Educating for the 21st Century: Bringing Today's Classrooms into the Digital Age

Full Committee Field Hearing

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Sean O'Leary, 5th Grade Teacher, Hawk Ridge Elementary

Hello Senator Hagan and other distinguished guests. My name is Sean O'Leary and I am a 5th grade teacher at Hawk Ridge Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

I am here today to share the successes that my students and I have accomplished in the classroom through the implementation of technology. Hawk Ridge Elementary began implementing a Bring Your Own Technology program in the spring of 2012. In the year and a half since then, I have seen, throughout the school, more engaged and independent learners due, in large part, to the ready availability of technology in the classroom.

Before I tell you about some of the amazing things that my students have been able to accomplish using technology I want to try to clear up some misconceptions pertaining to technology in the classroom. Many people are quick to jump to the conclusion that placing iPads or laptops into the classroom is what teachers want because it makes our jobs "easier." I respectfully must disagree. I do think that having access to technology makes the classroom more efficient but never "easier." It is my finding that the access to technology actually creates many opportunities to challenge ourselves in the classroom and grow as 21st century learners. Teachers are challenged to create or find engaging activities that promote critical thinking and challenge their students without simply throwing a device in front of them with a fun math game. Teachers are constantly challenged with the task of staying current and up to date with changing technology, data, and effective methods to implement the ever-changing technology. Students are challenged to rely less on receiving step-by-step instructions and rely more on their natural inquisitive nature to find, solve, create, share, interpret and deliver information that they discover in this technological world. Students are challenged with real world tasks that help them, as put by one of my students, "develop a stronger sense of responsibility which we will need in the future."

The students in my classroom, and the students throughout Hawk Ridge Elementary have been responsible for some truly incredible educational moments involving technology. Social media has become an integral part of my classroom for facilitating discussion both in and outside the school setting. Mr. O'Leary's class blog has become a place where students can share and discuss information in a safe and structured environment. I originally started the blog as a way to post supplementary information about topics we studied in class. "We talked about chemical changes today, well on the blog I put a couple of videos for you guys to check out at home." I was amazed at how quickly the kids took over the blog! "Can I post another video I found?" "I found a great website about this" and "I just had to comment on that" became common phrases I heard as the students unpacked each morning. The kids were not only taking ownership of their learning but they were sharing that learning with other kids. Currently the blog is almost 100% kid run and moderated. I take time to make sure that everything is appropriate and school related, but so far that hasn't been an issue. The kids have started posting about anything from books to movie trailers based on books to great math resource websites to cool science videos they are finding online. The students are taking the information I'm teaching them, making it relevant to their lives, and then sharing it with others. When I was in elementary school passed notes about a funny video and that was about it. Without the access to technology in the classroom many kids are so willing to take information at its face value and move on. I've seen a deepening of understanding and a huge improvement in the motivation to learn and a responsibility in making learning important in my students since introducing technology to the classroom.

I can't tell you how many of my friends that are teachers in other schools, cities, and states have asked me about having readily available technology in my classroom. "Aren't you

nervous?" "Are you worried about them using it wrong?" "How can you manage all of that?" My response to them has always come from one of my favorite authors, TS Eliot. "'If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?" Educators and students are ready for this change! We are ready, willing, and able to dive in head-first and embrace technology in the classroom.