

What a District CTO Should Know

More than just technology, he (or she) needs to know what's going on

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I often hear complaints from teachers that their district's CTO (whatever title he or she has) blocks too many things, or doesn't allow certain technologies like cell phones to be used. I also hear from CTOs and others that their hands are tied by Federal and other legislation, or by district policies set by others.

Clearly not all CTO's set policy, nor should they ever by themselves. Policy should be a product of dialog among all the relevant parties: administrators, parents, the school board, teachers, technology people, and (although they are rarely consulted) students. Every district, or even school, should be able, in consultation with all those parties, to determine the policies that are best for it. Those policies should probably be reevaluated at the beginning of each school year to take account of changing students, changing technology and changing thinking.

To do that however, all the parties need information, because the truth is that policies vary widely from district to district, even within the same state (and sometimes between schools within a district.) There are districts that block everything, and districts that block very little. There are districts that don't permit students to access You Tube at all, districts that allow selective access, and districts that don't see blocking it as their role. There are schools that allow teacher discretion in allowing cell phone use in class, schools that give students specific times when cell phones can be used, and "zero-tolerance" schools that allow no discretion at all. There are places where loud sirens go off if a student (or teacher) tries to access a blocked site (e.g. the Chicago Public Schools) and places where the responsibility to turn off the computer if something inappropriate appears on the screen rests solely with

the students. And the policies may vary according to which students one is talking about.

It seems to me that one of the primary responsibilities of the CTO, whatever the policies in their district today, is to inform themselves about, and make available proactively to the other interested parties, information on the entire spectrum of policies in their region, state, and in the country as a whole. Who has the most restrictive policies and why? How are they working? How do the teachers and students feel about those policies? Who has the least restrictive policies and why? How do the school boards and administrators justify those policies? What do the parents say? What is the real incidence of serious problems, as opposed to the over-reported or imagined?

In addition, the CTO should become fully informed on what districts and schools are using laptops or other 1:1 devices, how are they funding them and what results they are seeing, who has district-wide wi-fi to all schools and to all student homes? How has this been funded? Quite a few of the best solutions are due less to the availability of funds and more to the creativity of the CTO.

It would be extremely useful if such information could be compiled each year by each district's CTO. CTOs of different districts could make short statements on video justifying their own policies, all posted to one place. The data compilations and videos could then be shared and used by the interested parties (again, administrators, parents, the school board, teachers, technology people, and students) as they hold their yearly policy discussions and set their yearly policies.

The time of the "imperial CTO" whose only policy considerations are "no surprises" and "cover my (our) rear(s)" should now be over. It is not the teachers who should be coming to the CTO saying "but this other district does it differently" (they rarely know.) It is the wise CTO who should be laying out all the alternatives, and helping his or her district find the best course for learning.

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