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In Emerson, an early lesson in 'Digital Citizenship' and online presence

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EMERSON — Dennis Gordon, a social studies teacher at Patrick M. Villano Elementary School, stood in front of his third-grade class and pointed at a picture of footprints on the board in front of them and asked two simple questions: "What are these and what do they tell us?"

The class enthusiastically answered that they were looking at footprints on a beach and those footprints, they said, can show evidence that someone stepped somewhere — but also added that footprints can get washed away by waves.

Smiling, Gordon brought up a new slide. This time, an outline of a foot filled with internet company logos such as Google, Facebook and Instagram flashed on the screen. This is a "digital footprint," he explained to the class as they peered over their Google Chromebook laptops, but a better word to describe what the internet is really like would be "digital tattoo."

"As much as we like to believe the digital world is a separate place than real life, it's not," Gordon told the students. "The traces of the websites we visit are permanent. Everything is tracked and stored."

At the start of the school year, the Emerson school district implemented a Digital Citizenship course and curriculum in its elementary school to teach its third- through sixth-graders about how to conduct themselves in an online-environment, but also to develop an understanding of what it means to be a citizen.

Clearly, this isn't a prototypical computer class, or social studies class for that matter. It's a hybrid of both, school administrators said, and they believe it's becoming increasingly important as technology continues to be central in pre-teens' lives.

"Children are in a technology-infused world more than ever before," Superintendent Brian Gatens said. "Because technology is so prominent in kids' lives, we thought it was our responsibility to develop a program that recognized this and not one that is just learning how to surf the Internet."

The class focuses on a few different topics.

First, Gordon explained, he wanted to stress to the students what it means to be a citizen. Responsibility comes hand-in-hand with being a citizen, he said, and the power of the Internet empowers citizens to be proactive and share information.

Key words are defined by the class, such as "citizen," "rule," "consequence," "respect," "community" and "online." From there, the computer-aspects of the class come in: where the students learn how to create, research and protect themselves in an online world.

Jessica Espinoza, the principal at the elementary school, said the class works through Google Apps for Education, a batch of programs offered by the tech company to educational institutions, but the class is all about sharing ideas, commenting on each other's work and editing collaboratively using the technology the students have at their fingertips.

The class has talked about protecting passwords, what a virus is, what malware means, and Gordon said he has even showed them a real time map of computer servers being attacked by hackers.



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Teacher Dennis Gordon working with Ally Farrell, 8, in a recent Digital Citizenship class for third-graders at Patrick M. Villano Elementary School in Emerson.

Opening students' eyes early to the vast empowerment and risks inherent in the online world was important to school administrators, Espinosa said.

"We felt it was the prime time to teach students these lessons," Espinoza said. "By high school it's almost too late to teach them about how important social presence is online."

Hilary Wilder, a professor of learning technologies at William Paterson University, said introducing the lessons of digital citizenship at an early age is important considering the way technology has become pervasive in pre-teens' lives.

"You want them to start understanding, because speaking for myself, you tend to see yourself in two different worlds: your virtual self and your in-person self," Wilder said. "For children this age, are there two different worlds? It's something to ponder, because I'm not sure for them there are two different worlds."

As for citizenship, Wilder said, she thought the fusing of a social studies curriculum with technology rules went hand-in-hand.

"Everyone's citizenship now is not just in your town, state or nation – it extends way beyond," Wilder said. "The notion of digital citizenship is important, just as you wouldn't call someone a bad name to their face you shouldn't say that in a text message or online in email or Facebook or whatever."

Everything the digital citizenship curriculum stressed in Gordon's class seemed to be summed up in one interaction with a student last week.

Gordon instructed the class to type in one word they would want people to use to describe them, a word that would then flash up on the board in front of the class in real-time.

One student raised her hand and asked Gordon if the word she typed in should be what they wanted people to think of her online or in real life.

Gordon, kneeling down next to her as he helped her with the assignment, smiled and said: "Well, as we're going to learn, is there really a difference?"

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