



GR8

TTYL

BTW

IMHO

ROFL

THX

LOL!

“”

?

Keeping the Peace

Nueva School learned a tough lesson when rampant instant messaging led to an uproar over what technology was appropriate for their middle school one-to-one initiative.

In a November 7, 2007, *New York Times* article “New Class (room) War: Teacher vs. Technology,” author Michael Bugeja noted that “the baby boomers seem to see technology as information and communication. Their offspring and the emerging generation seem to see the same devices as entertainment and socializing.”

This became abundantly clear to us after launching a one-to-one laptop program at our middle school in 2007. Excessive use of an instant messaging program installed on our laptops exposed a profound disconnect between students, parents, and teachers about the appropriate use of technology at school and at home. The situation forced our district to take a hard look at the pros and cons of IM and eventually ban it—something that would have been easier before we implemented our one-to-one initiative.

Communication Breakdown

From the early stages of the program, we were losing the battle, and losing badly. In the first few weeks, students routinely sent instant messages to their peers while in class. Video chatting with iChat was rampant after school, and one student even shared with a classmate a view of his mother in her pajamas. Many parents grew increasingly alarmed and did not know how to engage their children in conversation around appropriate use of this technology at home. Faculty felt overwhelmed with how to manage the distraction in their classrooms, and one faculty member announced, “I won’t use the laptops in my classroom. The kids need to be able to focus.”

It became apparent that we had an epidemic on our hands, and the community had broken into two camps. On one side stood faculty and parents who felt that students needed the freedom to explore and learn with little or no restriction. On the other side, parents dug in their heels over the need for more restrictions, both at school and at home. Some parents felt blindsided by the laptops. They had created carefully considered guidelines for home use of IM, but their children now came home with school-issued machines that granted permission to video chat with their peers. In their minds, the school had made a decision for the home, and they were given no choice in the matter. Still other parents saw this whole experience as a wonderful opportunity to engage the students and to educate them on appropriate use.

At informal “parent coffees,” these issues boiled to the surface and erupted into heated disagreements over the appropriate direction the school should take. One parent suggested holding a town meeting to allow students and parents the opportunity to hash it out in a free-for-all.

Kill the Messenger

We had to make a decision, and much to the dismay of many, we decided to block iChat on the school laptops. Little did we know that the outcry would be so severe. I received volumes of correspondence on both sides of the issue. Student council speeches sounded the clarion for retraction. Students put together petitions to protest. One student wrote:

Boot-Up Camp

Each year, our laptop program begins with three mini-workshops that focus on the issues of physical care, guidelines for appropriate use, and ethics. Students travel in small groups and participate in a variety of activities and discussions with teachers and tech staff. They have the chance to ask questions and review key aspects of laptop learning at Nueva.

As part of the morning workshops, leaders from Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) join teachers to work with our students. The not-for-profit organization provides information and tools to give families a choice and a voice in the media they consume. We use parts of the Common Sense Media Digital Life curriculum to have students explore challenging ethical situations involving digital media, and to develop solutions and interventions.

We invite a technology educator to speak to the students at midday. This past September, we heard from internationally recognized technology leader and educator Alan November. He tapped into student imagination about the possibilities of media and ways to leverage technology tools for deep, authentic learning. In the afternoon, we have students engage in a media creation project, such as making an iMovie about the opening advisory overnight camping trip.

Students pull together video footage and photographs to make their films and then share with the whole community. On the day of the boot-up camp, we hold parent education meetings to discuss and review the acceptable-use policy and to talk about how to manage the home computing environment. We asked several parents to write a parent tips guide for the laptop program (<http://nuevaschool.org/programs/one-to-one-laptop-program>), and we share and strategize with parents about how to “keep the peace” at home.

The goal of the boot-up camp is to bring together the key constituencies—students, teachers, and parents—to get the community on the same page about laptop learning.

From the school’s perspective, the academic purpose of the laptops had disappeared into a vortex of social networking, especially when it was occurring during the school day.

We really love it [iChat] and use it for important uses.... We believe that the parents can block it for their own children if they want, but it is not fair for them to block it for the whole middle school.

