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In a speech to the Alberta Society for Computers in Education, the Honourable David King, Alberta’s Minister of Education announced, as part of a Computer Technology Project, the conclusion of negotiations with Bell and Howell, Ltd., to purchase 1,000 Edumod Apple Microcomputers. The purchase is intended to be an initial purchase, a minimum number which would be the beginning of an effort to “triple the number of microcomputers in Alberta’s classrooms within 18 months.” This would occur, Mr. King stated, because the government’s computer technology project would “allow school boards to purchase a microcomputer system through the (Alberta Education) School Book Branch, at a lower price than would ordinarily be available to boards.” (King, 1981).

By mid-April of this year, the School Book Branch had sold fewer than 50 Systems. What went wrong? Why are Alberta’s schools not beating down the doors to snap up this “bargain”? There is more than one answer to these questions but the most obvious is quite simply, the price. The package consists of the following:

1. One 48K, Bell and Howell Edu­mod Apple Microcomputer with Control Card, Clock Calendar Card, and Integer Card, a 9-inch Colour Monitor, a 11-inch Colour Monitor, a 1393 Printer, a Dual Disk Drive, a Centronics Printer, a software package consisting of Apple Pilot, Shell Games, Apple Plot, VisiCalc, Line Editor, and 20 Diskette units.

2. An extended warranty, (15 months labour and 11 months parts).

3. Inservice by Bell and Howell.

The price of the total package, according to the School Book Branch price list, is $5,905.40 and reflects the government’s costs on any single piece of equipment and may be a bargain this package really is and about the school boards’ purchase of a “comparative” set-on the commercial market. Regardless, $3,600.00 is a substantial amount of money for a school to spend on any single piece of equipment and may well be, if not the, major reason for the small number of sales of the package. Alberta Education has apparently recognized this point and will be allowing (as of April, 1981) a further splitting of the package. A school may now purchase the Edumod 48K Apple computer, single disk drive with control card, and 11 inch Panasonic monitor, for $2,517.00.

The other answers to the question of the lack of interest in the microcomputer package stem from more pedagogical considerations. Why would a school be interested in a microcomputer in this price range? The Bell and Howell Edu­mod certainly a useful and flexible machine (equally as part of the total package listed above). But to what use would a school put it? Teaching computer literacy? Administrative purposes? Computer-managed instruction? (CMI)? As an instructional device (CAI, CAL)? Mr. King justified his department’s bulk purchase on a basis of a reduction in cost and on standardization, that is, in this case, to allow the transferability of software and courseware. In this respect, he has likely been influenced by the success of the Minnesota experience and seems to want to embrace computers as instructional aid management devices right now? The move to this comes from Mr. King’s school and classroom computer laboratories in which he stresses the importance of computer literacy as a primary instructional focus in this area and that they question the need for as sophisticated a com­puter literacy as their primary instructional focus in this area and that they question the need for as sophisticated a com­puter literacy as is offered by Alberta Education. Computer literacy could be taught using a much less expensive machine. An in­service program on computer literacy currently offered by the Calgary Board of Education makes use of a hand-held micro­computer, the Sharp PC 1211, to introduce teachers to programming in BASIC. The program characteristically teaches a level of computer literacy (albeit very elementary) and, from the aspect of the program, has no need for an expensive machine. While definitions of com­puter literacy vary widely, most contain the following elements:

- To be computer literate, one must be able to define, demonstrate, and/or discuss, how computers are used; how computers do their work; how computers are programmed; how to use a computer and how computers affect society. (Brumbaugh, 1980).

- These definitions vary, to a large degree, on the basis of the particular author’s idea of what is meant by “comparable” set-up on the commercial market.

- Inservice by Bell and Howell.

- An extended warranty, (15 months labour and 11 months parts).

- A software package consisting of Apple Pilot, Shell Games, Apple Plot, VisiCalc, Line Editor, and 20 Diskette units.

- Inservice by Bell and Howell.

Inservice by Bell and Howell, the Calgary Board of Education, computers are subsidized Apple microcomputer systems (perhaps up to 40 percent as are textbooks in Alberta?) would certainly be very useful to schools, but so would Commodore Pets, Atari 400’s, and sharp 1211’s, depending on the instructional need. While schools are not prevented from purchasing these other machines, neither are they encouraged (fi­nancially or through support) as they are to buy the Bell and Howell Edu­mod. Standard­ization is important, but good instructional practice also requires choice. Hopefully, Alberta Education will see the light and pro­vide Alberta’s schools with a variety of com­puters from which to choose, at a reasonable price, and with readily available support materials and services. Then, perhaps, a much greater number of Alberta’s teachers will choose to have an electronic apple on their desks!

For example, the Alberta Education purchase contract was intended to be a part of an inclusive, on-going computer technology project which was to include such support as a clearinghouse of computer materials, which would evaluate computer literacy. Good instructional design in­corporates needs analysis and task analysis before proceeding to the stage of selection and/or production of media. While Alberta Education may well have carefully con­sidered the province’s varying educational needs and while it has selected a flexible machine, it is possible to find other microcomputer systems that meet all these needs, and the question then follows: why didn’t the government support several options and allow educators to make the choice? To be fair, it is not always the case that the Alberta Education purchase contract was intended to be a part of an inclusive, on-going computer technology project which was to include such support as a clearinghouse of computer materials, which would evaluate commercial materials and assist the produc­tion and distribution of locally-developed courseware; a Computer Literacy Cur­riculum; and the development of computer orientation and instruction for teachers and admin­istrators. Such support is certainly necessary and would be an incentive for school systems to invest in microcomputer hardware. The elementary version of the Computer Literacy Curriculum will be placed this fall but, to date, a clearinghouse has not been established (a director is currently being hired) and teacher support has been limited to inservice by the manufacturer. Although its Apple microcomputer systems (perhaps up to 40 percent as are textbooks in Alberta?) would certainly be very useful to schools, but so would Commodore Pets, Atari 400’s, and sharp 1211’s, depending on the instructional need. While schools are not prevented from purchasing these other machines, neither are they encouraged (fi­nancially or through support) as they are to buy the Bell and Howell Edu­mod.


King, D. A. speech delivered to the Alberta Society for Computers in Education. October, 1981.

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