I'm a huge proponent of both technology integration and waste reduction, so I'm usually the first person to condemn the flagrant waste of paper in schools and offices everywhere. Hundreds of sheets are wasted on printed e-mails, bad photocopies, or paper tests and quizzes that get thrown away. I believe that our attachment to hard copies comes from an increasingly outdated way of thinking—a confidence in the substantial quality (or security) of real, tangible paper.

But going completely paperless requires bigger concessions than these feelings of safety. In fact, eliminating paper from our schools poses a great risk to both our students and our future.

First, handwriting is important. Yes, it's likely that students will pen far fewer handwritten notes in their adult lives than previous generations. But that does not change the fact that learning to write the letters of the alphabet by hand and
Paperless schools would also reduce the need for custodial staff to haul away the drifts of paper that students leave in hallways, classrooms, and trash cans. Communications sent by e-mail, posted on a blog, or placed on a website are more likely to reach parents and students than a piece of paper anyway. In addition to the time savings, going paperless would save money. Eliminating the cost of ink, toner, paper, electricity, and maintenance for printers would free up more funds for appropriate classroom technologies.

Although I do not dispute that libraries and the references, books, and publications they house are valuable, printed textbooks are too expensive and too much of a burden on schools and students. Textbook budgets have been slashed beyond belief, and as a result, many of us have resorted to using textbooks that are too old and out-of-date to be effective. Digitized textbooks are easily distributed, require little management, and are far more portable. Our young digital natives would save their backs from having to haul around 100-pound backpacks, and they would always have their textbooks handy. They also adapt easily to screen-oriented reading and find paper to be more of a nuisance than a benefit.

It’s hard to imagine that anyone in this day and age would argue against paperless schools, but still, it is unlikely that schools will ever be entirely paperless. I, for one, would stand up and defend the need to have coloring books handy. They also adapt easily to screen-oriented reading and find paper to be more of a nuisance than a benefit.

Second, computer skills are a byproduct of technology integration, not the sole objective. If we are going to use technology to teach, we must seek the most appropriate technology for each lesson. And modern technology has not yet provided the most cost-effective means of replacing the pencil, only of supplementing it. Paper can be recycled and is inexpensive, in contrast to many personal computing devices, which require power, maintenance, and prompt replacement upon disrepair or the swift onset of obsolescence.

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Third, going paperless is not always the greenest option. The introduction of cloud computing and mobile devices, for example, has increased the amount of power consumption because of the higher number of electronic devices in use. And as each new gadget hits the market, mountains of electronic waste accumulate.

Finally, for schools with ever-tightening budgets, purchasing dozens of personal computers may not be the most lasting investment. New models are released at an alarming rate, rendering thousands of dollars worth of property virtually useless in a matter of years.

Just as the office workers of the 1980s suffered fear and trepidation about moving from their typewriters to keyboards, we are having a hard time transitioning to a digital screen from the comfort of holding what used to be a tree.

The move to paperless schools is like most technology shifts—fraught with fear and the resistance to change. Just as the office workers of the 1980s suffered fear and trepidation about moving from their typewriters to keyboards, we are having a hard time transitioning to a digital screen from the comfort of holding what used to be a tree. Change isn’t easy, but it is inevitable.

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