

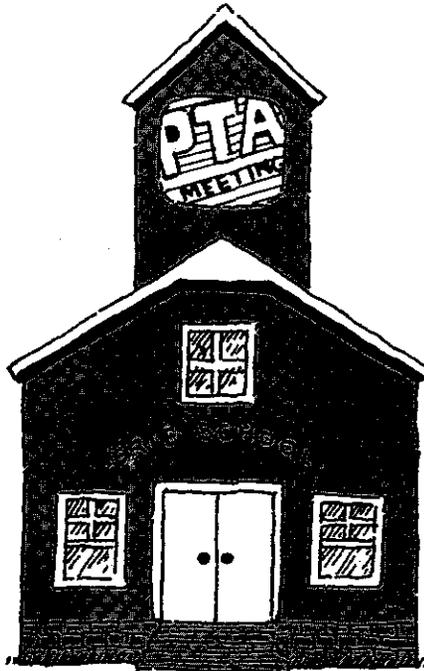
A Vidtex System Grows in Erie

Cable television companies often provide public access channels to the local school district. Then, it is up to the school district to decide what to do with this free air time. A common approach is to install videotex systems, that display information for TV viewers. That usually means a substantial investment for a school system, unless they are lucky enough to have a clever Atari user group like SAGE (Spectrum Atari User Group of Erie) in their town.

Pat Ferrito, the public information director of the Erie school district, decided to install a videotex system in late 1984. He intended to broadcast school information over the channel provided by the Erie cable TV franchise. "We would broadcast the lunch menu, sports events, PTA meetings, open houses, kinds of information that the public might want or need. Then he discovered what it would cost. "It might cost a lot of money, maybe \$20,000," he said. That slowed down the progress of the videotex system considerably. Ferrito had to spend time looking for the best, most economical way to bring videotex to Erie.

Enter Atari in the form of Bob Tirak, a member of SAGE, the Spectrum Atari Group of Erie. Tirak works for the Erie School District and spoke to Ferrito about using an Atari to generate text. "I was pondering buying TV equipment [for a videotex system] when I was told that there were other ways of doing it" Ferrito said. "So I went out and bought an inexpensive Atari computer and saw that it was possible." Two people that helped in the initial installation were SAGE member Dan Christoffersen, and Jack Fetzner, who is an employee of the school district.

What attracted Ferrito was the possibility of savings, and he has not been disappointed. "So far the cost to the school district has been about \$250,"



said Richard Olson, the president of SAGE and the one who handles advanced programming of the system. Olson stepped in when Ferrito got enthusiastic about the system and wanted to do more complicated things, like presenting the school system's budget, changing colors, typestyle and type size so the effect is more appealing, and some graphics. Olson is donating his time on volunteer basis. "He has been extremely gracious," Ferrito said.

"What's really exciting is that we did it quite quickly and inexpensively," Ferrito said. "In less than a week we were disseminating information to the public." The Erie county school system uses an Atari 800 for a text generator. They also have a printer, two disk drives, and a koalapad.

Cable T.V. professionals are impressed by what Erie has done. Sue Miller-Buske, the executive director of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, was very excited about the Erie system. She calls it "pretty darn unusual" for a school system to produce videotex for under \$250, as Erie does. She explained that character

generators run from a minimum of \$1,500 to professional-quality systems of over \$20,000. "What they're doing is really unique," she said. "I've known people who've done it with Apples, but of course they're more expensive. I've never heard of anyone who's done this sort of thing with an Atari."

In a suburb of Erie, the Mill Creek Township school district is broadcasting with a \$1,900 character generator that is part of a full studio. "Our studio's pretty well equipped," said Dr. Solomon, the assistant superintendent of schools for the township. "We're fortunate to have devices of this kind in the community and we've tried to get a lot of public information out. Our center was established 10 years ago and we started buying stuff then." He is proud of his broadcast quality. "There's a big mistake made in putting out low-quality signal," he said.

Mike Williams, the programming director for American Television Communications (ATC) who gives Erie their access channel, is pleased with the usage the Erie school district has of their channel. "I think it's a terrific outlet for getting to parents," he said. Williams is also pleased with the quality of the text generated by the Atari. "It looks good, very legible," he said. "I was afraid we'd have problems, but it looks sharp."

Erie's videotex transmission is aided by the modulator that ATC supplies. With it, Richard Olson is looking forward to producing overlay titling at future school board meetings. "The modulator is in a sense a mixer," Olson said. "We plug the Atari into [the] camera 2 [outlet], go to preview mode, and show our picture, then switch to camera 2 to show our text."

For more information on Erie's videotex system, write to SAGE, c/o Richard Olson, P.O. Box 10562, Erie PA 16514-0562.

—P. R. Adler