

BYOT: No Excuses

The success of a pilot program led to schoolwide acceptance of mobile learning devices.

Eric Sheninger

As we continue to move even further into the 21st century, technology becomes more embedded in all aspects of society. I see this firsthand with my son, who is in first grade. The gift he wanted the most this past Christmas was an iPod Touch, which Santa was kind enough to bring him. His younger sister regularly asks to use my iPad so that she can either care for her virtual horse or dress her Barbies in creative ways. Because I download all of the apps on those devices, I know that the majority of their time is spent engaged in games that require thought, creativity, and sometimes collaboration. My point is that many children around the world have access to and are using technology outside of school in a variety of ways. Not only do many have access but also older children possess their own devices (cell phones, smart phones, laptops, tablets, e-readers, etc.).

Society continues to move forward in terms of innovation, technology, and global connectivity, but schools have been stymied by relentless cuts to education. That has resulted in the reduction in numbers of staff members, larger class sizes, lack of repair to aging buildings, and the inability to keep up with purchasing and re-

placing educational technology. It is essential that we rectify all those negative effects of budget cuts, but when it comes to technology, the perception is that it is the least important area in which to invest precious funds. That is why the time has come for districts and schools to seriously consider developing a bring-your-own-technology (BYOT) initiative.

The world of education is often defined by the “haves” and “have nots.” That separation ultimately drives decisions when it comes to educational technology. Why should students in less-affluent districts not be afforded the same opportunity as those in wealthier districts to utilize technology as a learning tool to create, collaborate, connect, communicate, and develop essential media literacies? A BYOT initiative makes sense because it enables schools to leverage a variety of devices that many students already possess. *How* educators use those student-owned devices in schools is the key to a successful BYOT initiative.

There are many well-respected educators whom I greatly admire who feel that BYOT has no place in schools. They are concerned about equity in terms of which students have devices and believe that it is each district’s

responsibility to provide all technology that will be used by students in schools. I wholeheartedly agree with their positions, but those of us in the trenches must play with the cards that we have been dealt. It is our duty to do everything in our power to give students the best learning opportunities possible, and in many cases, allowing students to bring their own devices to school helps meet this lofty goal.

Mobile Learning Devices

We launched a BYOT program at New Milford (NJ) High School last September after piloting it with just the senior class the previous spring. We have learned many lessons from this journey, the most important being that the students have greatly appreciated this shift. We have developed policies for students to bring in their own computing devices; lifted a ban on cell phone use during noninstructional time; and put in place educational programs to teach our students about digital citizenship, responsibility, and footprints. Our school also established a partnership with a company called ClassLink, and we are currently using its BYOT solution. We did not let excuses, such as concerns about equity, stop us from moving forward

with an initiative that is turning out to have real value for our students and teachers. Key components of a successful BYOT initiative include the following:

- Ask students for their input as you begin the process.
- Change the way students view their devices by changing the language used to refer to them. Students need to fully understand that the devices are tools for learning. Make consistent efforts to refer to them as mobile learning devices.
- Ensure that teachers have a specific learning outcome in mind when using mobile learning devices in the classroom.
- Be cognizant of the equity component and discreetly identify those students who might not own a device. Solutions include using school-owned devices and pairing students up when using mobile phones.
- Use a BYOT initiative to increase access by supplementing existing technology. For example, if a class has a laptop cart with only 20 devices but 25 students are in the class, student-owned technology can close that gap.
- Develop appropriate support structures that align with current acceptable use policies. (See New Milford's policy at <http://bit.ly/Xi7tJu>)
- Provide professional development and resources for teachers so that they can successfully implement

mobile learning devices.

- Treat students like 21st century adolescents. Many of them own and use devices outside of school. If we can focus that use on learning, then why not allow them to bring them to school and use them?
- Deal with unacceptable use according to the school's discipline code. It should not be considered different than any other infraction. Off-task behavior in the classroom is most likely the result of a poorly planned lesson or ineffective classroom management techniques.
- Promote the use of student-owned devices for learning during noninstructional time. At my school, students routinely use their devices during lunch to conduct research for projects, complete homework assignments, and organize their responsibilities. In addition, we have seen a dramatic reduction in behavior issues.

Resolve to Make It Work

Instead of criticizing, dismissing, or coming up with ideas about how and why BYOT *won't* work or is unfair, school leaders are best served by brainstorming ways to make it an educational component of their schools. The excuses to write off BYOT only serve to undermine the students who we are committed to educating. A BYOT initiative will be unique to each district and should be carefully constructed on the basis of socioeconomics and community dynamics. **PL**



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