

Technology Checklist

Item	Rating				
1 Lots of shiny new equipment	1	2	3	4	5
2 Teachers who have been trained to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms	1	2	3	4	5
3 Frequent, ongoing, subject-specific training to enhance teachers' effective pedagogical integration of digital technologies	1	2	3	4	5
4 Adequate hardware, software, and network support so that teachers can rely on the technology "being there" for them	1	2	3	4	5
5 Ubiquitous access by all students to computers and the Internet during the school day	1	2	3	4	5
6 Ubiquitous access by all students to computers and the Internet outside the school day	1	2	3	4	5
7 Principals that know how to evaluate effective technology usage by teachers and students	1	2	3	4	5
8 District technology plan that is effectively integrated with the district's strategic plan, continuous improvement plan, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
9 Dedicated and reliable funding for the district technology plan	1	2	3	4	5
10 District- and building-level leaders with a vision for the effective preparation of students for their digital future	1	2	3	4	5

Blocking the Future

BY SCOTT McLEOD

A middle school librarian in New Jersey receives national media attention for posting “Just Say ‘No’ to Wikipedia” signs over the computers in her library. A private school in Michigan forbids students from having a MySpace account. A ban on cell phones in New York City schools causes a parent uproar. Students and staffers in some Texas and Oklahoma schools are prohibited from accessing Google. A Washington principal is told by his school district’s technology coordinator that he’s not allowed to blog to his school community. And so on.

Some educators see these types of events as principled stands against the shortcomings and hassles of digital technologies. Others see them as rejections of the impersonal dehumanization of the educational process by soulless machines. Perhaps we ought to view them instead as examples of school organizations that are desperately and inappropriately blocking the future.

It is clear by now our world is going to become even more technological, not less. Technology tools such as digital software, online systems, global networks and personal computers are literally reshaping global civilization. The democratization of media, the ability of local sellers to compete in worldwide markets, and software that replaces jobs once done by humans are all examples of transformational impacts that have arisen in just the past decade. We are at the forefront of societal change on the scale of the Agricultural or Industrial revolutions.

Proper Mindset

In this type of environment, school district leaders have a critical choice to make: Will their schools pro-actively model and teach the safe and appropriate use of these digital tools or will they reactively block them out and leave students and families to fend for themselves? Unfortunately many schools are choosing to do the latter. As a technology advocate, I can think of no better way to highlight organizational unimportance than to block out the tools that are transforming the rest of society. Schools whose default stance is to prohibit rather than enable might as well plant a sign in front of their buildings that says “Irrelevant to children’s futures.”

As director of a technology support center for educational leaders, I often get asked what appropriate district policies should be for various technologies. In my mind, the specific policies are much less important than the general mindset of the school district.

If a district has decided to figure out ways to facilitate technology usage and empower students and staff, the policies will follow accordingly. Conversely, if a district is determined to treat technology from a fearful or wary

standpoint, its policies will reflect that position as well. I see both viewpoints play out in school communities across the country, and I always feel sad for the students and teachers in the districts that choose to simply block rather than do the harder but necessary work of enabling.

The vision for the district flows down from the top. When I hear stories such as the principal’s blog that gets blocked by the district technology coordinator, I am left to wonder, “Where is the superintendent in all of this? Why is she or he allowing this to happen?”

A superintendent never would allow his district business manager to function with minimal or no supervision; yet that practice is all too common when it comes to technology. I hear countless stories from educators that their superintendent is completely hands-off, leaving all technology-related management and pedagogical decisions in the hands of subordinates. This sends the wrong message to teachers and principals about the importance of these revolutionary forces.

Supportive Messages

Superintendents don’t have to be power users themselves to be effective technology leaders, but they do have to exercise appropriate oversight and convey the message, repeatedly and often, that frequent, appropriate technology usage is both important and expected. Structural actions that also carry symbolic weight, such as including the district’s lead technology person in the cabinet, can go a long way toward sending the right message. So too can funding some highly visible pilot projects and/or personally modeling the struggles and successes of learning a new technology tool.

Some school districts have figured this out. They don’t have all the answers, but they have the right mindset. Their first reaction is not “keep this out” but rather “how we can make this work?” We can learn from these organizations how they have balanced safety concerns with the need to empower students with 21st century skills and dispositions.

Please don’t block the future. Please don’t relegate your students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to second-class status in the new economy because you left it to them and their families to figure out on their own what it means to be digital, global citizens. Ask AASA and its state affiliates to provide more technology leadership-related professional development opportunities. And let us know how we can help.

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