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Head of Bristol Brunel Academy says much school IT spending is wasted

Pupils at the Brunel Academy. It has had to use its own cash to "beef up" IT

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An academy designed to be the first fully wireless school has been blighted by computer problems since being opened by Gordon Brown more than two years ago.

The head of the £24 million Bristol Brunel Academy — a beacon of Labour's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme — said that its wireless system had yet to work properly and teachers still did the register on paper because of problems with swipe cards. Other heads had told him fingerprint recognition systems were unreliable.

Brunel's problems, similar to those experienced in other schools, raise questions about the education department's £1.65 billion annual expenditure on IT for classrooms. The budget for the BSF programme is £55 billion.

Armando Di-Finizio, the head of Brunel, said that millions of pounds were being wasted on "white elephant" technology in schools. He said that his school — the first to be rebuilt under BSF — had continuing technical difficulties. "The school was designed to be completely wireless but I have yet to see a school where wireless works well.

"We have been told that we have one of the most powerful systems in the country, but it is still not enough. We keep being told that lots of lessons have been learnt. We have had to beef it up out of our own budget."

Mr Di-Finizio criticised the millions of pounds being spent on technology in schools, and suggested that there was a fixation with constantly updating classrooms with the latest gadgets.

A government drive to provide state schools with the latest technology has seen most equipped with a large number of computers and "interactive whiteboards" in classrooms.

Some have installed swipe cards, fingerprint recognition systems, and have "virtual learning environments" to allow children and teachers to access the curriculum online.

Mr Di-Finizio said that there were pressures on schools to buy expensive equipment. "One could be led up the wrong path by IT experts. Is it worth having card-swiping and fingerprint detection systems in place, if the teacher still has to do the register?

"We introduced a system of swipe cards because it encourages children to use them in the library and to pay for lunch, rather than carrying cash. We spent all this money installing a swipe-card room entry system but the teacher ends up having to do the register anyway, because how do you know a child has not stolen someone else's card, or isn't covering for a friend?"

He said that there were problems with some of the latest fads, such as fingerprint recognition systems, which apparently do not work properly if the child has dirty fingers.

But he did not call for the removal of technology from schools, saying that it had been useful for raising attainment.

Schools spend £1.65 billion a year on information technology, with one computer to every three pupils in secondary schools, and one to six in primary schools. Yet some heads, particularly those involved with the BSF programme complain that they have lost freedom over their IT budgets, and are forced to buy expensive equipment through designated suppliers.

Mr Di-Finizio spoke last week at the Westminster Education Forum in Central London.

Information superhighway

1997 Tony Blair pledges: "By 2002 every one of the 32,000 schools in Britain will have modern computers, the educational programmes to go on them, the teachers skilled to teach on them, the pupils skilled to use them, connected to the superhighway."

2000 Tony Blair's pre-election education pledges include £710 million for new technology in schools, five pupils per computer in secondary and eight pupils per computer in primary schools within four years.

2004 Charles Clarke, then then Education Secretary, says every school will have an interactive whiteboard in every classroom.

2009 ICT becomes a core part of the primary school curriculum, alongside English and maths.

2010 Gordon Brown and Ed Balls start scheme to give 270,000 low-income families a free computer and free broadband access, to help children with homework.

Labour plans

? All 3,500 state secondaries in England are to be refurbished or rebuilt by 2023

? Government says the scheme is the most ambitious of its type in the world

? Budget has grown from £45 billion to £55 billion

? Up to £3 billion is spent on capital each year

? Spending on information and communication technology is £1,675 per pupil

? Partnerships for Schools, which runs BSF, was criticised for wasting money on consultants