“Schools and Students Clash Over Use of Technology” by Katrina Schwartz

When it comes to using technology in school, the tension between what students and parents want and what schools allow is becoming more apparent — and more divisive.

Students want more control over how they use technology in school, but many classrooms are still making it difficult. That’s according to the most recent Speak Up 2011 report, “Mapping a Personalized Learning Journey,” which reflects the views of more than 416,000 K-12 students, parents, and educators nationwide surveyed on how technology can enhance the learning environment. The survey is produced by Project Tomorrow, an educational non-profit focused on raising student voices in education policy discussions. The theme for this survey focused on individualized learning paths.

Students aren’t just posting personal pictures and stories on Facebook — it’s just as much a part of their social lives as it is a place where they connect with each other for school work, too. According to the survey, 46 percent of students have used Facebook to collaborate on school projects, and one in 10 high school students have tweeted about an academic subject. Meanwhile, in formal classroom settings, the practice of using these online tools as an acceptable means of learning has been slow: half of all middle and high school students say they can’t access social media sites at school. Educational policy makers need to connect the dots between what motivates and encourages students to learn and what’s actually happening in the classroom, the report states.

That connection might be found in students’ own mobile devices. A whopping 45 percent of middle-schoolers and 55 percent of high-schoolers say that they mainly access the Internet through mobile devices. And access to tablets doubled between 2010 and 2011 – up to 26 percent for middle-schoolers and 21 percent of high-schoolers. These are increasingly important ways that students can interact with the world, follow their own interests and supplement their school-based learning.

More than half of students – 56 percent of middle-schoolers and 59 percent of high-schoolers – reported that they would like to be able to use their own devices and learning tools in the classroom, something that many parents surveyed said they would support. But the idea is still met with resistance from administrators, 52 percent of whom said they don’t allow students to use any personal mobile device in class, at least partially because a blended learning model represents a shift in the relationship between teacher and student.

Although a nascent Bring Your Own Technology (or Device) movement is beginning to take shape, a full 65 percent of school principals said it was unlikely they would allow personal devices in the coming school year. This, in spite of the fact that students say the devices will help them, and nearly two-thirds of parents said they would support their children using personalized devices to learn in school. What’s
more, parents from across income categories were willing to buy devices for their children in order to increase their interest and engagement in learning.

When parents were asked what most concerns them about their children’s future almost three-quarters said they worry that their children won’t “get the right skills” to succeed in the future.

But students might have to look outside of school for this. Already, 12 percent of high school students have taken an online class on their own, outside of the classroom, to learn about a topic that interested them.

Blended learning classrooms, where students can fluidly use technology as learning tools, may encourage more interest in science and math subjects, too. In the survey, 20 percent of students in classrooms without much technology expressed a strong interest in STEM careers, whereas 27 percent of their counterparts in more student-directed and technology focused classrooms reported interest in the subjects. This indicates that the way kids learn seems to influence what they’re interested in pursuing.

This recent survey clearly points to a disconnect between students’ interest in how they want to learn, and their lack of access to these tools in schools.

Possible Reflection Topics:

1. What is the author’s main argument in this article? What details does she use to support her beliefs about technology in the classroom?
2. Do you believe that schools should allow personal technology in the classrooms? Do you think that it could work so that both sides are satisfied? Why or why not?
3. What are the foreseeable benefits to allowing students to use personal electronics in school? What are the potential problems in doing so? How do we solve or prevent these problems?

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