Unit 8 Assignment Example: Tablets for SAISD Students

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*Please note that this is a* ***sample*** *Unit 8 Assignment to help inspire and guide your own original writing of the assignment. Be sure to review the assignment instructions and grading rubric, complete each task in the instructions, and contact the instructor with any questions.*

Tablets for SAISD Students

The Texas Education Agency rates state schools using a four-tier system, with “exemplary” schools being those with the highest student scores and “academically unacceptable” being the lowest rating. Schools can also rank as “recognized” and “academically acceptable.” While the many families moving to Texas for its low cost of living and unemployment rates seek out school districts with “exemplary” ratings, long-term residents whose children go to low-rated schools must move or put their children into private schools--if they can afford to do so. Despite being one of the largest school districts in one of the nation’s largest cities, the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) received only an “academically acceptable” rating in 2011, which was actually an improvement for the district since it received “academically unacceptable” ratings in 2009 and 20010 (“SAISD Progresses, Earns Acceptable State Rating,” 2011; “Texas Education Agency,” 2012). The “Great Schools” website gives the district a 3 out of 10 rating (“San Antonio Independent School District,” 2014). In order to improve academic performance and help SAISD students compete with peers in higher-rated districts when applying to college, the district needs to provide every high school student with an electronic tablet; this will encourage more learning outside of the classroom and increase mastery of skills.

As evidence that students in the district need this boost, one needs only look at how the SAISD students compare to others in the state of Texas. One evaluator of Texas schools, Local School Directory, indicates that the district’s graduation rate is 51.5%, more than 20% below the state average, while the dropout rate of 10.9 % is more than double the state’s average of 4% (2014). The city cannot continue to let students in this district struggle to compete with their peers on tests and leave them to drop out of school. San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro, a keynote speaker at the 2012 Democratic Convention, touted the city’s innovative education programs like Pre-K for SA and Café College, programs meant to give academically unprepared or impoverished students greater opportunities (Castro, 2012). America is a place of opportunity, but the government must provide the resources for achieving the American dream, and he believes education is the foundation for this upward mobility (Castro, 2012).

The city has already looked to tablets as a way to increase literacy rates. While San Antonio’s population makes it the nation’s seventh-largest city, it ranks 60th among the country in terms of literacy rates (Weber, 2014). The city opened BiblioTech, an all-digital library, in 2012; the area comprises the Harlandale and Southside school districts, which have ratings of 4 and 3 out of 10 respectively, according to the Great Schools.org web site (“Southside Independent School District,” 2014; “Harlandale Independent School District,” 2014). Ashley Elkholf, the head librarian at BiblioTech, observed that the library is frequently filled with local high school students who want access to the library’s on-site desktops and the tablets that can be checked out (personal communication, February 14, 2014). For those who worry that students will not be responsible for the technology and will either damage or fail to return tablets, she notes that no patron has failed to return an iPad checked out of the library. Based on the interest area students have shown in the library, she believed that they would benefit immensely if local schools provided the tablets to all students (A. Elkholf, personal communication, February 14, 2014). Like SAISD, students in these districts need greater access to technology, and the library’s tablets and computers do provide some of that access.

While providing students with tablets would be a first step, students would also need internet access at home to review videos or complete online exercises. The *USA Today* article about BiblioTech indicates that many residents near that library still lack Wi-fi access, which suggests that this would be a challenge in the San Antonio ISD as well (Weber, 2014). The city should look into providing low-cost Wi-fi access in this area of the city, or the district could provide Wi-fi hotspots to any student who lacks internet access at home or purchase a data plan for the tablets.

Certainly, providing tablets and internet access is a significant investment, and technology is not cheap. Many schools in Texas are struggling financially since the state cut its education budget by $5 billion in 2011 instead of raising taxes (Castro, 2011). School districts then had to cut art programs, fire teachers, and figure out how to improve test scores with limited funding. Technology often moves to the bottom of the priority list when schools have to decide between new computers and larger student-teacher ratios. However, Minnesota’s Byron Independent School District actually found that technology provided a solution to their budget woes. To reduce costs, the Byron ISD decided to abandon textbooks and create their own math curriculum (Fulton, 2013). They used Moodle, a free, open-source platform, instead of purchasing an expensive learning management system, and by creating their own curriculum, they did not have to pay steep fees to a publishing company for physical or e-books (Fulton, 2013). Byron ISD showed that technology combined with innovative curriculum could save money and improve the students’ learning.

