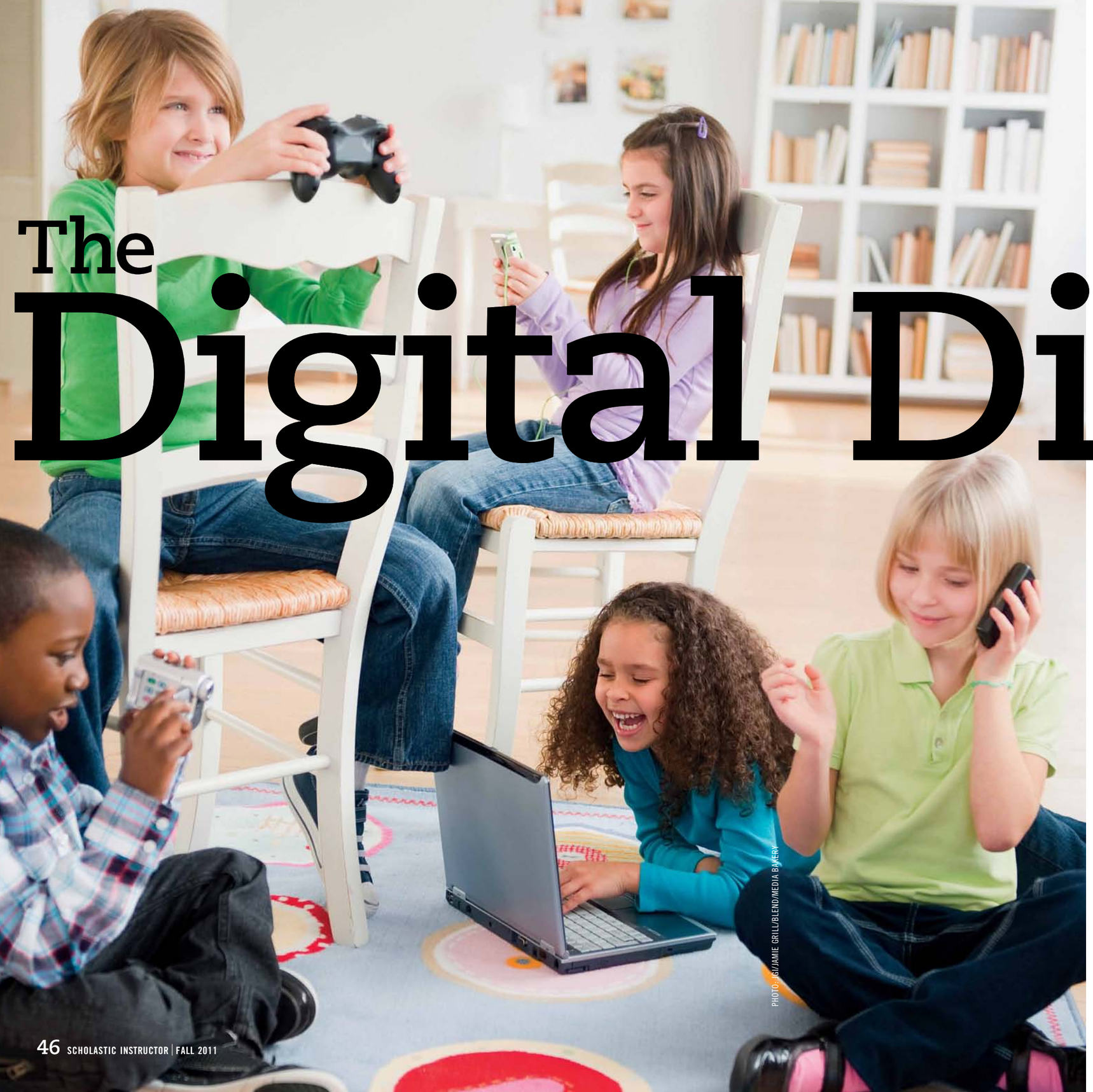
The Digital Divide



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> Not between the haves and have-nots. Between kids and grown-ups.
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> *By Hannah Trierweiler Hudson*

Megan is a 14-year-old from Nebraska who just started ninth grade. She loves watching YouTube videos and talking with her friends on Facebook, and her mom recently had to increase her texting plan to cover all the messages coming in. Megan has her own digital camera, cell phone, Nintendo DS, and laptop, and one or more of these devices is usually by her side.

