Who's In Charge?

Who should set and control IT Policy in our schools?

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As I travel the world speaking at schools, there is one issue that rarely fails to raise its head: How "open" should school IT systems be? What should be blocked, and to what should students have access? The entire Internet? School-approved software only? Email? IM? Cell phones? And most importantly, "Who decides?"

There is no right answer to this, as it depends on many factors, some very specific to particular schools or districts. And while my own preference, as you may have guessed, is for as much openness as possible, it is not my objective here to advocate for that position.

What I want to question, rather, is how these decisions are arrived at. I have heard many teachers complain about "IT tyrants" blocking everything they want to use in the name of the kids' safety (which is really sometimes the IT people's *own* safety, so they cannot be "blamed" for any incident that might occur.)

On the other hand, I have heard many IT managers say "we're happy to open things up – it's the teachers afraid of the kids' doing bad things, or the administration afraid of being sued, or the parents afraid of predators – that prevents us."

And where are the students in all this? As in most things concerning their own education, students are generally ignored. Except, of course, when they "screw up." If just one student sees some porn or gets to MySpace on a school computer, the entire student body is often labeled irresponsible and suffers the consequences. Remind you of any old prison movies?

I don't imagine there is a single school anywhere that doesn't have at least one student who knows how to get around any filters IT can devise. And I would personally maintain there would be more useful learning in having *all*

students learn to do this than in whatever they get from what it is that any IT tyrants (whoever they are) do allow.

But whether you agree with that or not, here's my point. The technology that students are allowed to see and use very much affects the quality of their 21st century education. We all know there are several stakeholders in the decision of what kids can do and see: Teachers, IT people, administrators, parents, and, most importantly, the students themselves. So how can any school make responsible policy decisions until all of these groups have had a chance to talk to each other and present their points of view?

My strong recommendation is that that *at least* once each year, preferably before any decisions related to IT policy in the school – from what should be filtered, to the use of cell phones, and everything in-between – are made, the head administrator gather representatives from all of the stakeholder groups on stage, preferably in front of the entire student and faculty body, for a discussion and debate. Because technology changes so rapidly these days, I recommend that this be an annual start-of-the-year event.

In preparation, all factions should gather information about what other schools around the US are doing (it varies widely.) Student views should be carefully considered (it *is* their education after all.) Administrators should avoid letting the "scare tactics" of a group's citing one or two bad incidents determine policy. Remember, although there may be bullies in the schoolyard, we don't (or at least I hope we don't) ban recess, because we see the value of recess to all, and recognize the need is to deal with the bullies, not to eliminate exercise for everyone.

Yes, our children are growing up in a world of technology that scares many adults. But they are scared more, I think, because the adults have little idea what is actually going on, than because the dangers to their kids are imminent. Students should, of course, be taught responsible on-line behavior, just as they should be taught to look both ways before crossing a street. At some point though, we let our kids go places on their own. Savvy parents and teachers don't let the existence of danger force them into keeping their kids in a technology bubble. Savvy administrators shouldn't (and don't) run from the risk of parent complaints or lawsuits, which happen with or without technology, and do what is best for the kids.

Students hate, and know their education is suffering, when a site they know is perfectly reasonable to use for their schoolwork comes up as "blocked" because of some overly zealous protection scheme. They know we are moving quickly to Internet 2.0, where participation and input is more important than

just finding information. Most of them know, or can be taught, how to act responsibly. It is, of course, possible for IT to lock things so tight that there will almost never be an "incident." But the penalty we pay for this is the breadth and quality of our student's 21st century learning.

To make good policy, we need to get all the affected groups – including the students – in one place and "talk it out." In doing so we must remain very aware whether the "protection" any faction advocates is for the benefit of the students, or for itself.

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