

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

New way to engage students

On Tuesday, I published an essay by a New York City eighth grader who loves the remote learning program instituted by the city school system as a response to the pandemic.

Remote learning, she wrote, frees her from all the daily distractions caused by students in her regular physical classrooms who can't behave.

She can watch recorded lessons sent by her teachers via the internet and review them as many times as it takes to absorb the material. She also has a chance to talk remotely to her teachers in small groups or one-on-one in regularly scheduled "office hours."

She can do collaborative learning with other serious students in her class via FaceTime.

Of course, that's just one student. But her experience demonstrates the potential of remote learning to enhance everyone's education experience once the new technologies are fully integrated into schools.

Like most school districts nationwide, Pottstown was forced into remote learning March 13 when the pandemic forced school buildings to close.

Although Pottstown has been handing out laptops to everyone, and teachers are reaching out to their students, only 75 percent of Pottstown students were participating as of last week.

And of those students, almost all were less engaged than they would be in a physical classroom.

But things will improve in time.

Pottstown is using Google's G Suite educational platform, where everything is cloud based, K-12. All classwork is done on Chromebooks, which are laptops specifically designed to work with Google products.

Chromebooks, made by independent manufacturers, not Google, are less expensive than regular laptops because they have no hard drives. All information is housed on remote Google servers connected to the internet.

Chromebooks come preloaded with all the Google educational apps. The apps are free.

Google Classroom is the app

teachers use to give assignments to students.

Docs, Sheets and Slides are Google's equivalent to Microsoft Word, Excel, and Power Point. Not only do they work the same way as Microsoft products, they are interchangeable. Students and teachers can also use YouTube.

Google Drive is the cloud-based hard drive where all documents are stored. They can be shared between teacher and student and between students.

Google Meet allows teachers to conduct virtual classrooms over the internet, much like the Zoom meetings currently used by the school board. All the students can see the teacher and each other in little boxes on their computer screen. The teacher can show presentations or documents on everyone's screen. The teacher also controls the microphones, so each student can speak to the group or be silenced remotely if misbehaving.

And there are lots of other bells and whistles available.

Of course, Google itself benefits enormously from this arrangement. Tens of millions of students worldwide are using Google products and will continue to use them as adults, likely becoming customers for life.

And there are questions about how Google uses the voluminous data it collects from students and teachers using its products (although Google says it does not use any data for targeting ads).

From my perspective as a Pottstown School Board member, the G Suite provides benefits that far outweigh privacy concerns.

Education is supposed to be the great equalizer. Chromebooks and G Suite work the same in Pottstown as every other school district, rich or poor.

Readily available information on the internet is also the same everywhere.

Now, we must change the role of the teacher from the "expert" dispensing knowledge to the "mentor" guiding students to absorb knowledge on their own.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
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