Teaching the iGeneration

Dear Parents,

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing parents and teachers is preparing students for a future that is rapidly changing yet poorly defined. New content and information is constantly being created, new partnerships developed across global boundaries are becoming commonplace, and new tools are connecting workers who once would have remained isolated.

Put simply, the work world that your children will inherit will be dramatically different than the work world of today! To properly prepare our students for that reality, we are planning to incorporate new digital tools into learning experiences here at school this year. Specifically, your child may have opportunities to use the following.

- **Tools for content creation:** Today's students must recognize that in a world where new information is generated at a blinding pace, the ability to develop novel ideas after a careful process of synthesis and evaluation—and to edit and publish those ideas to wide audiences—is far more important than simply consuming knowledge generated by others.

- **Tools for communication:** Today's students must be able to engage in both collaborative and competitive dialogue. They must be able to understand different roles in complex networks of learners, respect multiple viewpoints, recognize how important listening is in productive conversations, and articulate a range of positions clearly. Today's students must learn to see communication as an opportunity to refine and revise their own thinking.

- **Tools for collaboration:** Because companies are becoming increasingly global, creating work teams of colleagues on different continents, it is imperative for students to begin collaborating with peers across classrooms, schools, communities, and oceans. They must be equal partners in the creation of documents and presentations and have ample opportunities to create shared final products. Ongoing experiences with collaborative exercises will help students learn the task management skills that are often prerequisites for successful participation in a world driven by joint endeavors.

- **Tools for information management:** Perhaps the greatest challenge facing today's students is sifting through the amazing amount of content being created and selecting what is truly useful. Where students of an earlier generation had access to a handful of sources while exploring new ideas, today's students have access to tens of thousands of sources. Students must learn to balance primary sources (interviews, blogs, surveys, personal data collection, and so on) with secondary sources (magazines, newspapers, websites, books, and so on) when collecting and organizing information.

Specifically, our students may be engaged in the following.

- **Reading and commenting on blogs being created by other students:** One of the best ways to motivate students to read is to provide them with opportunities to share their thinking with other students. Collections of classroom blogs make that possible. You can explore the blogs that your children will be exposed to by visiting this URL:

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- **Creating a classroom wiki:** A wiki is an editable website that allows many writers to create content together. In education, wikis are generally used by students completing

classroom projects. At our school, wikis are only editable by students in our building or by students in sister schools that we work with closely. Generally, our wikis are closed to outsiders—however, there are times when wikis are opened to the world. Here is a sample of a public wiki created by middle school students: http://carbonfighters.pbworks.com.

- **Joining in digital conversations with other students:** Middle grade students are social by nature, completely driven by opportunities to interact in ongoing conversations with one another. At our school, we plan to tap into this motivation by creating digital conversations connected to classroom content.

  These conversations are always closely monitored by classroom teachers, and all comments are viewed by teachers before they can be seen by students. What's more, participation in our conversations is limited to students in our school or in sister schools that we partner with. Here is a sample conversation created by middle school students: http://ed.voicethread.com/share/62276.

- **Writing entries for our classroom blog:** Student writers are generally motivated by having an audience and receiving feedback from their peers. At our school, those goals are often accomplished by creating classroom blogs. Blogs are public websites on which students post content and readers from around the world leave comments.

  To ensure that inappropriate content is not added to classroom blogs, teachers review all new entries and comments before they are seen by students. What's more, students are taught to never reveal their full identity or their location. Here is a sample blog that has been maintained by middle school students: http://sugarkills.us.

Addressing Internet Safety

Students of the 21st century are exposed to different dangers than those faced by earlier generations. With nothing more than a few simple mouse clicks, children can stumble upon inappropriate content or participate in potentially unsafe interactions with other users.

Students must be skilled at self-advocacy and protection. They must learn to guard themselves and their identities while creating, communicating, and collaborating in virtual environments. They must recognize and have an action plan for removing themselves from dangerous situations. They must also understand and respect the line between one's public and private life.

Age-appropriate guidance, monitoring, and guidelines assist students as they learn to take responsibility for their own behavior when using online resources. Providing controlled educational environments focused on learning helps students utilize new tools responsibly while giving educators and parents the required safety and security.

To help prepare our students to be responsible digital citizens, we will consistently emphasize and enforce the following rules for Internet safety in our classrooms and community.

- **Students participating in any digital project are expected to act safely by keeping personal information private:** They are expected to never share their family names, passwords, usernames, email addresses, home addresses, school names, city names, or other information that could make identification possible.

- **Students participating in any digital project will let teachers or parents know when a digital interaction seems unsafe:** They are expected to help police their classroom

projects by pointing out any inappropriate comments or interactions to parents or teachers.

- **Students participating in any digital project are expected to treat the project as a classroom space:** They understand that speech inappropriate for class is also inappropriate for our digital projects. If inappropriate language is posted in digital projects, students understand that they will be referred to the office for consequences. Students also understand that repeated instances of inappropriate language or content will result in the closing of all classroom projects.

- **Teachers understand that all content created by their students must be monitored and moderated:** A primary responsibility of all teachers interested in using digital tools in the classroom is ensuring student safety. The first step to making digital learning experiences safe is monitoring and moderating all content posted in digital projects. Teachers accept responsibility for reviewing and approving all comments added to blogs or digital conversations before they are made available to student readers. Teachers also accept responsibility for reviewing content created by students on an ongoing basis and closed projects that are no longer active.

- **Teachers take active steps to review Internet safety rules with students frequently throughout the course of the school year:** Teachers understand that students need consistent reminders and reinforcement about safe online behaviors. As a result, they regularly introduce short minilessons on digital safety in their classrooms. One website that is regularly used to develop minilessons is Common Sense Media: www.commonsensemedia.org/educators/curriculum.

- **Parents recognize that they have an obligation to monitor digital activities and behaviors beyond the school day:** The greatest risks to students engaged in digital projects come from unsupervised participation in online activities. While the faculty and staff will carefully monitor student involvement in classroom projects, parents understand that we cannot effectively monitor student activities beyond the school day or beyond the scope of school-sponsored activities.

  Therefore, parents accept responsibility for monitoring the online lives of their children away from our school. One of the first steps that proactive parents often take is ensuring that the family computer is in a public location, making monitoring easy!

- **Parents accept responsibility for learning more about Internet safety:** There are many resources available online that can be used by parents to learn more about keeping their children digitally safe. A growing collection of these resources can be explored by visiting the Family Toolbox created by Common Sense Media: www.commonsensemedia.org/educators/connecting-families/share.

Permission

Before your child may fully participate in our technology experiments, I am asking for you and your child to agree to the Internet safety rules and to acknowledge your consent by signing and returning the following form.

I have read and understood the rules for keeping students safe while working on digital projects. I agree to abide by each of the rules, doing my part to make digital learning experiences both fun *and* safe at our school.

Student Name (please print):

Student Signature: Date:

Parent's Signature: Date: