**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 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.

The purpose of this article is to state additional reasons that apply specifically

to education.

First, free software can save schools 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 in practical terms, is rather shallow.

And proprietary software developers can eliminate this reason by donating copies

to the schools. (Warning: a school that accepts such an offer may have to pay

for upgrades later.) So let’s look at the deeper reasons.

Schools have a social mission: to teach students to be citizens of a strong,

capable, independent, cooperating and free society. They should promote the

use of free software just as they promote recycling. If schools teach students free

software, then the students will tend to use free software after they graduate.

This will help society as a whole escape from being dominated (and gouged) by

megacorporations.

What schools should refuse to do is teach dependence. Those corporations

offer free samples to schools for the same reason tobacco companies distribute free cigarettes to minors: to get children addicted.[[1]](#footnote-1) They will not give discounts to these students once they’ve grown up and graduated.

Free software permits students to learn how software works. Some students,

on reaching their teens, want to learn everything there is to know about their

computer and its software. They are intensely curious to read the source code of

the programs that they use every day. To learn to write good code, students need

to read lots of code and write lots of code. They need to read and understand

real programs that people really use. Only free software permits this.

.

Proprietary software rejects their thirst for knowledge: it says, “The knowl-

edge you want is a secret—learning is forbidden!” Free software encourages

everyone to learn. The free software community rejects the “priesthood of tech-

nology,” 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 deepest reason for using free software in schools is for moral education.

We expect schools to teach students basic facts and useful skills, but that is not

their whole job. The most fundamental job of schools is to teach good citizenship,

which includes the habit of helping others. In the area of computing, this means

teaching people to share software. Schools, starting from nursery school, should

tell their pupils, “If you bring software to school, you must share it with the other

students. And you must show the source code to the class, in case someone wants

to learn.”

Of course, the school must practice what it preaches: all the software in-

stalled 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.

Copyright c 2003, 2009 Richard Stallman

This essay was originally published on

http://gnu.org, in 2003. This version is part of Free Software, Free Society: Selected Essays of Richard M. Stallman,

2nd ed. (Boston: GNU Press, 2010).

Verbatim copying and distribution of this entire chapter are permitted worldwide,

without royalty, in any medium, provided this notice is preserved.

58 Free Software, Free Society, 2nd ed.

This workforce product was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration. The product was created by the grantee and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Labor. The U.S. Department of Labor makes no guarantees, warranties, or assurances of any kind, express or implied, with respect to such information, including any information on linked sites and including, but not limited to, accuracy of the information or its completeness, timeliness, usefulness, adequacy, continued availability, or ownership.



Documents also licensed under Creative Commons 4.0 International (CCBY)

1. RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company was fined $15m in 2002 for handing out free sam-

   ples of cigarettes at events attended by children. See

   <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sci_tech/features/health/tobaccotrial/usa.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)