Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Internet

By Reg P. Wydeven
November 26, 2011

Last week we went to our kids' elementary school for parent-teacher conferences. Thankfully we received glowing reports and were very proud of our children. On the way out of the school, however, I got a little nostalgic as we passed the computer lab.

The lab had rows and rows of state-of-the-art computers. When I attended the same school thirty years ago, I remember when we got our first computer: an Apple II. It was about as big as a teacher's desk and had almost a dozen programs you could run by inserting a 5½-inch floppy disk into the drive.

After we got a few more models, we starting having computer class once a week. We learned how to type, learned how to program a little with LOGO, and even got to play some games. But, if we had a book report due, we still wrote it long-hand. The only cutting-and-pasting we did was making a photocopy of a photograph in an encyclopedia, clipping it out and gluing it into the report.

Today, however, computers are an integral part of our kids' entire education. When I was in law school, three students had laptops and sometimes they even brought them to class. Today, law students are required to have a laptop to bring to class each day.

Students use computers to sign up for classes, download syllabi, check grades, ask teachers questions, print off and upload assignments and even take tests. After they graduate, students use computers to hunt for jobs, put together resumes and submit them to potential employers. To put it simply, a student needs a computer to keep up in today's world.

Not every student, however, has the means to buy a computer or access the internet. That's why the federal government is introducing the "Connect-to-Compete" initiative, which aims to provide low-income families with computers and internet access.

The initiative will be implemented by a national private and non-profit sector partnership run outside the government. Executives from leading internet providers, computer companies and charitable organizations have already committed to making in-kind contributions to the program. Accordingly, the program will not have to be funded with taxpayer dollars.

Connect-to-Compete will launch national pilot programs beginning in the spring of 2012. The goal of the initiative is to sell laptops to free- and reduced-cost-school-lunch-eligible families for $150 and two years of internet access to free-school-lunch-eligible families for $9.95 per month.

Not being able to afford computers and internet service for students is a challenge for many families, but not the only one. Julius Genachowski, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, explained that in addition, "Digital literacy is a barrier. A lot of people don't know how to use computers."

Genachowski recognizes how vital a computer can be in today's world, saying, "If you're looking for a job today and you don't have online access, you're in trouble, because all of the job postings are online." To combat this, Genachowski vows that through Connect-to-Compete, "We will get more kids educated on new technologies. We will help people find jobs."

Inspired by the initiative, I've decided to donate all my 5½-inch floppy disks to my kids' school.