Seventy-five miles east of San Francisco, the Central Valley school district of Manteca, California, has embraced digital citizenship instruction in every school and for every student. As part of one of the most comprehensive one-to-one technology programs in the state, students must first earn their “digital driver’s license” before gaining access to a school-issued tablet.

Superintendent Jason Messer, who led the district in this initiative, describes the digital driver’s license as a system to support teachers in instructing students on the safe and appropriate use of technology, a method of ensuring Manteca students get digital citizenship instruction, and a set of guiding principles for everyone involved in the district’s technology initiative—from school and district staff, students, and parents to the greater community.

Why Digital Citizenship?

In 2013, the Manteca school board approved a district-wide one-to-one technology initiative. Superintendent Messer was tasked with creating a technology committee to ensure the program met the needs of Manteca’s teachers and students. The committee brought together a broad range of constituents to provide advice and input on the initiative’s implementation, including Superintendent Messer, deputy superintendents, district senior directors, directors, the district IT department, teachers, union representatives, vendors, and, later, parents and students.

One of the committee’s recommendations was that Manteca implement an instructional program to support teachers and students in the safe and appropriate use of the new technology. As Victoria Brunn, director of community outreach for Manteca schools, explained, “When implementing a one-to-one initiative, you have to think about the implications. When you as a school district decide this is a fundamentally important tool and is a resource for your students and your teachers, then you’re taking ownership of what happens.”

The No. 1 goal of the Manteca Unified School District board of trustees, administration, and staff is to keep students safe. And they understand that safety goes beyond just physical safety. Implementing a digital citizenship program was one way for the district to do its due diligence in ensuring students’ safety when they’re using the school-issued devices.

Additionally, the committee pointed out that when you roll out a one-to-one initiative, the district has a responsibility to families. The technology and how it’s used becomes a family concern as well. Manteca district media/tech coordinator Peter Gale explains, “As a parent who works for the district, I’m grateful that they keep their networks safe for my sons. I appreciate the Common Sense curriculum that helps them be responsible online.” It was clear the district needed to empower not only students but also families on best practices for using technology safely and responsibly.

Implementation

A subset of Manteca’s technology committee was tasked with designing the digital citizenship program. They conducted a vetting process during which they surveyed the programs available, selected which materials the district was going to use, and designed how those materials would be delivered. They chose Common Sense Education’s digital citizenship resources and created a program that could be implemented across all schools in the district.

In its first year of the one-to-one initiative, the Manteca Unified School District put in place its digital citizenship program. The first component...
of the program is what the district calls its “digital driver’s license.” To receive a school-issued device, students from kindergarten through 12th grade must complete two Common Sense lessons and corresponding assessments from the Common Sense K–12 Digital Citizenship Curriculum. New students coming into the district at any point in the year must complete these lessons before being issued their devices.

After the initial digital driver’s license, the planning committee selected three units per grade level from the curriculum and distributed them to school administrators to implement. The idea is to help students continue the conversations on these topics throughout the school year and from year to year. It’s another way the district emphasizes that digital citizenship topics aren’t isolated but are integral to everything students do online — both in and out of school.

Each school site has the freedom to choose the timing of the instruction and how it’s delivered, although the district encourages schools to spread out the digital citizenship instruction across the school year with one unit per trimester for grades K–8 and two units during first semester and one unit during second semester for grades 9–12. Administrators are required to report back to the superintendent’s office directly in an affidavit saying that every student received the digital citizenship instruction.

In terms of onboarding teachers, each school administrator is also responsible for planning that process. What this looks like is different at each site. At Stella Brockman Elementary, for example, program coordinator Selina Reynolds provides one-on-one support to teachers in implementing the lessons in their classrooms.

The digital citizenship program at Manteca also includes extensive support for the parent community. Across the district, school sites host parent classes throughout the school year on topics such as managing device use and online safety. The schools include resources for parents in their monthly school bulletins and newsletters. Plus, the district website includes a range of parent resources on digital citizenship.

Impact

Though only three years into the program, the Manteca digital citizenship program is already affecting the students, parents, teachers, and administrators in the district.

According to teachers, students find the lesson topics to be relevant and something teachers revisit throughout the school year. Seventh-grade teacher at Stella Brockman Elementary School Erick Kimball feels the conversations about digital footprints are the most engaging for his students. He finds students are surprised to learn the permanence of what they share online. He also finds the lessons on digital footprints make students think twice when posting about other people online.

Superintendent Messer feels the digital citizenship program alleviates many parents’ worries about the one-to-one initiative. He recognizes that parents are concerned for their children — legitimately so. The fact that Common Sense is a known and trusted entity helps address many of their concerns. Messer also points out that Common Sense District Recognition (which Manteca has earned three years in a row) lends a third-party authorization that shows the district is taking its responsibilities seriously.

Additionally, Messer finds the conversations sparked by the program continue in the home and help families address their own beliefs and rules around technology use and online safety. On the one hand, the program gives parents more responsibility — here’s this new device that kids bring home and parents now have to manage. On the other hand, the program offers parents extra support in building their own skills in managing kids’ tech use.

Manteca’s digital citizenship program has opened up many learning opportunities for staff, including teachers, counselors, and administrators. Administrators are rethinking which technology-related infractions should be treated as teachable moments versus suspendable acts. Counselors are now learning about how to deal with online conflict and other situations because these instances are happening on school-issued devices. And teachers are learning how to balance device management with guiding students in using the technology for deeper learning.

Candace Espinola, principal at Stella Brockman, sees how the program has affected the teachers on her staff. She finds that the lessons offer educators a kind of “safety net” for redirecting issues in class. For example, if an issue related to online behavior arises in class, the teacher can say, “We’ve gone over this before,” and refer students back to previous digital citizenship lessons. She also notes that students and teachers have some common vocabulary to use, which deepens the learning in these teachable moments.

In terms of the future, Manteca Unified School District has big hopes for what the one-to-one program and digital citizenship instruction will mean for its students. Messer and Brunn talk about seeing problem-based learning in all classrooms and about staff using the rich resources available to them to create real-life learning experiences for students. And above all, Brunn says, is equity: “We want everyone on an even playing field here at MUSD.”

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