

# Cost aside, laptops can be a classroom curse: teachers' union

NATASHA BITA | THE AUSTRALIAN | MARCH 28, 2016 12:00AM

**Students should leave their laptops “at the door” for some lessons, a teachers’ union says.**

As it questioned the ubiquitous use of computers in classrooms, the Australian Education Union’s president, Correna Haythorpe, said she was concerned parents were required to pay for laptops, initially provided free by the former Rudd government through the \$2.4 billion Digital Education Revolution scheme.

Ms Haythorpe said some public schools now required parents to buy \$1500 laptops even though they were not essential in every class. “If you’re in an English literature class that requires deep thought, conversation and analysis, it might be that the best thing is to check the laptops at the door,” she said.

“The bigger problem is the expectation of families to fund their own technology: there’s been a real shifting of the cost and it is quite a large burden to spend \$1500 on a laptop when your child starts school.”

Veteran headmaster John Vallance told *The Weekend Australian* he had banned laptops in the classroom at Sydney Grammar, one of Australia’s top academic schools, because they distracted students from classroom discussions and listening to the teacher.

He said the billions spent on technology in schools had been a “scandalous waste of money”.

Yesterday, one of the two academics who reviewed the national curriculum for the federal-government last year, Australian Catholic University senior research fellow Kevin Donnelly, said laptops should not be used in primary schools.

“You’ve got a really good computer — it’s sitting on your shoulders — and you’ve got to hardwire it by doing a lot of repetitive times tables and rote learning,” he said. “It slows everything down when students are stumbling over what should be automatic. The basics have to be mastered before you go into more creative activities.”

Many schools now used technology as a “marketing tool”, Dr Donnelly said. “They’re trying to give the impression to parents the school is cutting-edge and innovative, but it’s really a marketing tool,” he said.

Ms Haythorpe said that technology was a mainstream part of teaching, but questioned the need for laptops in primary school.

“Personally, as a primary school teacher, I would not use a laptop throughout the majority of the day,” she said. “My expectation is the children need to be focusing on what the class is learning together, instead of just looking at their laptops.”

Teachers needed training to use and monitor technology in the classroom.

“Laptops are now very much a part of what we do in our classrooms and schools do need to look at what protocols are in place to ensure students are using it just for their education,” she said.

“It is increasingly difficult when you’ve got smartphones, iPads and laptops, and the question for me is: Do you ban them or embrace the new technology and teach students to use it effectively and safely?”

The director of the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute, Geoff Prince, said he made extensive use of software to diagnose and remediate skills shortfalls in students at university. “However, I strongly oppose the view that the pervasive use of mathematical software will revolutionise the school classroom,” he said.

“I recently heard a self-identified mathematics guru victoriously claim that the quadratic formula would disappear from the school curriculum because of the computational power of maths software. This is the crazy talk of a zealot who has not understood the profound nature of this part of mathematics.”

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