PARENTS' CORNER

Jack Feenstra is a man whose work requires some knowledge of computers. In addition, he is the father of three grade-school children (Heritage Christian School) who enjoy putting their home computer to a variety of uses. We asked Mr. Feenstra therefore to write a short article explaining why it might be advantageous for parents to invest in a computer for the home. To the question, "Should I, or shouldn't I?" Mr. Feenstra answers "Yes, if." For an explanation of that, read on.

Home Computers

Jack Feenstra

Computers are one of the most fascinating inventions of mankind in recent years. The vast majority of the population do not understand computers, and to them a wall of mystery shrouds this invention. Nevertheless, it is of widespread usefulness to man.

Many people imagine that the computer can think by itself; however, it cannot. It cannot learn by itself, nor is it self-sufficient. It can only do what man programs it to do. It is but a machine. It cannot function on its own, any more than an automobile or a typewriter can. It can only retrieve information stored within its memory. Herein lies its powerful usefulness. The vast amount of information that can be stored and recalled varies with computer models and computer attachments. The blinding speed at which stored information can be recalled is mind-staggering.

The computer and its attachments are referred to as hardware. Any programs, usually stored on a disk or magnetic tape, are referred to as software. Programs, very simply put, are special instructions for a computer to perform certain tasks with its stored information or with information the user gives to the computer while using that program. Specialized programs are available by the thousands. These programs range from those that are work-related, to fun type games, to educational teaching aids. Using a purchased program not only saves the computer-user time, but it also makes operating the computer very easy.

Computers are all around us. Their use in industry today ranges from the small shop, to giant corporations, even to our local grocery stores. All of these de-

pend on the computer for their everyday activities. Our children will be more dependent on and involved with computers than we can even imagine today. For this reason nearly every school has one or more computers for its students to learn on, to play with, and to become familiar with. Nearly every student in our schools in Grand Rapids from the fifth grade through high school has had time with a computer. It is amazing how rapidly they can learn to operate a computer and run their favorite program. Their acceptance of the computer is quite natural. To them, the computer is as commonplace as a typewriter is to most adults.

Many parents have asked teachers about the benefits of having a computer at home for their children. Will it help their son or daughter in their school years or in preparing them for further studies or for their life in the labor force? The answer to this is YES – IF. An affirmative answer, in other words, is qualified by whether or not their son or daughter has a strong interest in computers. Learning to use a computer takes time and a strong desire to learn to use it. The machine does not work as does a radio or a television by merely turning it on for entertainment. Time and effort are required to learn the necessary skills to run a computer. Continued use of the computer is needed to maintain these skills.

The home computer can be a good investment for a family. It is a fact that most occupations will require some understanding of computers in the very near future. Currently, many high schools and colleges require their students to take a minimum of one computer course to meet graduation requirements. Many college courses cannot be completed without the use of a computer for calculations and problem-solving assignments. Students also find the computers extremely helpful in report writing and printing. Programs called Word Processing allow reports to be written on the computer and stored in its memory or on a disk. The report can be put aside and restarted very easily with the computer. The program allows spelling corrections, sentence or paragraph restructuring, and text additions to be made very easily. At the completion of the report, the whole report can be printed by the computer on a printer, error free.

The computer can be used as a learning tool at home for the student. Many programs are available on virtually every subject. For the young student, excellent programs were written to help them understand basic math principles. Programs to challenge and teach students the