It's safe to say that technology plays a big role in Megan's life—at least her life outside school. Compared to the interactions and exploration she's engaged in at home, Megan finds the technology in her classroom falls a little flat. "Pretty much the only time we use the computer is to do research or type essays," she says. Most of the classrooms in Megan's school don't have their own workstations, so teachers have to sign up for time at the computer lab. And while a few teachers have interactive whiteboards, Megan has never had the opportunity to use one. Overall, Megan says that she "definitely" uses more technology at home than she does at school.

Recent research suggests that Megan's experience is not all that unusual. While we've traditionally used the term *digital divide* to refer to the technology gap between financially secure suburban districts and their poorer urban counterparts, another divide has emerged, and it's cause for concern: the disparity between how educators view their use of technology and how students themselves perceive it. To put it simply, we're falling short of kids' expectations about how technology can and should be used in the classroom. And its not just the high schoolers and middle schoolers—many first graders can easily find the Arctic on Google Earth or videos of the American black bear without any assistance at all.

How Often is "Often"

Several findings from a new technology survey by CDW-G highlight this difference in how teachers and kids perceive technology. For example, 75 percent of teachers say they regularly use technology in their classrooms. However, only 40 percent of students report that technology is used in their classrooms. You have to wonder if "regular tech use" is defined differently by kids and adults.

At the same time, a whopping 94 percent of students report that they use technology to do their homework, while less than half of all teachers (46 percent) incorporate technology into homework assignments.

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We'd all agree that the balance was out of whack if kids felt the place they most often read books or solved math problems was at home. And yet, in the CDW-G survey, 86 percent of students reported using more technology outside of school than in it.

Furthermore, when we do tap into digital literacy in school, it's not with the depth and breadth that the future workplace will require. "We're still using technology to teach *at* our students, rather than putting technology into kids' hands as a tool for them to learn with," argues Julie Smith, vice president for K–12 education at CDW-G. Requiring students to turn in typed essays or to use three online sources in a research report is just scratching the surface of what true digital literacy means. And because today's students are so tech savvy, they can sense those missed opportunities. Only four out of ten students surveyed by CDW-G felt their schools were meeting their technology expectations.

So What Do Kids Want?

From everything kids say, it's clear they want to bring what they're doing outside of the classroom into their lives at school—including mobile learning, collaboration, and social networking. They see potential in using smartphones and MP3 players, and they believe school policies banning these devices prevent them from making possible learning connections. According to the Speak Up 2010 report conducted by the technology nonprofit Project Tomorrow, 53 percent of middle and high school students feel that the restrictions on using cell phones are the biggest obstacle to using technology at school.

What's more, kids want to be heard. We are teaching digital natives, many of whom have been pounding on keyboards since their toddler days. Yet the CDW-G survey found that just 30 percent of students say their schools ask for their input on technology. Worse, while 75 percent of teachers feel they understand how students want to use technology as a learning tool, only 49 percent of their students agree.

And Then There's the Budget

Of course, there are many reasons that help explain the gap between how teachers and kids see technology. Chief among them are budget, security, and access concerns. Everyone who took the CDW-G survey—teachers, staff, and students—overwhelmingly named budget as the biggest challenge to classroom technology, and with state dollars under the (scratched and outdated) microscope, there may be little help on the way.

