

Gather 'round and get smart on the latest technology for classrooms.

From Microwave Popcorn to Optical Mice— Ten Technology Gadgets for Every Classroom by Warren Buckleitner

Walk into any consumer electronics store and you'll meet a new generation of inventions that can make your life easier. Even though they're not specifically designed for classrooms, many of these products can add significant value to daily classroom life. Here's a list of our favorites, in order of importance. Each product, with the exception of #10, can be found at Walmart.com, Target.com or BestBuy.com.

1. Microwave Oven. Every teacher should be within arms-length of a \$50 microwave. I've used them for drying socks after a wet recess, softening a block of ice cream, heating muffins and softening clay (not to mention brewing a cup of tea on a chilly morning). Make sure it has one-touch controls, e.g., a "popcorn key". One quick bag of fresh popcorn, and you have an instant math activity (ask children to count backwards as they eat each kernel). Of course, you'll want to make sure to keep the oven in a safe spot, away from little hands. There are many prices and options, but I spotted a small Emerson for \$50, with the all important "popcorn key."



2. Digital Camera. The fact that you can instantly see the picture you've just taken (and erase it if you don't like it) has incredible educational possibilities, from making labels for your classroom to showing parents their children's creations during parent-teacher conferences. After you've snapped a few hundred pictures without using any film, you'll wonder how you ever got along without one. The power of a digital camera is measured in something called "megapixels" – the more it has, the sharper your pictures. As a rule of thumb, a classroom camera should have at least 2.1 megapixels and strong rechargeable batteries. Of course you'll need a computer (\$1200) to plug your camera into. Think of this computer as your dark room. It lets you alter pictures to your liking, and can store thousands of photos for later use. My favorite classroom cameras are from the Kodak EasyShare series, featuring simple controls and a storage cradle that automatically charges the battery while transferring the pictures to your computer. Price ranges are \$350 to \$500 for the camera, \$1200 for the computer and \$140 for the ink jet printer to print out your photos. A few quick ideas for using the camera in a preschool or elementary classroom:



- Give the kids the camera. You'll be amazed and delighted as you see the world through children's eyes.
- Do some time-lapse photography. Take a picture of the kids in front of the same tree each month to see the seasons change.
- Label the room! Put faces on every child's cubbie.
- Preserve memories. Next time a child cleans up, snap a picture.
- Decorate the bulletin boards with photos of active, happy children! They're also great for your classroom web site.

3. Walkie Talkies (\$40 to \$80 a pair). Next time you're on a field trip and your co-teachers need to rush a child to the restroom, you'll wish you had a pair of industrial strength walkie talkies (which have dropped dramatically in price). One brand I've kid-tested is the Motorola Talkabout series (pictured) with a two-mile range (more like a mile in realistic conditions). There are many walkie talkie accessories, but the most useful is a charging cradle, that keeps the batteries fresh. Have





School Supplement, Continued

a couple of too-shy kids? Give them walkie talkies and watch the language flow.

4. **“Smart” Toys.** You don’t have to have a thousand-dollar computer to offer high quality interactive learning opportunities, thanks to a new generation of toys with microprocessors as brains. Here are some favorites, available in most toy stores.



- **Music Blocks** (Neurosmith.com) lets children experiment with the structure of music (\$40).
- **LeapPad** (Leapfrog.com) is an outstanding early language experience. Children can touch each letter or sound to hear it spoken in a clear voice. Multiple language options are now available. (\$45)
- **Pixter** (Fisher-Price.com) is an electronic sketching device (\$40).
- **Question-Air** (Educational Insights, www.edin.com) is like a game of hot potato, but with educational questions tossed in (\$25).
- **GeoSafari Talking Microscope** (www.edin.com) -- lets children learn about magnified bugs (\$30).

5. **Classroom Stereo.** There’s been a recent revolution in portable stereo systems, allowing you to fill your classroom with the rich sounds of Canadian Brass, the London Philharmonic, or Garth Brooks. I spotted this portable system for \$200 that can play up to five music CDs. It even has a remote control, so you can have a game of musical chairs from anywhere in the classroom.



6. **Color Television Monitor.** Remember when color TVs were expensive? Now you can get a Sharp (and many other brands) 19” TV with AV plugs in front for \$130. The unit at the right includes a VCR for \$170. This makes it simple to display the pictures you just took on your digital camera (a great recall activity), or play back a movie for a parent-teacher event.



7. **New Computer.** Computers have improved a lot recently, but they’ve also come down in price. Macintosh systems are still easier to use than Windows computers – especially when it comes to editing pictures or videos, but they offer fewer software choices. Of the 2002 children’s releases, for example, 280 run on Windows, while only 159 run on Macintosh. Windows computers are also cheaper – you can expect to pay \$800 for an ample Windows computer as opposed to \$1100 for a comparable Macintosh. For a Windows system (we’ve had good results with a Sony Vaio Desktop, an eMachine and an HP Pavilion), make sure it comes with Windows XP and has 256 MB of RAM, a 30 to 40 GB hard drive, a 20X CD-RW drive (combination readable, writable CD-ROM drive), easy to access USB ports for plugging in a digital camera, and a 10 or 17 inch monitor. Note that a flat screen monitor costs about \$200 more, but is easier on the eyes and saves space. For a Macintosh, get either the new eMac or the iMac. Both come with System OSX.2 preinstalled. We recommend getting 256 MB of RAM.



8. **Optical Mouse.** For about \$30, you can get a Kidzmouse, or a Logitech USB optical mouse that has no moving parts. For children, this is important, because the mousepad becomes unnecessary, and the mouse is more responsive.



9. **Wireless Indoor/Outdoor Thermometer.** For \$30, you can get a GE digital thermometer that can beam the accurate outside temperature into your classroom. This is handy if your room is located away from a window, or on the second floor where it is difficult for children to see a thermometer.



10. **4-Wheel Drive SUV with a sunroof and satellite navigation system and a Hot Tub.** Just a thought. ☼

