

27 Talking Points About Internet Safety

1. Even though they may use fancy terms and know more than you do about their domain, you never would allow your business manager or special education coordinator to operate without oversight. So stop doing so with your technology coordinator.
2. The technology function of your school organization exists to serve the educational function, not the other way around. Corollary: your technology coordinator works for you, not vice versa.
3. Mobile phones, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs, Wikispaces, Google, and whatever other technologies you're blocking are not inherently evil. Stop demonizing them and focus on people's behavior, not the tools, particularly when it comes to making policy.
4. You don't need special policies for specific tools. Just check that the policies you have are inclusive of electronic communication channels and then enforce the policies you already have on bullying, cheating, sexual harassment, inappropriate communication, illicit behavior, etc.
5. Why are you penalizing the 95% for the 5%? You don't do this in other areas of discipline at school. Even though you know some students will use their voices or bodies inappropriately in school, you don't ban everyone from speaking or moving. You know some students may show up drunk to the prom, yet you don't cancel the prom because of a few rule breakers. Instead, you assume that most students will act appropriately most of the time and then you enforce reasonable expectations and policies for the occasional few that don't. To use a historical analogy, it's the difference between DUI-style policies and flat-out Prohibition (which, if you recall, failed miserably). Just as you don't put entire schools on lockdown every time there's a fight in the cafeteria, you need to stop penalizing entire student bodies because of statistically-infrequent, worst-case scenarios.
6. You never can promise 100% safety. For instance, you never would promise a parent that her child would never, ever be in a fight at school. So quit trying to guarantee 100% safety when it comes to technology. Provide reasonable supervision, implement reasonable procedures and policies, and move on.
7. The 'online predators will prey on your schoolchildren' argument is a false bogeyman, a scare tactic that is fed to us by the media, politicians, law enforcement, and computer security vendors. The number of reported incidents in the news of this occurring is zero.
8. Federal laws do not require your draconian filtering. You can't point the finger somewhere else. You have to own it yourself.
9. Students and teachers rise to the level of the expectations that you have for them. If you expect the worst, that's what you'll get.
10. Schools that 'loosen up' with students and teachers find that they have no more problems than they did before. And, often, they have fewer problems because folks aren't trying to get around the restrictions.
11. There's a difference between a teachable moment and a punishable moment. Lean toward the former as much as possible.
12. If your community is pressuring you to be more restrictive, that's when it's time to educate, not capitulate. Overzealous blocking and filtering has real and significant negative impacts on information access, student learning, pedagogy, ability to address required curricular standards, and educators' willingness to integrate technology. It also makes it awfully tough to prepare students for a digital era.

13. 'Walled garden' online environments prevent the occurrence of serendipitous learning connections with the outside world.
14. If you're prohibiting teachers from being 'friends' with students online, are you also prohibiting them from being 'friends' with students in neighborhoods, at church, in volunteer organizations, at the mall, and in other non-school settings?
15. Schools with mindsets of enabling powerful student learning usually block much less than those that don't. Their first reaction is 'how can we make this work?' rather than 'we need to keep this out.'
16. As the lead learner, it's your responsibility to actively monitor what's being filtered and blocked and to always reconsider that in light of learning and teaching needs.
17. If you trust your teachers with the children, you should trust them with the Internet. Addendum: Mistrust of teachers drives away good educators.
18. If you make it too hard to get permission to unblock something, you might as well not have the option in the first place.
19. Unless you like losing lawsuits, remember that students and staff have speech and privacy rights, particularly off-campus. Remember that any dumb decision you make is Internet fodder and has a good chance of going viral online. Do you really want to be the next stupid administrator story on The Huffington Post?
20. When you violate the Constitution and punish kids just because you don't like what they legally said or did and think you can get away with it, you not only run the risk of incurring financial liability for your school system in the tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars but also abuse your position of trust and send messages to students about the corruption of power and disregard for the rule of law.
21. Never make a policy you can't enforce.
22. Don't abdicate your teaching responsibility. Students do not magically gain the ability at the end of the school day or after graduation to navigate complex, challenging, unfiltered digital information spaces. If you don't teach them how to navigate the unfiltered Internet appropriately and safely while you have them, who's going to?
23. Acceptable use and other policies send messages to students, staff, and parents. Is the predominant message that you want to send really that 'the technologies that are transforming everything around us should first and foremost be feared?'
24. Imagine a scale with two balancing pans. On one side are all of the anxieties, fears, barriers, challenges, and perceived problems that your staff, parents, and community members put forth. If you want effective technology integration and implementation to occur in your school system, it is your job as the leader to tip the scale the other way. Addendum: It is difficult to understand the learning power of digital technologies – and easy to dismiss their pedagogical usefulness – if you are not familiar enough with them to understand their positive affordances.
25. In a hyperconnected, technology-suffused, digital, global world, you do your children a disservice – and highlight your irrelevance – by blocking out our present and their future.
26. Educating is always, always more powerful than blocking.
27. Elsewhere in your state – perhaps even near you – are school districts that have figured this out. They operate under the same laws, regulations, rules, and procedures that you do. If they can be less restrictive, why can't you?