Intranet? Very Intra-resting!
Head for the Edge, April 1997

"The issue of the use of technology is 5 percent bits and bytes (a spiffy e-mail system that spans continents), 95 percent psychology and sociology (an organization that dotes on sharing information rather than hoarding it)." Tom Peters

This is how my "high tech" department compiles computer supply orders:

1. The computer coordinator creates a database which generates a printed form with blanks for the teacher's name, school, supply account code, and quantities of each of about 250 items.
2. The form goes to the printer where about 1200 copies are made and a delivery driver hauls them to our dozen schools.
3. The school secretary at each building distributes the forms into staff mail boxes. (Well, to those of the staff she likes, anyway.)
4. Teachers take the forms back to their classrooms, loose them, find them, fill them out, and sometimes remember to send them back to the computer coordinator.
5. When the forms are returned, the computer coordinator creates a record in the database for each teacher, and the program tallies the total number of items to order.

It takes five steps and four people - one person twice - handling the paper forms to perform this annual task.

Now this is how we are planning to handle the process this spring:

1. The computer coordinator creates the supply order database. But instead of taking a copy of a form to the printer, she creates a Web based CGI interface to the database and loads them both on the district's Web server. (We use Tango and FileMaker Pro 3.0.)
2. The URL for the database is send to all teachers via the daily bulletin and e-mail. Teachers then log on to the supply order web page where they plunk in the quantities of each item they need and hit the send button.
3. The CGI script automatically creates a new record in the computer coordinator's database.

Now the task requires only three steps and two people. There is less likelihood of misplaced forms, miskeyed quantities, and forgotten staff members. And it take a fraction of everyone's time to complete.

This is one of the first ways our school will be using its "intranet." An intranet is simply a computer network which uses the same protocols, programs and organization that it's big brother the Internet and is accessed only by those within the organization. In the example above, the teacher uses Netscape to complete the supply order, and both the interface and database are on a server running Web software.

One intranet function we've been using for sometime is a district-wide e-mail mailing list (listserv). Just this year individual buildings, organizations and long-range planning groups have also asked for their own lists. Other early uses to which our district is putting its intranet include:

- creating an easy-to-update staff directory
- posting events calendars which can be maintained by individual departments or schools
- offering a Web-based district film ordering form

As more of our staff become comfortable with using e-mail and a Web browser and as the percentage of classrooms and offices with networked computers reaches the 100%, I expect the use of the intranet to grow rapidly. Imagine these exciting possibilities:

1. Electronic forms. Expense claims, time sheets, changes in W2 forms, maintenance requests, and purchase orders can call be done electronically from a teacher's desktop.
2. Uniform, accessible and modifiable curricula. Without leaving the classroom (or from home), a teacher can quickly find the topics and outcomes of any subject for any grade level taught in the district. Curriculum writing teams can update the curriculum on-line. The amount of detail can be as great as a department wishes (or is mandated) without back breaking three-ring binders taking up bookcase space.
3. Group project workspace. The latest incarnation of Netscape will allow multiple users to create and edit documents and other projects. Next time that grant writing team gets together, it can do so virtually.
4. Information gathering. Surveys, questionnaires, and guest books are all becoming easier to create and administer. Does the staff development committee need to find out what topics are highest in demand for the next inservice day? Create the form and electronically collect the responses.
5. Registration and reservations. Sign up for that community education class or staff development workshop. Check to see if the computer lab is free on Tuesday morning. Even buy tickets to the school play or homecoming dance.

Think of it this way - if the information you are now working is collected, sorted or stored on a piece of paper, the process can mostly be done on your school's intranet.

Now I suspect what I've just described is rather old hat to some the country's larger districts. Schools with MIS Directors, mainframe computing power, and database expertise have taken advantage of network power for years. But what makes using an intranet exciting is that it can be the "poor man's" solution to improved intradistrict communications; and that graphic user interfaces like the Netscape or Explorer are easily used by even the most technophobic teacher. For an organization that already has a wide area network in place, adding a Web server can cost less than $3500, and a person with fairly modest computer skills (like me) can set up the server software, databases, and CGI interfaces.

School technology coordinators and media specialists need to add intranet management to their bag of tricks and ask for responsibility for maintaining those important information resources. For once creative teachers have used this newest information technology, they will rapidly find classroom applications for it, and academic intranets will flourish.