

the it's on v line:

Tech policies that make sense

This statewide partnership is developing policies that can be used by all districts to guide student and staff behavior, both online and off.

“So what’s your Facebook policy?” If you’re in educational leadership today, you’ve likely been asked this question, and a hundred others like it. And it may have struck you as odd that you keep hearing these same questions being asked again and again.

That’s because no one ever seems able to land upon that elusive magic formula: the one where you feel certain your policies have adequately captured the ever-changing, crazy world that is technology use today. Trying to write “technology policies” in such a volatile environment is akin to the “nailing Jell-O to a wall” phenomenon. Just as you feel you have it “nailed,” it changes, moves, and you’re right back where you started, unsure you’ve landed on policies that protect your organization, or serve and guide your students and staff.

You’re surrounded daily with challenges and questions relating to technology use. Students using their cell phones. Staff members caught shopping excessively online.

An anonymous, nasty online quote about a principal. Unauthorized video. Questions about teachers communicating with students on social media (Facebook being only one of several vehicles). The issues just keep coming, each one seeming to bring yet another twist you haven’t seen before. You hear stories of potential complex legal pitfalls awaiting you at every turn. You keep thinking, “Somebody’s surely figured all this out, right?” Right?

And yet the questions keep coming. So what’s the answer? How do we stop the leaks in a dam with a million holes in it (when here we are with only 10 fingers)?

The answer is to stop creating technology policies.

Wait a minute. Did she say, “Stop creating technology policies?” I’m up to my eyeballs in technology issues, and she’s saying to stop creating technology policies? What kind of crazy talk is this?

By Kelly J. Calhoun

The answer is astonishingly simple, fairly easy to apply, and counter-intuitive all at once. And yes, it's even something we can join forces and do together, with the help of some of our most trusted professional organizations around the state. ACSA, the California School Boards Association, the California Educational Technology Professionals Association, the Santa Clara County Office of Education, CUE (Computer Using Educators), the law firm Fagen, Friedman & Fulfrost and others have joined forces to develop resources to help every California district and county office of education.

A new approach

"ON[the]LINE" is a new statewide effort focused on tackling this challenge. The unique initiative seeks to provide relief to beleaguered districts, county offices of education and others, bringing together a suite of resources they can use to either adopt new, CSBA-approved policies in alignment with this approach, or adapt existing local policies in alignment with the initiative's guidelines. And it will also provide help in the development of local technology use guidelines, professional development and more.

So how does it work? ON[the]LINE is built upon understanding a simple principle about technology use today and why our old approach doesn't work any more. You can understand it by answering these two questions:

1. What's at the core of your typical technology policies today?

Technology! And what's the flaw with that? You are building policies around a constantly moving target. For example, today's Facebook policy becomes irrelevant tomorrow when students and teachers begin communicating via an array of other non-Facebook tools. Every scenario you imagine and try to capture will be a different one tomorrow.

2. What is it we're really trying to influence with technology policies for our staff and students?

Human behavior! What we discover is that the problems we're trying to solve are not actually technology problems at all. Want to test this theory? Answer these questions:

Johnny copies his entire essay from an article he finds online and submits it as his own work. What is the principle at play here? Is this a technology problem? Would it not be more accurate to say the challenges we need to confront are plagiarism and cheating, whether by photocopying from a book,



copying somebody's paper, or from the Internet?

Mr. Smith, the science teacher, spends half his day in class gambling online. What is the principle at play here? Is this a technology problem? Would it not be more accurate to say the challenge we need to confront is neglecting (sometimes criminally) his professional duties, whether by gambling online, surfing porn, or reading a book in class while neglecting his students?

Human behavior standards

You're getting the gist. It turns out we don't need to list every imaginable activity online (not that we ever really could) – we need to be able to clearly define what our professional behavioral standards are for our teachers and staff. Those standards should govern behavior and expectations, regardless of what technologies exist today or tomorrow. Are your teachers and staff clear on what your standards are?

As you test each policy against these guiding principles, we find that it's the human behavior standards that can be ap-

plied consistently, regardless of the technologies rapidly changing around them. Your policies around specific social networking tools become policies around appropriate communications between staff and students (because isn't that what your real concern is?). Your policies around cell phone use

It turns out we don't need to list every imaginable activity online (not that we ever really could). We do need to be able to clearly define the standards that govern behavior and expectations, regardless of what technologies exist today or tomorrow. It's the human behavior standards that can be applied consistently.

merge into your policies on appropriate classroom behavior and academic honesty (because isn't that what your real concern is?). Your policies around bullying are really about any form of bullying, whether in person or online. The examples go on and on.

Even better, this new approach holds the promise of helping us in our quest to keep education relevant, and to help foster the development of students prepared to live and work in a 21st century environment where technology is ubiquitous.

Don't kid yourself. Most students walking through your doors are already arriving with the Internet in their pocket these days. It's no longer practical to imagine ourselves tightening our grip on the use of technology both in and outside school to confront these challenges. The genie is out of the bottle, and it's not going back in. We need to adapt to this new world, and prepare our students and staff for survival and success in this environment.

Yes, there are very specific requirements associated with protecting students online (and new legislation being passed every

year based on the latest hot topic), but this approach allows for incorporating and addressing those requirements into the appropriate areas of your policy.

Okay, this sounds like a good idea. But you have no time, money or people left to throw at this. Wouldn't it be great if you didn't all have to do this on your own? If we could join forces and come up with model policies and other resources that any dis-

trict could use? That's where ON[the]LINE comes in, with each of its partners providing solutions.

In a phased approach, CSBA is incorporating these principles into its policy updates as they come up for renewal. For example, you may have noticed CSBA's recent update to bullying (BP 5131.2) addresses the new requirements, but also incorporates the language around cyberbullying. This practice

of consolidating technology references into the relevant areas of behavior, rather than creating separate (and often redundant) policies specific to technology, has the additional benefit of simplifying enforcement and reducing potential for confusion.

Where you see key phrases like, "whether in person or online," you know a policy is focused on the behavior, not the technology itself.

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Additional guidelines and resources

The development of policies is just one leg on this particular table, and just a start. These need to be followed by additional guidelines and helpful resources for your staff, as well as appropriate professional development. ON[the]LINE's other partners are working on the development of these resources.

So how will all of this roll out? Work is being done now to create the initiative's website (onthelineca.org), which will be the clearinghouse of news, education, information and resources being shared. Some resources will be available right away, but updates and additions will be continuously added.

More to come

This process of changing the relevant policies will take some time, as CSBA will only be able to address a few at a time, but anticipates eventually incorporating the principles of the initiative into all its policies. ACSA and the other partners in the initiative are gearing up to share available resources and ideas in the months to come as well.

Messages announcing the official public "launch" will be making their way around the state through a variety of organizations, including ACSA, and you'll see opportunities to learn more and participate in this important initiative. Be on the lookout! ■

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