

•By Susan Howerter <[susan@mymac.com](mailto:susan@mymac.com)>•

## A Rainbow Colored Autumn

September and the kids are headed back to school. Was it only a year ago that the iMac was a little bondi-blue novelty, just beginning to pop up in a few classrooms? I managed to finagle an invitation to an inservice that first week of September '98 at an alternative high school which had ordered several iMacs for the kids. My own school, due for an update in 2003, had to scrape along with a mix of LCs and Apple IIs. And when it comes time to update, it's almost certain to be PC-based. Information Technology in Topeka no longer speaks Mac.

The inservice was fun, even if I wasn't due for a new computer. They gave away T-shirts and software. There were videos and speakers. There was even an iMac, the first one most of us had seen. But there was also a lot of confusion, not to say, misinformation. The printer wouldn't print. Some software wouldn't load. And when teachers asked how they were to transfer their files, they were assured, by the Apple reps, that Imation's drive was ready and on the market.

It wouldn't be actually be available until at least a month after school had begun and that didn't include waiting-in-line time. With no way to move files, no networking in place and no way to install the school reading program, there was more anxiety than rejoicing last fall.

Worse, the teachers badly needed 'At Ease' to keep sticky fingers out of the works, especially as this was a school serving Topeka's most disturbed middle and high schoolers. I put out an SOS to other educators on the Net, hoping one of my online friends would have found a solution. But it was all too new. Not only was there no floppy drive to transfer the old protection, there was considerable doubt that the current software would work with the iMac's System 8.1.

Apple's tech support was clueless. Useless. Inept, incompetent, and uninterested. The teachers were told to download 'At Ease' from the Internet. But the school had no Internet as yet. Then they were told to download to another computer and Zip it over. But remember, there were no USB Zips at that time. Or much of anything else. Apple did, at last, mail out some hard copies. For the iMac. On floppies!!! When the school protested that was not a workable solution as they had, ahem, floppiless iMacs, they were told "Sorry. No return. The software has been opened!"

Fortunately persistence, and the ingenuity of the average Mac lover, came to the fore. The Principal eventually found someone with a CD burner to make a CD with 'At Ease' and a few other vital files. As I understand it, things were beginning to fall into place sometime in January.

How different it is this year. I got a phone call yesterday from the husband of a second grade teacher in a small school south of Topeka. Joy and excitement! The office was piled with a rainbow of boxes; each teacher would sport an iMac on her desk this year. They were apparently doled out with no choice as to color—bet there is a fair amount of trading going on after hours—but she was thrilled to have drawn a lime green for her class.

The students were not forgotten. Although the class iMac will sit on each teacher's desk, the computer lab has 25 lollipops ranged around the room in strawberry, grape, lime, tangerine and blueberry. Kansas State kids can fight over the purple. Don't know what the KU kids will make of strawberry. But the first day of school will knock their socks off.

The only problem, according to the teacher's husband, a pretty computer-savvy guy, was that the old classroom ImageWriters did not seem to fit any of the ports on the back of the spiffy new iMac. Well, no. And there was no sign of stacks of printers to accompany the wealth of new computers. On the other hand, it appeared that the whole school was being networked, which probably meant a central printer somewhere about. With an abundance of Zips and other USB equipment now available, this year should get off to a pretty good start.

I do hope they manage to install several printers per building as the excitement of using all those new iMacs could result in a serious backup in the printer department. Shades of 'the more things change, the more they stay the same.'

Twenty years ago, teachers spent every spare moment in line for the old crank Ditto machine, which later gave way to camping out after hours for the Xerox. (Tempers were known to flair when someone jumped the line.) Each new advance

has led to an outpouring in teacher creativity, which has led to a paper shortage, which, in turn, has panicked the administration to cut off paper supplies about Easter.

They never learn. The heads downtown measure success in major equipment purchases. But those same heads seem oblivious to the need to plan for actually using the new stuff for educational purposes. Buying into technology looks good on paper. Makes a district look modern. Makes administrators feel important. But supplies? Kids? Teachers? A drag on the budget.

It's not just parsimony, however. Some of it is simple dunderheadedness. One of the district's most enthusiastic computer users, a preschool teacher who designs personalized materials and projects for her children and constantly attends computer workshops on her own time, was lamenting last year that new all-in-one Macs sat unused in some classrooms while she was stuck with an ancient LCII. Surely, I said, they can see that you really need a new computer. And would make such good use of it.

"No," she said. "All they know downtown is that a computer is a computer. And there's already a computer on my inventory. They don't have a clue what to do with them once they are in the classroom. Maybe that's why they never order us any software."

This year the long awaited computerized IEPs have arrived for all the teachers in Special Education. What a saving in time and effort! The problem? The Special Ed classes run solely on Macs, many of them years old. But downtown is big on IBM. So all those new IEPs are done in Microsoft Word—which not only isn't available to the special ed teachers, it won't run on those old LCs. Those that can, teach. Those that can't, administrate.

So if your kids are lucky enough to find a rainbow-colored autumn when they head back to school, you might want to check that there will be sufficient resources for them to make full use of the new equipment. On the other hand, an administration smart enough to choose Macs over PCs, in spite of the current pressure to make Microsofties of us all, just might be smart enough to do it right.

•Susan Howeter• <[susan@mymac.com](mailto:susan@mymac.com)>

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