YAKIMA SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Impact Student Safety Has on Digital Equity

About Yakima School District

The Yakima School District is located primarily within the boundaries of the City of Yakima, WA. Serving a diverse population of nearly 16,000 students, Yakima is the largest Latino-majority district in the state and has 14 elementary schools campuses, five middle schools, five high schools and one technical school.

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CHALLENGE:

With 90% of the Yakima School District student population qualifying for the National School Lunch Program, the importance of equal access to digital tools, resources and services is a top priority. Along with this initiative, the school district strives to educate students and families about the proper use of technology and ways to stay safe online.

SOLUTION:

A long-time Gaggle customer using CIPA-compliant student email, Yakima schools decided to switch to G Suite for Education, but still needed to ensure the safety of students. The district now relies on Gaggle Safety Management to further promote student and educator productivity in a safe environment.

RESULTS:

While solutions like Gaggle Safety Management help the school district comply with privacy and safety laws such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Yakima schools also use Family Engagement Nights to engage parents and address current and relevant topics around technology and online safety.

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Implementing educational technology in a school district whose primary demographic is a family of poverty is a monumental task. Also, when tools like school email, a learning management system or G Suite for Education are implemented by a district, it's paramount that students and parents understand the value these tools bring to learning along with the importance of keeping them safe.

"My mission is to keep our families at the forefront of the decisions we make," said Andy Gonzalez, Technology Services Director at Yakima School District. "We also need to be advising parents on the peripheral consequences of technology in the home."

When it comes to the safety of students using technology, Mr. Gonzalez believes that administrators can't do enough. "When we make technology a part of a free education, we bear the responsibility to educate our parents and keep students safe," he said. "We focus on taking care of the equipment, but we're not focusing enough on helping our families make decisions that they don't understand the dangers."

Vital information is revealed to Yakima School District through the Gaggle Safety Management Dashboard, allowing the district to direct resources to specific campuses and students.

But Yakima's technology team knew it needed to do more. "There's not one solution that's going to address it all, but having safe, monitored student communications shows a genuine commitment to the school community," said Mr. Gonzalez. "Some students go home to empty households and use technology without any oversight for hours on end; technology that their parents have never had or heard of or completely understand."

Family Engagement Nights have helped Yakima schools gain a better understanding of what its various technology initiatives mean to students and parents. Mr. Gonzalez, along with school counselors, capture audio of students' perspectives. There are now more than 100 audio testimonials, which are anonymized to protect the privacy of students.

Surveys of both students and parents collected throughout the year are critical to expanding Yakima's understanding and perspective. "We gained a more nuanced perspective of student life and their challenges," said Mr. Gonzalez.

For instance, although Yakima School District provides educational access points for students to stay connected throughout the day, some students admitted to hiding in the bushes of local restaurants that offered free Wi-Fi, unable to pay for food or beverages to receive the access for "free." "Parents and our entire school community are not hearing it from me, they hear it from an actual person who is going through it," he said.

In addition to presenting the audio testimonials to spark discussion topics, the Family Engagement Nights include anonymous voting on a particular area of interest followed by open discussions. "Our students become the gatekeepers of technology in the homes," said Mr. Gonzalez, "which leads to a lot of questions about how students are using different technology; not only what we give them, but apps and other websites."

The Family Engagement Nights have been a resounding success, seeing involvement grow significantly over a two-year period from a mere half-dozen or so parents to a high of 236 parents at a recent meeting. These Interactions have revealed stories such as a student using Snapchat and the app's currency, Snapcash, to generate an income by selling inappropriate photos. Additional harmful situations that have been discussed include incidents identified in Tumblr and other apps.

"We want to make sure that we understand the always-changing landscape, but our devices and technology will always have safety and compliance at the forefront," said Mr. Gonzalez. "Educating our families about the technology we give them and any technology their children could be using will always be very important to us."