Newman, Kathleen

From: Nass, Jonathan
Sent: Friday, November 02, 2012 9:36 AM
To: Newman, Kathleen
Subject: FW:
Attachments: Memo to Governor LePage on laptops.docx

Steve's pitch for the laptop program. Going in tonight's book.

From: Bowen, Stephen
Sent: Friday, November 02, 2012 8:52 AM
To: Nass, Jonathan
Subject: RE:

Can forward the attached memo to him? I am pretty tied up today, but could move things, especially this afternoon, if needed, to discuss this with him...

Thanks.

From: Nass, Jonathan
Sent: Friday, November 02, 2012 8:20 AM
To: Bowen, Stephen
Subject: FW:

From: Newman, Kathleen
Sent: Friday, November 02, 2012 8:17 AM
To: Nass, Jonathan
Subject:

http://bangordailynews.com/2012/10/31/politics/kings-laptops-leveled-playing-field-but-academic-benefits-hard-to-assess/

Kathleen Newman
Deputy Chief of Staff and Legislative Policy Director
Office of the Governor
State House Station 1
Augusta, Maine 04333-0001
207.287.4418 - office
207.592.0653 - cell
kathleen.newman@maine.gov

Memo to Governor LePage,

From Steve Bowen

CC: Jon Nass

RE: The Laptop program

Governor,

I know you are not convinced that the laptop program is a worthwhile program, and I agree that it needs improvement, especially with regard to how the program is run at the school and district level. I do think, though, that the program should continue in some form, and I especially think the RFP for the laptops should go forward. Here are some reasons why:

It harnesses the state's purchasing power to cut costs for taxpayers.

As we have discussed, the deal that the state is getting from its vendor is almost unprecedented. To our knowledge, no other state or school system is getting the value we are getting for what we are spending. For $242 per pupil per year, we are getting very good laptops, plus cases, replacement batteries, warrantee coverage, extra laptops for when deployed machines need repair, wireless networks, a huge suite of software, repair services based here in Maine, and training and professional development for teachers. There is no way any school can get that kind of a deal on its own. Some have tried, and the result is that they spend more tax dollars on things like netbooks and get far less value.

Districts are going to continue to buy computers – kids and teachers are accustomed to having them so schools will continue to buy them - but without the state's bulk purchasing power (which we should use to buy a lot of things for schools, I think) they will just spend more tax dollars, both state and local, and get less for it.

This kind of technology is essential if we are going customize learning for all kids.

When people ask me about the administration's vision for education, I always say that it grows out of what you have said since day one, which is that it is all about the kids. Everything we do has to focus on how best to reach every child.

Computers are an essential tool for customizing learning. We'd like to think that teachers can meet the individual learning needs of every student they have in their classrooms, but the reality is they can't. Computers can, though. Modern educational software adjusts to each child so that it provides more instruction in a concept when students need it and less when they don't. My daughter is using Rosetta Stone to learn French, which is a perfect example of what I am talking about. The program presents content to her at exactly the right pace for her every time, something no French teacher could ever do. Soon

enough, there will be courses in every subject area that work exactly like Rosetta Stone. Teachers will do less direct instruction, and more managing of educational opportunities for individual kids, many of which will be computer based.

So I think the only way we are really going realize your vision for an educational system that meets the needs of all kids is to continue to invest in technology – and do a better job making sure it is used effectively – and this program is a cost effective way to do that. We do need better training and support and we do need to hold districts accountable for how they are using the machines, but these tools are essential if we are going to reach every student.

I think we are getting a good bang for the buck.

The laptop program costs us about $14 million a year. That is no small amount of money, even though it buys us a lot, but in the large scheme of things it is little more than ½ of 1 percent of the $2 billion we are spending each year on public education in this state. When I reflect that the state sends districts $843 million each year in GPA and we've seen very little forward progress even though we invest a staggering sum like that, I have to cringe. The laptop program is different, though. Yes, it is hard to prove that the laptop program, in and of itself, is having a huge impact on test scores and so forth, but we can say that it has changed the way teachers teacher and students learn. I can't think of a similar investment we've made, in teacher training, or teaching materials or anything of that kind, that really has changed what happens in our classrooms as much as the laptops have. Not every teacher, school, or district is doing great things with them, and we need to work on that, but the program has changed the way the work of teaching is done, and has changed it in a way that puts students more at the center.

It is a bit like big businesses that manufactures all kinds of things but finds that one product or service has an outsized effect on sales. A pharmaceutical company makes all kind of medicine, but one drug they make is, for some reason, a game-changer. I think the laptops are a game changer. I had a principal tell me that they had a day recently when the school's wireless network was down for an upgrade. She had teachers coming to her at the end of the day and telling her that the next time she knows the network will be down for day, she should just cancel school. The laptops and the internet had become so essential to what they were doing for kids that not having the wireless network was like not having electricity or heat. I can't think of anything else in education that we are spending the equivalent of ½ of 1 percent of total spending on that has changed what school is like as much as this has.

This is how these kids live their lives

I get what you are saying about issues with students becoming too reliant on technology and the example you use of having to close Mardens when the lights go out because nobody can make change. But that is more connected, I think, to the overall ineffectiveness of the education system, which, under your leadership, we are attacking on a number of fronts.

The fact is that for this generation of kids, technology is, and will continue to be, the air they breathe. This is how they consume, how they create, how they communicate, how they live. We can wish it were not so, maybe, but that is how it is. For my girls, technology is an indispensable part of their lives. So my concern is that if we turn schools into the one place in the lives of these kids where technology is not a key element of their lives and their learning, we are going to continue to fight a battle for relevance. To these kids, technology is a kind of language and if schools don't speak the same language, the kids are going to continue to wonder why they are coming to school in the first place. This is especially true because they know and we know that technology is going to be a key part of whatever careers these kids are going to go into. This is their future, and if they feel like school is totally disconnected from the lives they are going to one day live, we are going to struggle more and more to reach them.

We do need to do it better.

I agree 100% that we need to run the program differently. I think we need to be more proscriptive with regard to how the technology should be used, we need to insist that schools are using best practices in how they use the machines with kids, and we need to do a better job holding schools accountable for what they do. We know schools can do great things with the laptops, we know they can make them into tools to meet the needs of all kids, we just don't have enough districts doing what they need to do. So I don't want you to think I am satisfied with how the program is going, I am not. This next round for the program, if we go ahead with it, gives us an opportunity to re-imagine the program to make it about customizing learning for all kids – about putting kids in the driver's seat and letting them use these to tools to maximize their own potential. We can make the program significantly better and make it far more about the kids than about the grown-ups, who, in the districts where good things are NOT being done, are the biggest problem.

What I think we should do...

At the very least, governor, I think we should move forward with the RFP and see what kind of bids we get back. The RFP commits us to NOTHING. All we would do is put it out and see what the vendor community comes to us with. If we're not happy with the bids, we can shelve the whole thing then. It may be, though, that the intense competition we think we are going to see in this round means vendors will come to us with really incredible offers that give us the most technological bang for every taxpayer buck. If we spike the program now, though, without even knowing what vendors might have in the works, we will have made a decision without all the facts. Let us at least put out the RFP, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by doing that, and again, if we decide later this is not the way we want to go, we can shut the whole thing down later. Let's find out what might be able to do with this program before we shut it down completely.

Thanks. I appreciate your taking the time to hear me out, let me know if you have any questions or feedback.