Schools of the Future
By Bryon Martin

In response to the narrow victory of the Vouchers Proposition during the California State elections in the year 2000, many Californians felt that the ideals of democracy and fairness had been trampled. A result, unforeseen by the voucher proponents, was a vigorous dialogue about the content and values of public education. At times the public discussion became quite passionate, and new ideas (including ones that would have seemed radical just months before) were weighed with scales close to every parents’ heart. Historically, there was recognition that it was too late to do things differently; different things now had to be done.

As fears rose that the state would now embrace a two-tiered system of haves and have-nots, some education activists championed the idea of an “equalizer” that would put all students on an equal footing re: access to information. This equalizer was the computer, wired to the Internet. (In fact, recent innovations such as the iBook and AirPort, both Apple products, dramatically reduced projected costs of getting internet access to all schools by their side-stepping the enormous costs of a hardwired infrastructure.) Proponents of this idea had several advantages. They were supported (1) by a coalition of politicians who had been stung by the backlash of the voucher amendment, (2) by captains of industry who saw an opportunity to advocate the outcomes of a curriculum that could be advantageous to their interests, (3) by an alliance of silicon valley figures who saw an opportunity for new market penetration. (As we all know, this led to the later compatibility standards agreed to by Gates and Jobs.), (4) by the teachers' unions who felt this was a do-or-die issue for their own survival, and (5) by a galvanized electorate that was now prepared to respond to the year 2000 vouchers proposition with one of their own in 2002.

The New Education Amendment for Reform (NEAR) which was overwhelmingly voted into law in 2002 was a remarkable victory for each of the groups above, as well as many educational theorists (among them neo-Deweyists and those at the Thornburg Center) and political scientists from both ends of the spectrum. (Those positioned on the left of center, pro-democracy and socialist advocates, were joined by “business-Republicans” and some libertarians.)

The themes of NEAR were quickly put into pace. The voucher proposition was rescinded, thus nullifying the outstanding suits against it in various California courts. Funds dedicated by the new amendment were now channeled into the acquiring of a desktop computer for every student in grades 4-12, one for every two students in grades K-3, and the massive teachers' technical training that was now required for “teaching teachers to teach” (the slogan trumpeted by the California Teachers Association). Class size reductions were extended to grades 4-8, and each school site received the servers, projectors, and software necessary to meet the spirit and the letter of the new law.

Results of NEAR’s triumph are already observable, after only two years. Many schools leapt at the opportunity, lest it be a mirage, to act on the funding promised and quickly acquired the tools needed to meet the new classroom standards. Because summer school was suspended state-wide in 2003 for the technical training of teachers, virtually all California teachers became semi computer-literate after their six-week courses. (Teachers were paid to attend these mandatory classes, and some continued to the two-week mentors' classes. Some teachers, affectionately referred to as the “old dogs”, chose this occasion to retire from the profession, taking advantage of golden handshakes that had been arranged jointly by the districts and unions.)

The state of California has accomplished a near reversal in its apparent dedication to educating its young. Visitors from every state and many countries come to see the “marvel” that has happened here. As common with many California trends, other states now appear ready to embrace such reforms.