Districts do not only have to consider initial and long-term maintenance costs; they have to wonder whether the technology will work. The failure of some high-profile tablet pilot programs in Los Angeles and North Carolina could generate fears of a similar high-cost folly. The Guilford County, NC school district spent $30 million to give all of its middle school students Android tablets only to experience numerous hardware malfunctions and screen breaks (Catalano, 2013). SAISD must review the technologies carefully to determine what will be the most cost-efficient and reliable tablets for student use.

The school district can also create partnerships with local businesses to reduce cost. Education innovators like Microsoft founder Bill Gates advocate technology as a way to provide teachers with the tools they need to motivate, challenge, and support students, and he has repeatedly invested in technology programs meant to do just that. He argues that “just giving people devices . . . has a really terrible track record; you really have to change the curriculum,” but he also notes the need to “ ‘to learn, make mistakes, try new things out, find new partners to do things’ ” (as cited in Young, 2012, para. 3). The San Antonio/Austin area has numerous technology companies like RackSpace that might be willing to invest in a program that provides students with tablets.

Even school districts that can afford technological innovations wonder if the investment will lead to improved student learning outcomes, however. As Justin Reich (2012) notes in *Education Week*, technology “has the potential to transform education for many students,” but he follows that with the reminder that “it is not a standalone silver bullet for improving outcomes” (para. 1). He suggests that a rush to integrate technology followed a study commissioned by President Clinton in the late 1990s that recommended the use of educational technology despite the lack of evidence for outcome improvement. Without carefully considering the purpose of the technology and training teachers to use that technology effectively, he argues, technology will fail to have a real impact on learning (Reich, 2012). SAISD must create a curriculum that uses tablets effectively, or this investment will not help students.

Furthermore, critics argue that technology will dehumanize education; in fact, technology can actually personalize education. The Byron ISD experiment suggests that that technology combined with a thoughtful pedagogy can have a positive impact on learning. Teachers realized that designing their own curriculum meant they could adapt the curriculum as needed; technology actually afforded them the opportunity to personalize their students’ education. Once a textbook is adopted, the schools are stuck with that curriculum until the next adoption cycle, but Byron’s teachers could make adjustments to a particular unit if the students were struggling to master an objective. Many teachers also created instructional videos, which allowed students to watch videos from multiple teachers. If one teacher’s explanation of a concept did not help the student understand, another teacher’s approach might work (Fulton, 2013). Their use of technology actually improved their teaching, and SAISD could adopt a similar approach if students had tablets.

A key benefit of deploying tablets and integrating video tutorials into the curriculum is that teachers can “flip” the classroom, requiring students to review lessons at home then come to school prepared to work on assignments, ask questions, and even tutor each other. Kidd and Chen (2011) call this “ubiquitious learning,” where students are able to access information anytime and anyplace, and they argue that “this type of learning can be powerful, personal, current, and situated” (p. xi). Khan Academy, a non-profit that provides thousands of free educational videos and interactive tutorials to teachers and students, provides a model for using technology to help students learn concepts outside of the classroom, and founder Salman Khan (2011) advocates the use of these videos to create a “global, one-world classroom.” Khan’s TED Talk describes a successful flipped fifth-grade math classroom pilot; students clearly improved as they reviewed videos and completed tutorials (Khan, 2011). After about 2 ½ years, students in the Byron ISD’s flipped classrooms scored higher on chapter tests than those in traditional, lecture-oriented classes (Fulton, 2013). While researchers are still sifting through evidence like these pilots to see if the flipped model has a direct impact on student outcomes, Goodwin and Miller (2013) note that educators see distinct benefits like better student-teacher interaction, the ability to provide students immediate feedback on their work, and the chance to let students learn at their own pace. These benefits alone are reason enough for SAISD to run a tablet pilot in at least one school.

Failure to provide students with the educational opportunities afforded by technology, particularly in underperforming school districts, will further widen the “digital divide” and increase economic disparity in this country. As Jose Ferreira (2014), founder of the Knewton adaptive learning platform argues, “[W]e can’t improve education by curing poverty. We have to cure poverty by improving education” (para. 6). The best way to improve education SAISD is to increase student access to technology, and providing them with tablets will be an important step in that direction.

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