

# iPads in the classroom: Not a bust, but not yet a boon

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"D" is the letter of the day in Maria Martinez's kindergarten class at Maywood Elementary. On a recent weekday, Martinez drew a capital and lower case "d" on the white board.

"Beautiful!" the children shouted. "Nice!"

They used their fingers to form a "D" on the wide writing lines that appeared on their iPad screens. The 5- and 6-year-olds in this largely poor and Hispanic school in southeast Los Angeles County already know how to navigate many educational apps loaded onto tablets, some 10 million of which are in classrooms across the U.S., according to Apple Inc.

"I can't imagine teaching without iPads," said Martinez, whose classroom provides a window into how technology is being used successfully to help children learn - even as the Los Angeles Unified School District attempts to salvage its botched attempt to distribute the pricey, high-tech devices. The district is the nation's second largest after New York City.

Los Angeles Schools Superintendent John Deasy has called the intended \$1 billion program to provide an iPad to every student in the district a civil rights imperative with potential to equalize access to technology. But the initiative, the largest of its kind, stumbled this fall during its first phase - a \$30 million rollout to 47 schools - after some 300 [high school students](#) skirted the tablets' security to surf social networking sites.

Under pressure, Deasy called for a delay of the rollout, which means all schools aren't likely to get the devices until 2015, a year later than planned.

Mistakes made in Los Angeles are now being heeded nationally as a cautionary tale, with [school districts](#) halting technology rollouts until rules regarding the use of the devices are finalized and teachers get more training.

"If we take away the old textbook, and replace it with digital curriculum, there's a transition that has to take place, and it doesn't happen just because you hand out a device," said Debbie Karcher, head of technology for Florida's Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

The district recently halted its plan to hand out devices to seventh- and ninth-graders. "I think people and districts want to go from zero to 60 in five seconds."

Technology advocates say the Los Angeles Unified school district failed to ask basic questions that must be addressed before schools introduce large-scale technology programs.

"I haven't seen anything like this in the 10 years I've been doing this work," said Leslie Wilson of the Michigan-based One-to-One Institute, a nonprofit that provides technology guidance to schools and districts nationwide. "Did they have a desired goal beyond the ever-present, 'We want our kids to be 21st century learners?' Why do we want every child to have an iPad? Because it will do what?"

Many school districts now want to get their rollouts right from the start and are calling to ask, "How do we prevent going down the same path as these major debacles out there?" Wilson said.

In Los Angeles, the district and school board disagreed over whether or not students had been allowed to take the devices home and who was responsible if they were lost or stolen. And some teachers still question the purpose of high-priced tablets.

Just 36 percent of 255 teachers polled strongly favored continuing the iPad initiative, and the majority said they did not have enough training, according to results of a recent anonymous survey by a Los Angeles board of education member and employee unions. Survey participants teach in the 47 schools that have received iPads so far.

Other school districts are also learning from bad experiences. The Fort Bend school district in Texas put the brakes on its \$16 million iPad program in October after a review showed the program had "unrealistic goals" and did not meet state standards.

The Guilford County school district in North Carolina is halting a tablet program paid for with a \$30 million Race to the Top grant from the U.S. Department of Education. They had to return some 15,000 Amplify tablets this fall after many of the screens broke, among other problems.

Some may take a page from Houston, where teachers received iPads so they could learn how to use them before students get devices in their hands. Los Angeles is considering this strategy for the second phase of its rollout.

That idea makes sense to Scott Himelstein, interim director of University of San Diego's Mobile Technology Learning Center, which studies how mobile devices in classrooms affect teaching and learning.

"That's smart because you really need time to plan for this and get staff used to the technology," Himelstein said.

Advocates for using iPads as teaching tools are quick to point out that they are only effective if teachers are well trained. Otherwise, they may simply be used as replacements for textbooks and worksheets.

"We have decades of historical evidence demonstrating that what people do with technology is to extend existing practices at great cost with very little learning gained," said Justin Reich, co-founder of EdTechTeacher, which trains teachers in how to use technology in the classroom.

In Miami, assistant superintendent Sylvia Diaz says her district decided to follow San Diego's example, where it took six years to get a device into the hands of each student.

"We're going to take baby steps and get this right," said Diaz.

Miami-Dade has a few small mobile technology programs up and running in the district already. The most recent plan is to hand out devices to seventh- and ninth-graders for use in social studies classes. If the program is a success, it will be expanded to other grades and subjects.

For any new program to work, teachers need professional development and technical support, she said. The district this week announced that it will equip all classrooms with a digital science curriculum and provide training for teachers on how to use it.

Above all, Diaz stresses the importance of making sure the instructional purpose of using iPads is clear - an issue that has gotten lost amid Los Angeles' troubles.

"It's really about asking, 'Why are we doing this?' " Diaz said.

There isn't a lot of research available yet on how iPads help students

learn. But a new study offers some insight.

Himmelstein's center researched an iPad program in Encinitas, Calif., observing four upper elementary classrooms in four different schools at the beginning, middle and end of the school year to find out how teachers were using the iPad and how students were learning from.

The findings were mixed. According to the study, iPads improved students' "research, writing and creative production," yet didn't improve math skills.

"In the classrooms we observed, the teachers who used the iPads well had better student outcomes," Himmelstein said. "That means students' time on task improved, and teachers were able to provide more individualized instruction.

At Maywood, where an iPad pilot program is in its third year, first-grade teacher Lorena Cisneros said using the tablet as a teaching tool is like learning "a whole new subject. It takes planning, time and energy. In the first year, it's a lot of trial and error. But now we're all really comfortable using the technology."

The Los Angeles Unified School District has heard the concerns of [teachers](#) and plans to address them, said Bernadette Lucas, head of the iPad program. In the meantime, Cisneros notices how iPads help students new to the English language open up. She listened to a recording they did as they told stories about illustrations that were uploaded to their tablets.

"These students never speak in class," Cisneros says. "But I hear them in the recording, telling these stories and providing all these elaborate details."

Cisneros also uses the iPad to transport them to different places. Recently, she arranged for her students to meet first-graders in a special education class at Esplanade Elementary in Orange, Calif., via the iPad. One student used Braille to read a story to Cisneros' class.

"My students were mesmerized, watching her hands move over the pages," Cisneros said. "I got chills."

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