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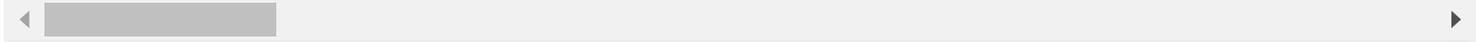
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Traditional teaching faces a cyberthreat from school model

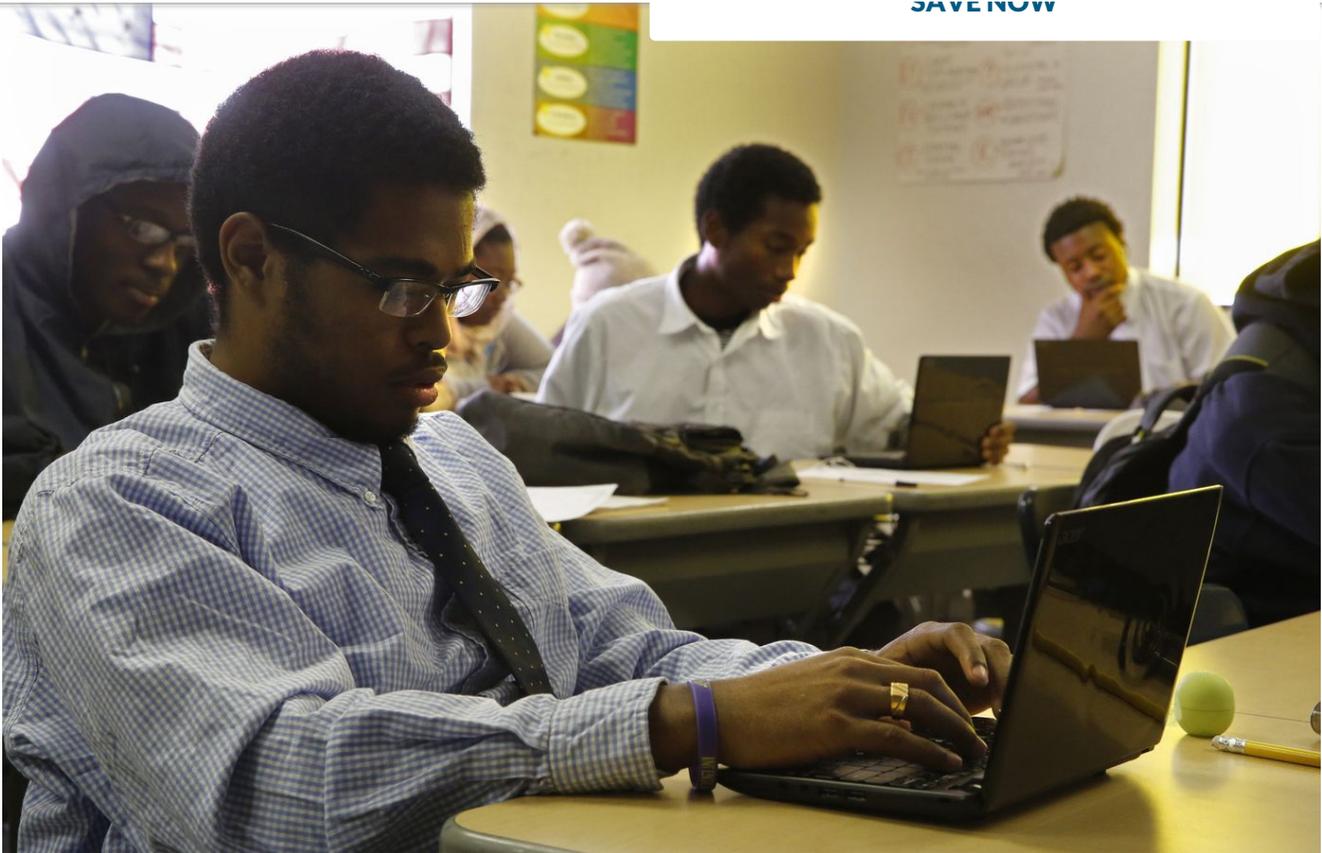
By MICHAEL GODSEY
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At L.A.'s Fredrick Douglass Academy High School, students use Internet-connected notebooks for research in a "Rhetoric & Composition" class. (Los Angeles Times)



There's a new network of K-8 private schools called AltSchool, based in San Francisco and soon expanding to Brooklyn, N.Y., and Palo Alto. From that tiny amount of information — the name, the locations — you can probably guess that AltSchool is trying to modernize education for the digital age. At AltSchool, according to NPR, every student “has a laptop or a tablet, and they spend about 30% of their day on their devices, completing what are called playlists.”