Other students were less circumspect. One commented:

My mom says that the majority of angry old people are OK with video chat at school. However, after 3:30 it should go off.... I am actually glad that you decided on a blanket ban. Otherwise it would be like teasing us. Giving it to us for a little bit then taking it away. Boy, that would be horrible!

Many parents sharpened their quills to share their opinions as well. One parent wrote:

iChat was wonderful. It truly broke the “clique” boundaries that tend to occur at school. Also, as our daughter is very busy and goes to a commuter school, she has almost no social life. We as parents were relieved that the clique boundary seemed broken on iChat and that she was engaging socially with her classmates. I also second the opinion expressed by other parents that iChat is like TV or video games or Internet browsing. It is the responsibility of the parent to teach the children how best to use these tools. Each parent can establish household rules as they wish. We are in favor of bringing iChat back! Censorship is not necessary nor wanted.

The situation had turned into an issue of freedom of speech. But from the school’s perspective, the academic purpose of the laptops

had disappeared into a vortex of social networking, especially when it was occurring during the school day.

Other parents were grateful the school took the approach it did. One parent commented:

Thank you for blocking iChat. You acted with due diligence. We felt betrayed by the school when our child came home with the application and started instant messaging, when we had not yet entered that realm in our household. When we told her that we didn’t want her instant messaging, she responded with, “But Mom, the school gave us this laptop with iChat!” Now that you have blocked its use, we feel better able to enter this area at our own pace instead of being forced into it by the school.

Another parent saw the iChat storm of protest as just a “tempest in a teapot.” She stated:

We will monitor her use, set limits, and help her learn to manage her time efficiently. I think once the novelty wears off and children realize how much work they have to do, they will naturally reduce their use of the tool. Parents and school staff can help children learn good time management skills more effectively by “learning by doing” as opposed to the school making the decision for the children.

The relationship between home and school rose to the surface and called into question the boundary issues associated with the two bodies. Respect for parents’ ability to make these

The relationship between home and school rose to the surface and called into question the boundary issues associated with the two bodies.

decisions in their own homes factored into our choice to block the use of iChat. And, particularly with middle school students, the option of allowing some to have it after school on a case-by-case, family-by-family basis did not seem to be a viable alternative, as we did not want to aggravate a community that was already frustrated and pit those who had access against those who did not.

Getting the Message

It was quite a first year, and there were moments when we asked ourselves why we ever embarked on this laptop program. However, we viewed the experience as a learning opportunity, not only for ourselves but also for the community at large. Several steps are now in place to prepare everyone in advance for the introduction of new technologies. We now have:

- A boot camp at the opening of school for our sixth graders to orient them to the laptops (see Boot-Up Camp on page 18)
- A partnership with Common Sense Media, an organization geared toward helping kids and families make informed choices about media
- Training sessions on how to conduct effective, efficient online research
- Faculty training and teacher-led technology workshops throughout the school year
- Parent education workshops to help facilitate laptop use between home and school
- An acceptable-use policy that must be signed before laptop distribution
- An IM program for use at school with teacher permission within the school's network and limited to student use only
- Continued flexibility and openness in our approach to handling issues that arise

Moving to a one-to-one program is not just about enhancing learning and teaching in an academic setting. It is about being open to the students' online world and being ready to deal with the social landscape that forms such an integral part of their lives. The Nueva School learned this lesson the hard way.

Adults and children view technology differently, and schools need to figure out how to manage this cultural divide.

We hope the lessons we learned through this process will help other schools begin this kind of program much more smoothly than we did.



Matt Levinson is a graduate of Teachers' College at Columbia University and author of the coming ISTE book From Fear to Facebook: One School's Journey. He is the assistant director and head of the middle school at the Nueva School in Hillsborough, California.

Connecting the dots to inspired learning...

Thinking Teachers

More than 10,400
FREE!
resources

Teaching Thinkers™



TeachersFirst.com

From the non-profit  For teachers. For families. For excellence.

 CORPORATE PARTNER