While kids may be clamoring to use their smartphones, many teachers are apprehensive about incorporating them into the curriculum. School days are packed enough without having to police students who are texting when they should be using a math review app or playing a vocabulary game. One teacher-blogger who attended the Mobile Learning Experience 2011 conference posted a screenshot of a student playing Tetris on her school-loaned laptop. "I can load up mobile devices with all these great apps," he wrote, "but in my experience, the kids are going to do what they want to do."

Finally, when it comes to assigning

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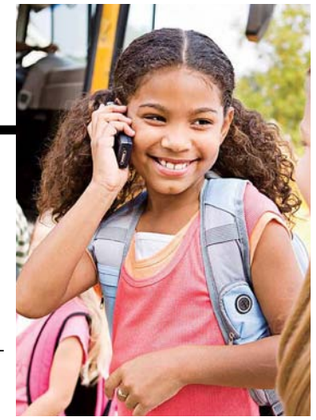

WHO IS MORE TECH SAVVY: YOU OR YOUR STUDENTS?

My high school students for sure. I have my own Geek Squad.
—Tracy Shannon

Me, for sure. A lot of parents seem scared to really let their kids explore technology.
—Jamie Jay Summers

I would say we are about equal. I know more about computers, and they know more about whiteboards and iPads.
—Megan Farley

My students, of course!
—Florence Riviera

I consider myself proficent, but there are still times when I'll ask them to help me do something on the computer.
—Katie E. Mitchell

My students are, but I ask them to teach me.
—Garsy J. Thoms Harper

Me—but it's my mission to make my first graders as tech savvy as me.
—Pamela Ralston

DIGITAL DIVIDE

homework, teachers have legitimate apprehension about the original digital divide—the one between richer children and poorer ones. Not every student is like suburban Megan with a technological suite at her fingertips. "Teachers in poorer districts are hesitant to assign work that requires technology because not all students have access outside of the school walls," says CDW-G's Julie Smith. "And that's a very valid concern."

Crossing the Bridge

Despite the obstacles that may be standing in the way, there are steps you can take to help bridge the new digital divide. First, survey your students about what, if any, technology they use at home. Then have an open class discussion about technology with your students. You won't have any trouble getting them to share their thoughts on the iPad or the BlackBerry.

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Talking to students and their families can also help you gauge kids' access to technology outside the classroom. What you find may surprise you, even in lower-income areas. "Mobile devices, especially smartphones, e-readers, and tablets, are becoming quite common," says Smith. Two-thirds of parents who responded to the Speak Up 2010 survey said they would be willing to purchase a mobile device for their child to use in school.

Listen Up, Kids Are Talking

You'll see your students will gladly tell you their favorite sites and which apps they can't stop using. Once you have that information, you can begin to incorporate their interests into some of the projects that you assign. The trick is to build the learning connections. A student who loves the music site Pandora, for example, might write about the songs a fictional character would listen to, or record a diary podcast in that character's voice. An Angry Birds addict might use the game to explain the frustration felt by settlers in colonial America for taxes levied against them by the king. If enough students have computer access, you could assign an online math game to practice those multiplication facts as one of the alternatives.

Education and technology experts argue we need to listen more and talk less. "We're missing a wonderful opportunity to hear directly from our students about how technology can help them learn," Smith says. She suggests setting up school-wide panels where students can offer their input on the curriculum and how technology can fit into it.

Allowing mobile devices may also help to alleviate budget pressure, and it doesn't necessarily mean you have to play cop all day. The key to getting kids to stay on task is to develop clear policies and consequences for misuse, recommends the Center for Education Policy and Law at the University of San Diego. A consistent school-wide policy is a must.

Lastly, browse some of the comprehensive standards that address digital literacy as a set of skills on the same level as reading or math. You might try ISTE's NETS for Students (available at iste.org) or the American Association of School Librarians' Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (at aasl.org). These standards can help you not only create assignments that go beyond keyboarding and Google, but reach today's students where they live! ☐

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