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## president's MESSAGE

By Mike Caskey, CETPA President



Mike Caskey

# Chicken Little Commentary

The world situation, the national economy, the California state budget. And we continue to speculate.

Mark Twain said, "There are two times in a man's life when he shouldn't speculate: when he can't afford it and when he can."

I submit to you that we can't afford to speculate now. How often do you install mission critical technology after only guessing that it will operate within the defined parameters? O.K., so you have installed mission critical technology on a "wing and a prayer." I'll bet you found that it's not called "bleeding edge" technology for no reason! If you didn't, you must lead a charmed life.

Most of the discussion among my fellow K-12 technology colleagues has centered on the speculation of the "impending disaster" that will befall K-12 budgets soon. This speculation typically points to substantial cuts in our IT budgets. And when, in reality, we are told to cut, we dutifully look at our existing budgets and find somewhat non-essential components that we can eliminate or at least reduce. That's round one. What about round two next year? Round three? And so it goes...

Successful systems professionals know that you must *define the right problem, and then define the problem right*. Actually, defining the problem right really implies that you identify the various alternative solutions to the problem, but "define the problem right," sounds better. Maybe it's time to take out our one-, two-, three-, four-, five-year (pick one) technology plans, dust them off and lay in a mid-course correction. For those of us who don't have a \_\_\_ (fill in the blank) year plan, perhaps this is a good time to develop one. In either case, this will force an examination of the current status of technology in our educational institutions and the future expectations for that technology in light of a reduction in funding.

Based on observation and past experience, I believe that you should do all the things you expect your user community to do as you revisit or build your technology plan: itemize essential services; determine luxury items (I know, you don't have any); examine and itemize future plans carefully; be open to alternatives; look for economies of scale; prioritize everything; establish a cost and staffing factor for each of your prioritized items. In doing so, you will be ready to define the right problem. You may even discover that the right problem is that the elimination of essential services will cause an increase in institution expense due to the lack of viable alternatives. The problem still may not be easily solved, but as you carefully define that problem right, you will be positioned to manage the expectations of both your administration and customers.

Remember too, that no matter what the right problem is, staffing is a component of that problem definition. You know as well as I do that staff support and morale are crucial to maintaining departmental efficiency. Keep staff informed to the degree possible to help reduce non-productive speculation and maintain morale. Include them in your problem definition efforts. You'll get some great ideas from your staff.

And to really be prepared, you might consider developing a multi-level plan, which is based on different funding levels and the corresponding levels of institution-wide technology that result from the various levels of funding. Being prepared will strengthen your position and the ultimate result will certainly be better than a result based on speculation. I know, I know, you don't have the time. Try to find the time. It will be worth your trouble.

Was Chicken Little right? I don't know about you, but I'm doing all I can to re-design and rebuild the hen house before I have to find out. ■