

Technology can help get kids 'community ready'

By Ellen Middaugh and Joseph Kahne, Oakland Tribune My Word © 2013 Bay Area News Group Contra Costa

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This fall, as more than 8,000 young people return to Oakland Unified School District high schools, we are reminded that the future of our communities rests in the hands of these students.

In Oakland, we know this is no small responsibility. We are a city with great resources and energy, but also a city with challenges.

Young people have both the ability and the will to fix community problems. With technology, they also have the means to find creative solutions. Ensuring they have the access and skills to make the best use of digital media, however, is essential.

This year, Oakland Unified School District is expected to consider a proposal by Acting Superintendent Gary Yee to approve a new graduate profile detailing requirements for successful high school graduates.

If adopted, it would state that students will graduate from high school "college, career, and community ready." Adding community readiness recognizes that education should be not only a collection of facts and skills but also preparation to join with others in our democracy to make our communities better places in which to live and work.

One way students are already becoming community ready is through the Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age initiative. Through EDDA, OUSD is working with 40 teachers across the district to engage young people in projects that give them opportunities to make sense of their community struggles and to see better possibilities.

Students are using their course content and Common Core skills for a purpose -- to understand and advocate for issues impacting their communities.

With the Internet comes access to a wealth of information, but that deluge can create confusion over which sources are credible and which come with misinformation or bias.

In an era where 46 percent of young people report getting news and information through social network sites, now is the time to ensure they learn how to find credible sources of information.

Although students may seem more technologically savvy than their elders, they still need mentors to help them with research and critical-thinking skills.

EDDA teachers in Oakland high schools are taking up this challenge, teaching their students Internet research skills and effective ways to share ideas about social issues.

They are connecting their students to audiences across the country through blogs and social networks. They are giving students tools to assess the credibility of online information and encouraging students to be mindful of their public presence.

These efforts are not easy. Computers are not always available, Internet connections can be unreliable, and protection policies -- such as filters denying access to social network sites or bans on cell phones in schools -- can impede educational uses of the Internet.

However, knowing students need information-literacy skills to be college, career, and community ready, teachers push themselves and their students to be creative problem solvers.

For 45 years, Mills College has dedicated efforts to supporting the Oakland Unified School District.

We applaud the board and the acting superintendent for taking up the question of community readiness and encourage them to approve the graduate profile with this addition.

As they move forward, we ask that they consider what kinds of professional development, infrastructure and technology policies will best enable students to be ready to take action for their communities using the technology they love.

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