


Board urged to tech up schools; the school board is urged to use the digital power already in students' hands

 *The St. Petersburg Times (St. Petersburg, FL)*, September 7, 2011

Byline: JEFFREY S. SOLOCHEK; Times Staff Writer

LAND OAE LAKES -- The days of banning cell phones at Pasco schools may be coming to an end.

"We need to get off that dinosaur," superintendent Heather Fiorentino told the School Board on Tuesday during a workshop on classroom technology.

It's a matter of dollars and sense.

Schools must increase accessibility to computers and other digital devices to give students better opportunities to learn using the tools that are available in most businesses, not to mention in their homes, Fiorentino said.

Yet the district has only limited resources to meet such demands.

"We need to be able to harness the power of student-owned devices," said Wendy Spriggs, district director of instructional media services. Telling students to power down when they arrive at school - often the only place they have to turn off - "makes school feel much more irrelevant to them," she added.

Many schools already have headed down that path, allowing students to use their own laptops, smart phones and computer tablets for classroom research and projects. School Board members raised concerns about the trend.

"All that sounds really good where it's been utilized for learning. But I don't hear any of those stories," vice chairman Allen Altman said.

He has heard teachers complaining that students get calls from parents and send text messages to classmates during class, causing disruptions. What models exist, Altman asked, to allow the use of student-owned devices for learning without allowing them to become a distraction?

"It is a struggle," Spriggs acknowledged. "It really becomes a behavior issue at that point."

Fiorentino said the schools with clear usage guidelines have very few issues with inappropriate texting and the like, because the students do not want to lose the privilege. The schools that have outlawed all cell phone use have many more problems, she said.

"We have to deal with the behavior of using it inappropriately," Spriggs said.

But that should not mean banning phones, iPods and other equipment, board member Cynthia Armstrong added. She likened the idea to telling kids they cannot bring paper and pencils to school because they might pass notes.

"It is here," board member Alison Crumbley said in agreement. "We have to deal with it."

Spriggs said it would fall to the district to ensure proper "digital citizenship" of students. That's just one of many things the district must accomplish as it moves ahead with initiatives to expand the availability of technology in the schools, she said.

Infrastructure needs remain large, she noted.

The district has yet to reach its goal of having one computer for every three students, for instance. After a thorough review, which included upgrading memory on nearly 1,000 machines, the district's middle and high schools have attained a 4 to 1 ratio.

Even that has not been good enough, assistant superintendent Ruth Reilly said, as schools commandeered career and technical program computers for testing, interrupting daily instruction.

At the elementary level, some schools were at 90 to 1, while others had many more modern computers, said John Simon, director of information services. The district has moved toward an overall average of 6.5 students per computer, with a plan to make incremental improvements annually, he said.

The district continues to strive to bring more interactive technology into the classrooms, using school improvement plans as a guide. Teacher training on best uses remains a work in progress, too.

Board chairwoman Joanne Hurley said the staff's report on technology made clear the district's needs. Now it's time for the board to consider the accompanying policy and budget implications.

"I suspect they're huge," Hurley said.

Some questions have emerged nationally about whether increased technology in the classroom, however engaging, translates into improved academic performance. Board members expect to continue this conversation at a workshop later this month.

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FAST FACTS

Other issues on the School Board radar

In other business, the Pasco School Board took the following action Tuesday:

- Approved new employee work calendars with furlough dates. The first of two furlough days for most workers will be Dec. 22. The second day for most employees will fall on the final work day of their contract, which is June 7 for teachers, June 6 for many instructional aides.
- Authorized \$500 for materials to support the board's four-day school week exploratory task force. The group is scheduled to have its first meeting at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 26 in the board chambers.
- Recognized the United Way of Pasco County for its Stuff the Bus school supply donation drive, and received \$1,300 of remaining gift cards for distribution to needy families.

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Source Citation

Solocek, Jeffrey S. "Board urged to tech up schools; the school board is urged to use the digital power already in students' hands." *St. Petersburg Times* [St. Petersburg, FL] 7 Sept. 2011: 1. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

Document URL

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Gale Document Number: GALEIA266357361