Interview with Administrator

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By Lori Welty

On Monday, June 17, I conducted an interview with Chuck Neidhoefer, Director of Charter and Magnet Schools of Napa Valley Unified School District. During the interview, various topics were explored and discussed from Acceptable Use Policies to Chuck’s experiences as an administrator with technology related issues. Chuck described a situation in which he was an elementary school principal and had to inform parents of the inappropriate use of technology by their children. A fifth grade girl was sexting her 5th grade boyfriend. From this event, it became evident that the school must begin educating its students on digital citizenship. He began educating his staff and discussing next steps regarding the education of the students. Having worked at the elementary level for many years, I did not think this would be an issue of concern at this young age. Chuck believes everyone in a student’s life is responsible for educating them on digital citizenship. This would include parents, teachers, grandparents, scout leaders, and many others.

In addition to educating students on digital citizenship, many other policies were in place at his school. From a basic level of organization, the maintenance of the lab was important in an effort to maintain and encourage a sense of value among the students. As each class left the lab, the expectation was to leave the equipment in the lab in a clean an organized fashion. To support increased efficiencies, password assigned to young students must be short and simple so the log on process did not interfere with instructional time. Protecting instructional minutes is an aspect that must be considered when incorporating technology.

He valued social media for instruction which allows students to share opinions in real time which supports increased student engagement. Web tools, such as Today’s Meet and Poll Everywhere, provide quick formative assessments and help direct instruction. Google docs is an excellent tool for creating, brainstorming, and editing while engaging in collaborative work. He stated that intentional and regular instruction is need to support the appropriate use of technology.

Social media is another topic discussed in detail. From administrators to teachers to students, we must identify key elements and provide education. For example, Chuck discussed the importance of administrators and teachers maintaining a level of transparency when interacting with students online. This means not hiding behind an avatar or communicating online under another identity. From the case study presented in ED 701, Digital Tools, a principal used a false identity to get information from students and parents regarding the school. Soon after the principal was identified as the author of the website, she resigned from her position. Another topic of concern is based on the interactions between teachers and students through the use of social media. Chuck appreciates teachers that will communicate with students after work hours to clarify homework assignments or provide student support in completing assignments. How do we regulate social media behavior so it exists only in the context of appropriate teacher to student topics such as homework?

Both teachers and students need education on socially appropriate skills in using technology. Adults often model inappropriate social interactions when talking on phones in social places or interrupting conversations to text, answer phone calls, or check email. Teachers have been observed making unprofessional comments about their job on social media sites. Communications through email are sensitive since facial expressions cannot be seen and may be misconstrued. Rereading email to ensure clear communication is often necessary. It is easier to discuss negative topics online, so if these situations exist it is best to address them face to face. In addition, if an email is written when emotionally frustrated or angry, the writer needs to wait for at least twenty-four hours before rereading, revising and sending the email. Once an email or social communication is sent, it cannot be rescinded. This has serious ramifications and our students must be educated on the negative outcome of this event. Job relationships, career aspirations, family relationships and friendships can be seriously affected.

Though most content cannot be rescinded, there are new applications such as “Snap, Chat” which allows a user to send a photo with a message. After a number of seconds the photo will explode and be unrecoverable. This provides a breeding ground for increased cyberbullying. Chuck is concerned about the negative consequences of this new application.

Access and the digital divide is also an area of concern for Chuck. With new policies related to BYOD, will this movement provide equal access for all students? Internet access at home varies from no access to slow access and then high speed access in higher income homes. There is a possibility that the ACLU will get involved in this issue of student accessibility related to technology in the schools.

Another interesting point made is in regards to the political environment and student voice. Can we have an active democracy without engaged students? If students fear posting dialogue that can be traced by potential employers and others, will some students stop voicing their opinions? Can a digital voice become a liability? Students need to maintain a growth mindset and not fear posting their feelings about political issues. It would be unfortunate if technology decreased freedom of speech. I had not considered the ramifications of this topic. It was an interesting point.

In summary, Chuck states that digital citizenship is a critical area of concern and must receive the attention necessary to prevent harm to our children. An increased level of communication happens online and comes to us electronically. Not only do we need policies and regulations but a process of education for our teachers and students. As evidenced in the videos and articles presented in ED 701, Digital Tools, serious consequences, including life and death situations, may occur if we do not take this subject seriously.