

Educators add mobile phones to their instructional tool kits



by Jennifer LeClaire

While many teachers struggle to get kids to turn off their cell phones during class, teachers at Trinity Meadows Intermediate (TMI) are encouraging fifth graders to use them both in school and off-campus to augment their learning.

It's all part of a Keller ISD pilot program called the Keller Mobile Initiative. The program was developed to study how mobile devices can enhance classroom curriculum by boosting student engagement and access to learning resources.

"There is no way to take 1,100 kids to the library to use the computers there," says Superintendent James R. Veitenheimer. "But with mobile devices that offer Internet access, we can make learning more accessible and perhaps easier for fifth graders to navigate than [if they were to use] laptop computers. We are using what we have learned at TMI to launch new technology programs across the district."

Giving wings to a mobile program

Developing the pilot program didn't happen overnight. It took months of planning among district administrators, technology companies and parents. The effort began after Matt Cook, a TMI fifth grade teacher, noticed that a growing number of his students carried cell phones in their pockets. As a trial of sorts, he let students use the cameras on their phones to take pictures of lab experiments, and he continued searching for new ways to leverage the mobile devices to enhance classroom learning.

"The genesis of this project was a teacher who had an innovative idea," says TMI Principal Ron Myers. "We started thinking outside the box. We looked at the technologies our kids are already familiar with and how to make that work for us



Ron Myers

on the education side. Matt reached out to Verizon and got the ball rolling." When Cook called Verizon to tell them about the Keller Mobile Initiative, the carrier agreed to provide wireless service for the pilot program at TMI. The company also introduced Keller ISD to Smartphone manufacturer HTC, which agreed to provide its model 6800 Smartphones with Internet access only — no texting or calling capabilities.

Forging the corporate relationships proved to be the easiest part of implementing the program. The more difficult task was figuring out how to tie the mobile technology to student learning. Myers says gadgetry for gadgetry's sake was not the point.

"You have to look internally and reflect on how a particular technology is going to change the teaching and learning process," Myers says. "If the technology is an appropriate tool, then you can begin to explore the steps necessary to get that tool into the hands of the kids. It's important to have a team of people working on the project, because it can't be done by one or two teachers alone. You need a team of problem solvers, as well as parent involvement."



Joe Griffin

Mastering the finer details of the program was no small task either, according to Joe Griffin, executive director of technology at Keller ISD.

"Managing this program from a network perspective brought

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Superintendent
James R. Veitenheimer



A Sci-Tech Expo culminates the Keller Mobile Initiative pilot project at Trinity Meadow Intermediate in Keller ISD. Students had the opportunity to present their project-based learning assignments using the many tools offered by the Smartphone.

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a new challenge for us. The teachers and trainers were driving the implementation, not the network," Griffin says. "Students have access to the network on their phones 24-7, for example, so we had to find a way to filter out inappropriate Web sites. The end result of so much input from educators was a program that is receptive to classroom instruction, which is where we needed to be."

For other districts that want to start a similar program, Griffin suggests first going through every possible scenario with the network team, curriculum coordinators and principals. Get all hands on deck to brainstorm and problem-solve. The key to success is collaboration among the various technology vendors involved, as well as the various departments.

"The biggest success for us from a technology perspective was to realize that mobile technology is a viable resource for students," Griffin says. "We designed our new network knowing that students are going to bring in mobile devices, so we have a secure network. We're not operating within the four walls anymore."

Under the guidance of their teachers, TMI students have used their Smartphones to study the geological stages of the rock cycle, explore early pioneers in North America, and find the mean, median and mode in a group of numbers.

Measuring results

Results of the pilot program are anecdotal at this point, but they are promising. Teachers say they have witnessed greater self-confidence and problem-solving skills in some of their students. They also have noticed more enthusiasm toward collaborating with peers.

"We saw students change personalities over the course of the year," Cook says. "The mobile program empowered our learners, and they seem to have a lot of confidence in what they are doing. We saw lots of personal growth and personal victories, especially among shy kids who came out of their shells."

As part of the pilot program, students were responsible for their Smartphones around the clock. The goal was to teach students about responsible, appropriate and safe use of today's technology tools.

"I feel strongly we need to teach our kids appropriate use of technology because they already do all sorts of fun, nonproductive things with technology today," Cook says. "We want to teach them how to use technology in productive ways so when they hit the workforce, they see technology as a tool, not a toy."

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Veitenheimer says the Keller Mobile Initiative at TMI represents a technology-adoption tipping point for the district. Keller ISD is preparing to open a hybrid school for fifth- through eighth graders in August 2010. The focus of the hybrid campus will be on using familiar and accessible technology with 24-7 access to learning resources. Based on student and curriculum needs, teachers will promote real-time access to information using a variety of technologies. The campus will include wireless connectivity, document cameras and projectors, integrated electronic whiteboards, mobile computer devices and an online student-teacher-parent collaboration portal. Moreover, student-response systems in every classroom will help teachers quickly assess student learning.

"The Keller Mobile Initiative let us put our toes in the water and helped us think outside the box



Students in Matt Cook's fifth grade social studies class use Smartphones both in class and at home to accompany their daily lessons.

of desktop and laptop computers," Veitenheimer says. "With our new approach, we are putting learning back in the hands of the kids, as opposed to keeping learning in the hands of our teachers. That has been our big takeaway from the Keller Mobile Initiative."

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