Technology and Teens: Can They Handle It?

Student internet speech will be fertile ground for the development of best practices, model policies, staff development, continuing education, research and policy writing in the coming years. A proactive approach by school boards and educational leaders can not only help to avoid the distraction and expense of court cases, but will also give better guidance to students and parents about appropriate use of the electronic media (Graca & Stader, 2007).

There is no question that students have technology, such as cell phones and iPods, and plenty of access to various Internet sites. The question is whether middle grades students are mature enough to handle this high level, largely unsupervised access to communication and information. The growing answer is that many are not, that many middle school students’ parents don’t realize it, and schools are on their heels trying to find ways to effectively deal with it.

School District Policies

Some estimates are that as many as 80 percent of students have cell phones. Many students now have cell phones with cameras, which have texting capabilities and can take both snapshots and videos. These capabilities provide students with newer and more tempting opportunities than ever to engage in inappropriate and disruptive activities at school. During the past five years or so, districts across the country have created policies permitting students to bring cell phones to school. Policies allowing cell phones emerged partly due to pressure from parents who expressed concerns about student safety during and after school. Now, several districts around the country are beginning to respond to growing problems with students’ misuse of phones by banning them altogether. My school district allows middle school students to have cell phones, but they may not be visible or turned on during the school day. Each of our four middle schools confiscates more than 100 cell phones per year due to student violations of the policy.

Even though most school districts now restrict students’ use of cell phones in schools, many students ignore policies and carry phones, turned on, into classrooms. Students use them to text fellow students within the school, take pictures of exams, and even to call in bomb threats and take compromising pictures and videos of other students. Pictures can immediately be e-mailed to friends, which can create myriad problems among students. Also, pictures of teachers, taken with student cell phones, are showing up on such online communities as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube, often with uncomplimentary remarks.

More disturbing and potentially more dangerous for middle schoolers is their easy access to online community accounts. MySpace users must be at least 14 years old to open an account, and YouTube and Facebook both require users to be at least 13. Of course, the problem is that users self-identify their ages and all information posted, making it easy for younger users to make use of the sites. Students sometimes post negative remarks about classmates, creating interpersonal relationship issues that often carry over to schools.

An even more sinister concern in students’ access to online communities is the potential for access of their information by predators. We have only seen the beginnings of this problem, but the nature of middle school children is to be curious and to push the limits of school district policy. Policies include strict guidelines prohibiting access to e-mail, pornographic sites, or online communities. In addition to policies, districts have initiated site-blocking software designed to prevent access to inappropriate Web sites. Still, a policy is only good if students comply, and blocking software is only good if students can’t crack it. Unfortunately, it is also the nature of middle school children to be curious and to push the limits of school rules. Additionally, they have the technological savvy to find their way around roadblocks to the Internet sites they want to access.

Middle school educators must take responsibility to educate ourselves regarding this technology and the ways in which it is being used and abused by students. We must then educate parents and our students regarding the dangers of online predators and preventative steps that can be taken.

What Steps Can We Take?

Contact local law enforcement agencies. Many have programs designed to provide educators, parents, and students with concrete information regarding predatory practices they have seen online, and specific steps that can be taken to prevent these issues.

Our school improvement council has spearheaded grade-level assemblies with a sheriff’s deputy who has provided a world of helpful information to our students. All parents were invited and many attended the sessions. Parents stopped me after the assemblies to remark on the information they had just heard, and comments included, “I wish I knew this before I let my daughter open one of those MySpace pages” and “My kid’s account is hereby closed!”

Involving school improvement councils or parent-teacher organizations in developing ways to get information into the hands of parents. My school improvement council chair is currently working with his counterparts in the district’s other middle schools to put together a parent task force to research, design, and disseminate information to parents.

Beyond setting up assemblies, our school improvement council has...
addressed the PTO board about its concerns with students’ use of technology and shared information it has researched. The PTO board is including a “technology talk” segment in each PTO newsletter, which is sent out every nine weeks with report cards. This segment includes information for parents and teachers regarding safety concerns for students on the Internet.

**Develop school-based programs to educate students regarding Internet safety and appropriate use.** We have identified an individual in our state department of education who is coming to our school to work with faculty on some ways that discussions on Internet safety can be integrated into homeroom periods, technology classes, and media center sessions.

**Ensure that your school and school district have clearly delineated policies for all technology, including computer use and cell phone possession and use.** Policies should define when, where, and how all technology is to be used, and spell out sanctions for misuse or abuse.

Our district policies on technology and cell phone use are included in both our student and teacher handbooks, and are consistently enforced. As specific types of misuse are identified, we ensure that teachers are kept informed of the misuses and of their roles in dealing with them. We periodically meet with students to remind them about both the policies and the consequences of violating them.

**Market your policies and the availability of information to your school community.** We use seminars and assemblies with parents and students, post information on the school Web site, and distribute it through PTO and school newsletters, and occasionally through phone mass-distribution systems.

Our counselors have been on the forefront of developing information to distribute to parents and students, and have become more aware of their role in proactively identifying potential problems students may face through technology. They have met with teacher teams and have opened lines of communication with students who feel they are being threatened through any technology venue.

While it is true that most educators are technology immigrants and our students are technology natives, we immigrants must quickly learn and be functional in the technology language and culture of our students. Our children are depending on it.

---

Robert Heath is principal of W. C. Sullivan Middle School in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and an adjunct professor of educational leadership at Winthrop University. His e-mail address is rheath@rock-hill.k12.sc.us.

**Reference**