BYOT signals a move to students using their own technology, writes Ainslie MacGibbon.

”It's better than spending time chasing after students all day, trying to catch them out with technology” ... Mai Lee, BYOT expert. Photo: Domino Postiglione

After years of offering a fixed technology menu via a bulk buy of laptops or including a designated tablet as a compulsory item on the back-to-school shopping list, schools are increasingly going BYO.

The concept is simple: if a student already has a preferred technology at home, bring it to school rather than duplicate cost, e-waste and learning time to navigate a school-issued device.

Hence the acronyms BYOT and BYOD - take your pick with technology or device.

Proponents say schools that have adopted BYOT are experiencing better outcomes from a more personalised education and enhanced engagement between the home and school. But words such as equity and access keep cropping up.

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Half a generation ago, being issued with a device by an organisation (pager, mobile, laptop) signalled status. But with the proliferation of internet and wi-fi-enabled portable devices, increased affordability and choice, thinking is shifting. And a stocktake of such devices in many Australian homes can be alarming.

At Broulee Public School on the NSW south coast, students in years 4 to 6 are allowed to bring technology they use at home.

One of the school's parents, Andrew Hearne, supports the concept because the use of technology is embedded across the curriculum in a meaningful way and not confined to an information and communication technologies (ICT) class.
The school loaded approved apps on to his daughter's iPod Touch. iPads are also available for students who have not brought in their own device.

"They are taught about the pitfalls of technology, too," Hearne says. "And because they bring their own technology, there are information nights run by the school, and it's here that can be a real eye-opener for parents about what their kids have been doing on their own technology.

"Parents learn how to help and be involved. It is very open.

"It's very different for my son, who is at the local high school, where so much technology is viewed as bad and personal technology is banned."

Increasingly, apps are compatible across a range of devices with wi-fi, while programs that connect communities using mobile technology will work on basic mobiles through to smartphones. A former principal and director of schools, Mal Lee, is an internationally recognised specialist in the field of BYOT.

Lee says the burgeoning power of technology already available in the home is overlooked and technology issued during the Digital Education Revolution (DER) rollout will become redundant if there is something more powerful and preferred at home.

In 2009, Lee conducted research that found in an average year 6 class of 30 children, the amount of technology in their homes was at least 15 times greater than what was available in the classroom.

"And that was in 2009," he says. "That amount is likely to have grown." According to Lee, BYOT is an inevitable development with positive economic, social and education outcomes.

"Kids normalised the use of the digital ages ago, as most of their parents did," he says.

"They should be naturally using their own. The reality is they already have an ever-evolving suite of technology."

But he says the move needs to be phased in and evolve naturally, with genuine collaboration between the school and home.

Some parents will see the benefit immediately and recognise that it allows the school to spend on other education tools, while others may need to be convinced it is not simply transferring an economic burden.

Lee adds that the move will be harder where there is resistance by ICT staff and principals who prefer to retain a control model rather than a facilitating one.

Results of a large-scale survey released last month by Project Tomorrow, an education panel in the US, found that 65 per cent of school principals were unlikely to allow students to use their own mobile devices for instructional purposes.

In contrast, almost two-thirds of parents said that if their child's school allowed the use of mobile devices for instructional purposes, it is likely they would buy such a device for their child to use.

Parents from low-income schools were just as likely to report that they would buy a mobile device for academic purposes as the other parents who were surveyed.

According to the report, the response from more than 330,000 kindergarten to year 12 (K-12) students surveyed about how schools could make it easier for them to use technology was resounding: let me use my own tools.

This was closely followed by: if you won't let me use my own tools, then provide me with tools and access that replicate my out-of-school usage.
The survey concluded that many education leaders believed a significant result of BYOT would be increased engagement in learning and greater ownership of the learning process by the students.

Lee says BYOT reflects a significant change in moving from a model of distrust to trust.

"I've had conversations with principals who found that when they started to trust the kids, the whole relationship changed," he says. "Once they sense they're trusted, kids rise to the occasion."

"It's better than spending time chasing after students all day, trying to catch them out with technology and reprimanding them."

Yet the question of equity cannot be ignored.

A spokeswoman for the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW, Rachael Sowden, has 11 devices, plus three smartphones, between seven people in her home. That doesn't include computers.

"This is not the case in every family," she says.

"There will be issues of equity. In some cases, the DER saw the first laptop enter a house. And it creates a burden on families who have one iPad but three children.

"There are definitely concerns around how do you ensure there is support for families who choose not to have these devices in their home for one reason or another, or can't afford them … and concern about equity across schools.

"Will children attending schools in low socio-economic areas have the same access to technologies [that] children have at schools in higher socio-economic areas?"

However, Sowden says there does need to be a conversation about what will happen next as the DER rollout concludes.

Lee also regards equity as vital.

"For sure there will be some families who will need to be supported, but there are policies in place and schools are well positioned to do this," he says.

"It's actually far better to address this at the individual school level, where teachers know the students."

What advice would Lee give to schools thinking of adopting certain policies and technological devices at present?

"Have a close look at your community, communicate and recognise what you've got already," he says.

"Educators have talked about trying to tailor education to individuals for decades; BYOT brings that on."