Why NOT BYOD in Rural, Impoverished Schools?

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“In America, your zip code or your socioeconomic status should never determine the quality of your education” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan famously tweeted that last year. Although this was something he just said last year, this has been the focus in our small, rural, impoverished Arkansas school over the past three years.

I am the principal of a rural, isolated PreK-12 school in Arkansas. We serve a population of students with a low socioeconomic background (approximately 80% free/reduced lunch). As a community of stakeholders, we came together and agreed technology and relationships were how we were going to improve our schools (prek-12) for our children.

Dr. Paul Lasely, ISU Sociologist says, “High speed Internet is as important to today’s young adults as electric lines and paved highways were for their parents and grandparents.” I believe this is a truly powerful statement, which speaks to the idea that what our students truly need is ACCESS. Equalizing some of the circumstances our students bring into our schools, whether it is a lack of parental support, not getting to eat dinner the night before, etc., requires access to a world class education; regardless of your school’s locale. This requires accessing the WORLD, as Dr. Laseley talked about, through the Internet. At our school, all stakeholders made a commitment to pair 1) Technology with 2) Relationships with educators to improve our student outcomes and ensure our students truly received a “Global Education” here in our small town.

Throughout the nation, there has been a sweeping movement of successful BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies in schools. I have to admit, I immediately thought, in our impoverished school setting, this was something we would never be able to take advantage of. I simply put my head down and continued to write grants to obtain as many school owned devices as possible so our students could have Internet access.

I perpetuated the old paradigm that “CELL PHONES ARE BAD” in schools. It took me awhile to understand, “just because it’s how we’ve always done it…doesn’t mean it’s the right way.” In 2012 I honestly got tired of doing discipline referrals for students with cell phones, and started listening to the things people like Eric Sheninger were saying about the great learning coming from BYOD programs; that was when it all began to make sense.

I had been assuming our students would not be able to have devices for a BYOD program…but, it clicked in my head, if they were able to have these devices to ‘get it trouble’ under our antiquated policies, why couldn’t they have them for learning? There was a disconnect somewhere! Keep in mind, my original ideas were not unfounded, a survey from the 2012 year showed only 10% of our families had Internet at home. I decided it was time to do another survey…I needed to know exactly what type of BYOD capability there was here in this rural, isolated community of learners. In this survey we found 75% of our 7-12th grade students had cell phones (2013 survey) and ½ of those were smartphones. WOW! What a far cry from my assumptions…and I would hazard to say, probably many peoples in similar situations!

Our policies were changed quickly to add a BYOD policy to USE the technology students had with them daily. We quickly added a digital citizenship component to our advisory program, which I believe to be a very crucial piece. We are currently a 2014 Model Middle School for Dr. Daggett’s ICLE and have been recognized as a Model Elementary School previously, and our High School was also recognized within the state of Arkansas for multiple awards for outstanding growth in both Literacy and Math scores.

BYOD is something attainable for any school, don’t “assume” students don’t have access to devices; they do. We are now a community of learners accessing personal devices for learning…connectivity is a GOOD THING!