Five Strategies for
Teaching Digital Natives

While we often think of millennials — those born between 1981 and 1996 — as the first wired generation, the truth is that most millennials were teenagers when the iPhone was invented. Today's K-12 students, on the other hand, are true "digital natives" in the sense that they've never known a world without swiping and apps — and many were watching videos on their parents' phones or tablets when they were toddlers.

This generation of students, Generation Z, has very different expectations for how they'll learn, and teaching them requires a different approach as well. K-12 educators and administrators have to be very thoughtful and deliberate about how to best reach them.

We've spent a lot of time talking with educators and administrators about how to reach today's students effectively. Based on what we've learned, here are five recommendations for educating the true digital natives of Gen Z.

① Meet them where they are.

Incorporate tools students are comfortable with and are already using every day for communication and entertainment. Many of these resources have education-specific versions available that are purposefully built to encourage self-directed learning.

For instance, Gen Z frequently streams video from sources such as YouTube and TikTok. According to the 2019 Speak Up survey from Project Tomorrow, a third of students in grades 6-12 use YouTube to help with their homework, and 49% say they use it to explore topics they're interested in on their own. What's more, 28% of middle schoolers have their own personal YouTube channel — and 7% are running a YouTube business! Educators can engage students more effectively by incorporating short video clips from well-vetted sources into their instruction and having students create their own videos to demonstrate their learning.

Besides YouTube, the most popular online platforms among teens are Instagram and Snapchat, according to Pew Research Center. Students like the positive reinforcement they get when their posts generate likes and comments on these social media platforms. An app called Seesaw is like Instagram for learning, turning school projects and assignments into social media that students share with the world. Instead of collecting likes and comments for posting selfies, students receive positive reinforcement on their schoolwork.

2 Focus on equity and inclusion.

Make sure every student has equitable access to digital devices and learning opportunities. If you're rolling out a 1:1 learning program but don't yet have the resources to provide a device for every student, we recommend giving all students in a particular grade level a device. Rather than divvying up devices by class type, distributing devices by grade is a more equitable approach. If you establish a "bring your own device" policy, make sure you have extra devices to give to students who don't have one of their own.

Consider how students will access technology not just at school, but also at home. The "homework gap," or the disadvantage that students face in completing homework when they don't have broadband access at home, is real. The 2019 Speak Up survey revealed that 13% of students struggle to complete homework because they lack home internet service. Lending students mobile hotspots, keeping the library open before and after school, and partnering with local businesses to give families discounted broadband can help solve this challenge. For more ideas, read Bridging the Digital Divide When Students Go Home

3 Teach and model effective digital citizenship.

Just because today's students are digital natives doesn't mean they understand how to behave safely and responsibly online. Teachers need to explicitly teach and model responsible and ethical digital behavior.

A Pew survey reveals that 59% of teens have directly experienced some form of cyberbullying. According to the 2019 Speak Up survey, only one in five girls and 36% of boys rate their digital citizenship skills as "advanced."

While many schools address digital citizenship in an assembly or one-time workshop with students, these skills should be taught and reinforced throughout the core curriculum. Common Sense Media is one of many organizations with a free digital citizenship curriculum guide for schools.

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4 Provide a safer online environment.

Cyberbullying takes a heavy toll on students. Of children currently experiencing a mental health problem, more than two-thirds (68%) say they experienced cyberbullying in the last year, according to The Children's Society and Young Minds. The organization notes that a study by Birmingham University found that cyberbullying victims are twice as likely to attempt suicide or engage in self-harm as non-victims.

Aside from teaching responsible behavior, teachers need tools that can help keep students safer while they're working online. Classroom management software that provides insight into students' online activity provides an additional layer of defense. And now, a new partnership between LanSchool and Bark for Schools gives schools even more security. Bark's research backed solution alerts administrators to activities that may indicate issues such as depression, cyberbullying, self-harm, and sexual content on students' school accounts. Schools that register for Bark as part of their LanSchool relationship will also receive complimentary access to Bark's image removal software, a powerful tool that helps prevent explicit images of minors from ever entering the digital space.

5 Turn them loose.

Teachers have to be willing to give up some degree of control in their classroom by letting students create, collaborate, and take charge of their own learning. Research shows students are more engaged, explore content in greater depth, and retain knowledge more effectively when they take ownership of their learning.

But this doesn't mean giving up all control — teachers are still there to guide students and ensure a safe learning environment. Teachers must establish clear rules for their classrooms and hold students accountable for breaking them. In fact, research suggests that classroom management plays a critical role in student achievement, as Robert Marzano and his colleagues have indicated.

Classroom management software can help teachers effectively manage instruction for today's digital natives, providing a safer digital environment that supports student-centered learning while empowering the teacher to guide on the side.

The true digital natives of Generation Z expect to learn differently than prior generations. By integrating the kinds of digital tools they're familiar with, focusing on equity, teaching and modeling responsible digital citizenship, providing a safer online environment, and empowering them to take charge of their learning, schools can deeply engage Gen Z in their learning and achieve better outcomes.

Learn more about how LanSchool can effectively support this approach to instruction.

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