Why Schools Should Exclusively Use Free Software

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Exclusively Use Free Software

There are general reasons why all computer users should insist on free software: it gives users the freedom to control their own computers—with proprietary software, the computer does what the software owner wants it to do, not what the user wants it to do. Free software also gives users the freedom to cooperate with each other, to lead an upright life. These reasons apply to schools as they do to everyone.

The purpose of this article is to state additional reasons that apply specifically to education.

First, free software can save schools money. Free software gives schools, like other users, the freedom to copy and redistribute the software, so the school system can make copies for all the computers they have. In poor countries, this can help close the digital divide.

This obvious reason, while important in practical terms, is rather shallow. And proprietary software developers can eliminate this reason by donating copies to the schools. (Warning: a school that accepts such an offer may have to pay for upgrades later.) So let's look at the deeper reasons.

Schools have a social mission: to teach students to be citizens of a strong, capable, independent, cooperating and free society. They should promote the use of free software just as they promote recycling. If schools teach students free software, then the students will tend to use free software after they graduate. This will help society as a whole escape from being dominated (and gouged) by megacorporations.

What schools should refuse to do is teach dependence. Those corporations offer free samples to schools for the same reason tobacco companies distribute free cigarettes to minors: to get children addicted.[1] They will not give discounts to these students once they've grown up and graduated.

Free software permits students to learn how software works. Some students, on reaching their teens, want to learn everything there is to know about their computer and its software. They are intensely curious to read the source code of the programs that they use every day. To learn to write good code, students need to read lots of code and write lots of code. They need to read and understand real programs that people really use. Only free software permits this.

Proprietary software rejects their thirst for knowledge: it says, "The knowledge you want is a secret—learning is forbidden!" Free software encourages everyone to learn. The free software community rejects the "priesthood of technology," which keeps the general public in ignorance of how technology works; we encourage students of any age and situation to read the source code and learn as much as they want to know. Schools that use free software will enable gifted programming students to advance.

The deepest reason for using free software in schools is for moral education. We expect schools to teach students basic facts and useful skills, but that is not their whole job. The most fundamental job of schools is to teach good citizenship, which includes the habit of helping others. In the area of computing, this means teaching people to share software.

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[1] RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company was fined \$15m in 2002 for handing out free samples of cigarettes at events attended by children. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sci_tech/features/health/tobaccotrial/usa.htm.

Schools, starting from nursery school, should tell their pupils, "If you bring software to school, you must share it with the other students. And you must show the source code to the class, in case someone wants to learn."

Of course, the school must practice what it preaches: all the software installed by the school should be available for students to copy, take home, and redistribute further.

Teaching the students to use free software, and to participate in the free software community, is a hands-on civics lesson. It also teaches students the role model of public service rather than that of tycoons. All levels of school should use free software.