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## Why schools should exclusively use free software

by Richard Stallman

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 software 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.

But there are special reasons that apply to schools. They are the subject of this article.

First, free software can save the schools money. Even in the richest countries, schools are short of 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, is rather shallow. And proprietary software developers can eliminate this disadvantage by donating copies to the schools. (Watch out!—a school that accepts this offer may have to pay for future upgrades.) So let's look at the deeper reasons.

School should teach students ways of life that will benefit society as a whole. They should promote the use of free software just as they promote recycling. If schools teach students free software, then the students will use free software after they graduate. This will help society as a whole escape from being dominated (and gouged) by megacorporations. Those corporations offer free samples to schools for the same reason tobacco companies distribute free cigarettes: to get children addicted (1). They will not give discounts to these students once they grow up and graduate.

Free software permits students to learn how software works. When students reach their teens, some of them want to learn everything there is to know about their computer system and its software. That is the age when people who will be good programmers should learn it. To learn to write software well, students need to read a lot of code and write a lot of code. They need to read and understand real programs that people really use. They will be intensely curious to read the source code of the programs that they use every day.

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 next reason for using free software in schools is on an even deeper level. We expect schools to teach students basic facts, and useful skills, but that is not their whole job. The most fundamental mission of schools is to teach people to be good citizens and good neighbors—to cooperate with others who need their help. In the area of computers, this means teaching them to share software. Elementary schools, above all, should tell their pupils, “If you bring software to school, you must share it with the other children.” 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.

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](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sci_tech/features/health/tobaccotrial/usa.htm).*

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