AltSchool, which announced recently that it was hiring executives from Google, Uber and Zynga, is also a software developer. While AltSchool expands its network into what one investor hopes will become “the world's biggest private school system,” it is simultaneously planning to license technology to other academic institutions. Silicon Valley has taken notice: In May, AltSchool announced \$100 million in funding from various investors, including Facebook's

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Mark Zuckerberg

. It would seem the company has tapped into the zeitgeist.

As a high school teacher, I've followed these developments with trepidation. Whether or not AltSchool meets lofty expectations, it epitomizes the increasingly popular belief that human instructors must cede to computers as the font of knowledge. That's a profound shift that educators have barely begun to contemplate.

AltSchool's pitch to parents — as opposed to investors — is familiar. It offers small class sizes, highly qualified teachers and instant feedback. Public schools have explicitly prioritized these qualities for decades. Somewhat less familiar is AltSchool's description of what those highly qualified teachers actually do. According to AltSchool's website, “The sheer amount of information available today calls for us ... to reimagine the educational experience” as one in which teachers “curate” the curriculum in partnership with students and parents and “co-learn with the students.”

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Ventilla isn't alone in this conviction. Aran Levasseur of MindShift, an organization that studies the future of learning, wrote in 2012 that computing devices “are dismantling knowledge silos and are therefore transforming the role of a teacher into something that is more of a facilitator and coach.”



At TED 2013, the British-Indian academic Sugata Mitra earned a standing ovation, as well as a \$1-million prize, for his talk declaring that traditional schools are obsolete because we no longer need traditional teachers. It's becoming a cliché that the teacher should move from being a “sage on the stage” to being “a guide on the side.”



Closer to home, a California high school principal — a friend who could speak candidly — told me recently that “we're at the point where the Internet pretty much supplies everything we need. My daughter gets some help from her teachers, but basically everything she learns — from math to band — she can get from her computer better than her teachers.”

Computers are certainly better than humans at storing information. But teachers have always done more than dispense facts; at their best, they cultivate the ability to use knowledge in the service of reflection and compassion. In other words, they cultivate wisdom. If teachers are ultimately defined by their ability to “co-learn,” will there still be a place for that function, or will technology companies, through the software they design, take on the role of mediating the information transmitted to students?

Another concern is that a high-tech education may also be a placeless one. Ventilla admires the Khan Academy, a Web-based company whose “micro-lessons” have been viewed on YouTube over 500 million times worldwide. “We would love to have their reach. That's a spectacular resource we use all the time,” he said. A lesson plan developed and product tested in San Francisco could be used in Palo Alto or

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A traditional public-school teacher's curriculum is driven by the local school board, local administrators and the parents. (I often use “The Grapes of Wrath” to help students understand the history of California.) By contrast, a curator of digital learning tools is subservient to private national organizations — corporate interests — applying regional examples as a footnote to the centralized syllabus.

But the most troubling aspect of this trend in education is the lack of evidence showing that repurposing the teacher as a “guide on the side” actually improves learning. In fact, the data compiled by John Hattie in his book “Visible Learning” suggest the opposite. After synthesizing more than 800 meta-analyses and 50,000 smaller studies, Hattie found that “teacher credibility,” “direct instruction,” and “quality of teaching” were all significantly more effective than “individualized instruction,” “matching teaching with learning style,” and “computer-assisted instruction.”

Larry Cuban, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, is one of many academics to have noted the absence of solid studies to justify a computer-centered pedagogy: “The fact is that no substantial basis in research findings or existing data on the academic effectiveness of classroom technology warrant the boom-town spread of classroom devices.”

None of this is to suggest that AltSchool will fail its students; they'll benefit from a wealth of resources unimaginable to their public school peers. But computer-assisted “co-learning” is, so far, an unproven experiment, promoted by technology companies that sell the accompanying digital tools. What's good for investors is not necessarily what's good for education.

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