

For The Tablet Generation, A Lesson In Digital Citizenship

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Matt Hamilton/Coachella Valley Unified School District

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Parents pack into a gym at Cahuilla Desert Academy, a middle school in the southern California city of Thermal. The near triple-digit daytime heat of the Coachella Valley, southeast of Palm Springs, has given way to a cool evening. It's iPad information night.

Before addressing the crowd, Principal Encarnacion Becerra talks up the district's ambitious new iPads-for-all initiative with the fervor of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur.

"It's truly a revolution, what's happening," he says. "Technology has finally caught up to where truly you hold the Internet in the palm of your hands. The power of the mobile devices that exist now — we have to have to leverage that capacity and to evolve as educators to address those needs."

Coachella Valley Unified — a predominantly low income, rural and Latino school district — is in the process of [handing out iPads](#) to every student, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Kids seventh grade and up get to take the device home evenings, weekends and breaks. Voters approved a bond issue to pay for it.

Administrators here paint it as a modern civil rights issue. Technology tools, they argue, will help boost achievement, prepare kids for today's workplace and narrow the digital divide between poor and wealthy areas.

A growing number of school districts across the U.S. are handing out tablet computers and integrating the devices into their curriculum. But the old issue of how much Web access kids should have on school-issued devices is growing more complicated as kids surf on multiple devices and access multiple networks at home, school, public hot spots and more.

iPad Security

Last month students at the Los Angeles Unified School District easily got around a security firewall on their district-issued iPads and could surf wherever they wanted. LA has now slowed down its iPad rollout amid growing concerns about LA's entire tablet project.

This worries Joey Acuna Jr., father of a student in Coachella Valley Unified.

"I have concerns after hearing what happened in LA Unified," Acuna says. "Kids are kids, and they're going to try to do what they think they can get away with. And not to be mean, but sadly ... some of our kids probably have better knowledge of these kind of electronic devices than some of our teachers."

LA is now exploring new security tools to block access to certain sites, including social media sites and YouTube. "All social media sites are blocked," says LA school district spokesman Thomas Waldman.

Parents here in Coachella want to know whether their district has learned from LA's missteps.

The Coachella Valley school district will block certain sites deemed harmful and install a tracking mechanism and other tools to monitor kids' use. Part of that falls under the Children's Internet Protection Act: Schools and libraries that accept certain federal funding for technology must install Web filters to shield kids from pornography and explicit content online.

But the district is taking a more nuanced approach than LA Unified to the access and use of social media sites. They're not blocked. The idea now is to educate kids and parents about appropriate use of the iPad — or what

the district calls online ethics and digital citizenship.

Karen Cator, CEO of the nonprofit education group Digital Promise, says the issue of filtering is incredibly complicated because the Internet is continuously changing.

"I think it's futile to try to shut this down completely," she says. "And it's a missed opportunity, if we do that, to teach kids how to act appropriately in what will be their lifelong globally networked world."

Setting Up Rules

Eighth grade physical science teacher Tim Sharpe at Cahuilla Desert Academy has been using the iPad in a pilot program for more than a year. He says tablets are tailor-made for science learning: His students use them to take photos, write about labs and tap into the latest educational science apps.

Sharpe has already confronted the problem of renegade surfing on mobile phones. Students can get on YouTube with their smartphones, he says, but they know Sharpe might take their phone away for the day if they do.

What sites to block, beyond the ones legally required, should be a teacher-student classroom management issue, he says.

Sharpe devised a system that engages kids and rewards them: If they finish their iPad project on time, they can then play games or take pictures for fun with the devices.

"And there's ... a point system," he says. "So you just lay the rules down. And I find that the kids go with that."