebooks will also permit us to comply with Virginia's SOL Technology Initiative, by providing on-line SOL testing for all students – a feat which frankly would be impossible in the next three years without the laptop initiative.

“Many of the paragraphs describing the environment at the school invoke scenes at Minnie Howard. Without question, it is a challenge for teachers to change their methods to take advantage of the laptops in front of them - and it doesn't happen overnight. For teachers with good classroom management skills, the benefits come far more quickly.

“As far as damages and breakdowns, we very carefully designed our support system to minimize downtime for students with damaged computers. That being said, teachers still have to have alternative plans in the event of technology "failures."

“And - just as the students at Packard ventured into areas not planned for by the school planners, our students are very creative with the use of their systems. For this reason we have extensive monitoring capabilities, and plenty of flags go up when untoward activities are taking place.

“Finally, despite the first year challenges, the first year at Minnie Howard has built the foundation for a instructional technology program in ACPS unparalleled in a major school system.”

With respect to the City government's wireless future, some of it is here and some of it will be here soon. Currently the City's Police Department has provided mobile, wireless computers for many of its patrol vehicles. The Fire Department is beginning to deploy mobile wireless computers to a number of its apparatus. In Code Enforcement staff are field testing a system that will allow field inspectors to work from wirelessly enable tablet computers from their field locations.

As part of its future technology assessment, in the next several months, the Information Technology Services Department plans to seek proposals on enabling a wireless downtown Alexandria zone, which would consist of a number of blocks that would allow members of the public to use the Internet from their wirelessly enabled devices. At some point, Minnie Howard or T.C. Williams students might be able to use their laptop in this wireless zone. However, until we receive proposals and understand the cost and technology implications, it is too early to determine if and how such a public wireless network could or should be deployed. A related City action that we will pursue in the next several months is to examine installing wireless zones in key public meeting spaces in City Hall so that citizens could have access to network services as they are conducting business there.

Attachment: Time Magazine Article, November 3, 2003, Old School, New Tricks.

cc: Rebecca Perry, Superintendent of Schools  
Chris Sieger, Director, Information Technology Services, ACPS



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# WIRELESS SOCIETY

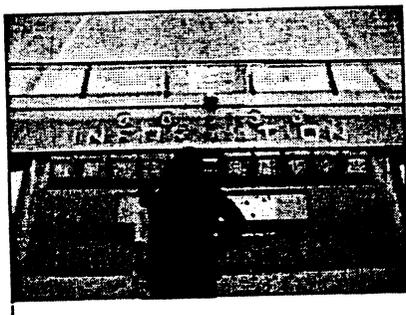
**WIRELESS SOCIETY**  
Old School, New Tricks  
Students at Brooklyn's Packer school are field testing the wireless future. And you thought high school was tough  
By Lev Grossman




  
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November 3, 2003  
Some of us still remember the first time we saw a computer. I saw mine in 1977. It was a Commodore PET 2001 (a Personal Electronic Terminal). It was squat and beige and not particularly personal, and its sole function was to play a game called Hunt the Wumpus, which seemed like a fair and adequate justification for its existence to a second-grader. As the year was 1977, the PET was kept in the school's fallout shelter, which otherwise was unoccupied owing to a lack of fallout.

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None of the students at the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y., will have the same sort of memory. For them, computers have always been there, a fact of life, in a way that no generation before theirs has experienced. Packer is at the cutting edge of an educational movement in the U.S. that is integrating laptop computers into middle schools and high schools--they're known as "laptop schools." But Packer has taken the idea a step farther. Its entire campus has been

turned into a wireless Internet-access zone. Wherever they go, whatever they're doing--whatever they're supposed to be doing--Packer students are in constant high-bandwidth contact with the school, with one another and with the Internet at large. In essence, Packer has added an invisible fourth dimension to its campus. But life in the fourth dimension is somewhat different from what the Packer's faculty anticipated. Can education survive the age of nonstop information?

For a school of the future, the Packer Collegiate Institute has a pretty fancy past. It was founded in 1845 (it's the oldest independent school in Brooklyn) and it occupies a cluster of architecturally distinguished buildings in downtown Brooklyn, including a 19th century church complete with vaulted ceilings and stained-glass windows. Packer has an impressive pedigree, a highly competitive admissions policy and an extremely hefty tuition bill, and in 1999 the school's administrators took a look at their computer lab and deemed it unworthy of the Packer name. The staff decided that to keep pace with the galloping ubiquity of computers in the world at large, Packer had to get its computers out of the lab and into the classroom in a new and radical way.

To say that this plan met with misgivings from teachers and parents would be an understatement. Would the kids use the technology to cheat? Would they become cyborg Stepford children? Would they, Brooklyn being Brooklyn, get mugged for their laptops after class? "I was worried about how it was going to affect their focus in the classroom," remembers Rebecca Boucher, who has four kids at Packer. "Their interaction, their basic eye-to-eye contact, even. Was it going to become an isolating experience? I was very unclear how it was going to work." The teachers were the ones who would have to answer that question, and they didn't know either. "How would I do this?" said a sixth-grade teacher. "I did not have the skills. The kids are better at it than I am!"

The wireless Packer would be very different from the old Packer. All assignments, handouts, work sheets, what-have-you would be distributed electronically. (Thus rendering the copy machine, possibly the only device on earth less reliable than the computer, obsolete.) Students would take notes on their laptops in class, then take their laptops home and do their homework on them. To turn in an assignment, they would simply drag and drop it into the appropriate folder, where the teacher could wirelessly retrieve it. Voila: the paperless classroom.

By the fall of 2001, the system was ready to go live. Christina Devitt, Packer's cheerful, indefatigable director of technology, and her team placed 50 wireless transceivers around the school--unassuming, almost unnoticeable little boxes that flooded the campus with wireless signals. Two grades, sixth and ninth, were selected to be the school's inaugural cybernauts. Their parents were required to buy laptops for them on their own dime: Apple iBooks for the sixth-graders, Dell Windows machines for the older kids--the idea was to give students a look at both sides of the personal computing world. To kick things off in style, the staff held an Out of the Box event at which the kids unpacked and were introduced to their electronic sidekicks for the first time. "There was an incredible amount of excitement and energy," Alan Bernstein, Packer's assistant head, recalls. "It was sort of like unwrapping Christmas presents." Out of the Box days have since become an annual Packer tradition.

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