

“Don’t Rush Out and Buy a SMART Board Yet!”

An interview with ed tech guru Rich Mincer

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Charter School Tools caught up with Rich Mincer, ed tech consultant and former chief of technology in Idaho. Rich also served as Chief Technology Officer for one of the largest networks of charter schools in the country, Friendship Public Charter School in Washington, DC. Our topic was interactive white boards (IWBs). If your school would like information about a specific product mentioned in this article, or a consultation with Mr. Mincer, email us at info@charterschooltools.org.

CST: We have a client who is about to buy 15 Promethean boards. Is that a good idea right now?

Mincer: While Promethean Boards are great learning tools, schools now have an alternative with the an emerging technology call “interactive projectors.” There are several advantages over traditional IWBs including lower cost, short throw distance, no need for calibration, and no special board is required since any screen, wall, table, floor or even ceiling can become interactive. A special pen is sensed by the projector and becomes a pointing device as well as mouse. A teacher can stand at the screen or across the room and still interact with the images.

CST: Who are the main vendors for these devices and what do they cost?

Mincer: Epson and BenQ are leading the early development with several others following suite. The BenQ MP780ST DrawPoint is based on DLP technology which can also project 3D images. It can be used anywhere in the classroom since it does not need to be mounted and requires no calibration in order to work on any surface.

The Epson BrightLink 450Wi is designed to be wall mounted above a standard whiteboard, screen or painted surface. Epson uses LCD technology which is not 3D ready but offers short throw capabilities and vivid colors.

Both units cost less than \$1900 with substantial discounts for multiple units. Traditional IWBs with ceiling mounted or direct connect projectors can cost between \$3,200-\$4000 with installation.

CST: Are these products in beta or are they ready to go?

Mincer: Both models are shipping now.

CST: If a school already has some Promethean boards, should it standardize on them?

Mincer: Promethean has great software, and it can be used with any device including these interactive projectors. The software allows teachers to create lesson plans online and integrate assessments. It is important for districts to standardize IWB software to ease the development of interactive lessons and to make it easier to move teachers between classrooms. It is also interesting to note that the BenQ projector can be easily moved with the teacher if needed, such as a music teacher that covers several schools in a district.

CST: What about training? What is the best way to implement interactive devices?

Mincer: If your school is new to these devices, we recommend starting out by just giving them to the top 15-20% most tech savvy teachers. They will use them most effectively and become the best advocates within the school. Without training, teachers typically just use them for Powerpoint, but with proper software training (which is available online from Promethean) they can become super-users. We recommend one day of training upon installation, and two separate three day sessions about one

and two months into the implementation. As you know, teachers are the best teacher of teachers, so getting your best users on board first will have the greatest results over time.

CST: Thanks, Rich. Are there any other ed tech devices you see having a major impact in the classroom?

Mincer: Audio enhancement is one of the first things I would add to a classroom. Teachers think they project their voices, but when they are facing a side wall or there is activity in the corridor, elementary students in particular often miss what is said. Research supports the effectiveness of this investment. There are multiple manufacturers to choose from. Epson now has a unit that can be retrofitted to existing ceiling mounted projectors. Calypso offers a complete classroom management system. Lightspeed's "RedCat" system can be easily installed in any classroom without having to install speakers in the ceiling.

For districts looking for an alternative to desktops or laptops, we are seeing a tremendous move to mobile devices. Today's "digital natives" are comfortable with the mobile devices such as iPhones, iPod Touch and the new Apple iPads. Netbooks are still very popular due to low costs. The new Intel Classmate has the added advantage of a screen that folds over the keyboard to allow the student to use the device as a touch pad.