

# Getting Techy!

## *Benchmark's Initiative to Integrate Technology Across the Curriculum*

By Jessica Siso

With the prevalence of technology in today's world, it has become a priority of Benchmark School to actively integrate technology into classroom instruction and prepare students for the creative thinking and problem solving that is required for 21st century literacy.

To tackle this major initiative, Head of School Robb Gaskins formed a Technology Integration Committee last summer to develop a plan for the integration of technology into the curriculum. The Committee, comprised of Division Heads Sally Laird and Eleanor Gensemer, Supervisors Betsy Cunicelli and Joyce Ostertag, Middle School Teacher Eric MacDonald, Math Teacher Amy Cuthbertson, Director of Technology Maggie Churchville, and Robb Gaskins, had two goals: (1) to develop a framework for technology skills and integration, and (2) to establish a plan for professional development for 2014-15.

"As teachers, we are bombarded with technology and apps, so we knew that we needed to come up with a clear plan for technology integration...a framework to help guide teachers in what to use and to figure out what technology matches up with the philosophies and guiding principles of Benchmark, especially The Seven Pillars of Benchmark Instruction," Eleanor stated.

During the summer, as part of the Committee's goal to make technology integration a priority for all Benchmark faculty and to develop a plan for professional development for the 2014-15 school year, all staff were asked to read *Reading, Writing and Literacy 2.0* by Denise Johnson, a professor and Director of Literacy Leadership at the College of William and Mary. In addition, Dr. Johnson was invited to lead one of this year's professional development seminars.

As for the Committee members, their summer work began by reviewing a number of resources so that they could develop a framework. "As we worked with experts, it became clear that we needed to think about digital literacy differently," Eleanor said. "In her book, Denise Johnson talks about it [digital literacy] as a genre and focuses on the continuum of what technology students need to learn at certain ages."



Using the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE®) Standards for learning, teaching, and leading in the digital age as a basis, the Committee developed five goals for providing students with the skills and strategies to be safe and effective producers and consumers of technology, including:

1. **online research and reading comprehension:** students need to have an effective set of strategies for online reading and research
2. **communication and collaboration:** students need to effectively communicate and collaborate with others in the digital world by adapting strategies previously learned to a new environment
3. **problem solving and creative innovation:** students need to be effective in technology and learning by using problem-solving skills and a creative mindset
4. **digital citizenship:** students need to be aware of issues of safety and privacy, as well as how to appropriately interact with others and use the Internet responsibly and legally
5. **strategic and efficient use of technology:** students need to become effective, efficient, and strategic users of technology who apply technological tools and applications to support their learning

For this school year, the Committee asked teachers school-wide to focus on just one of the five goals: digital citizenship. To change how students think about Internet and technology use, the first thing the Committee did was to take the previously-implemented "Acceptable Use Policy" that students are required to sign at the beginning of the

school year and modify it to be a “Responsible Use Policy” that will be introduced in the fall of 2016.

The Committee spent a lot of time investigating resources and found that the website Common Sense Media (*commonsensemedia.org*) has a number of great lessons on digital citizenship for various ages to assist faculty in teaching this new initiative. These lessons help students learn how to be good digital citizens: respecting the rights of others, thinking before posting, navigating the internet safely, and considering their digital footprint.

Though digital citizenship is the main focus of technology integration this year at Benchmark, the other goals are also beginning to be integrated in all classrooms. From more active use of Google Docs for organization, to installing “Read&Write for Google,” to using the “Book Creator” app, Pixton Comics, PowToon, and VoiceThread, to our library now providing student access to 300+ ebooks, technology integration is all around Benchmark.

“Benchmark has been pushing the envelope with technology for a long time, starting with the use of computers for writing years ago,” Eric said. “This technology integration initiative is just helping us to solidify where we are with technology currently and in what direction we need to move the students so that they will be prepared for their futures.”

Joyce commented that teachers in the lower school have been meeting once a week to discuss technology integration, digital citizenship, employing apps and programs, and how to integrate this new knowledge into what they are already doing in the classroom. “We are trying to find ways to weave technology into what is already taking place in the classroom and use it to enhance current activities, rather than merely adding on something new,” she said. “We want students to have an array of tools to choose from to get a job done, and then gradually release responsibility and let them take charge of technology.”

Eric also noted that while Benchmark students are considered ‘digital natives,’ it does not always mean that they are adept at using technology effectively. “So what we are trying to do with this initiative is help give them instruction on how to problem solve when a document won’t open in Google Docs, conduct an effective Internet search, and even write an e-mail. My focus is always to find tools that will help my students be successful, strategic, and creative—both while they are at Benchmark and after they leave.”

To fulfill its second goal, the Committee planned for many of the faculty professional development presentations this year to focus on technology integration in the classroom and to take elements of the framework and work on them with staff. Ultimately, these professional

development presentations are intended to spark dialogue about what students need to know, what teachers are already doing across the curriculum, and how to help faculty think concretely about the skills and strategies that need to be developed in a coordinated way across the grades. The technology integration professional development presenters for this school year include:

- **Dr. Jill Castek**, Assistant Professor in the Literacy, Language, and Technology Research Group at Portland State University
- **Dr. Julie Coiro**, Assistant Professor of Reading in the School of Education at the University of Rhode Island
- **Dr. Denise Johnson**, author of *Reading, Writing and Literacy 2.0—Teaching with Online Texts, Tools and Resources, K-8*, and Professor and Director of Literacy Leadership at the College of William and Mary
- **Dr. Rachel Karchmer-Klein**, Associate Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Delaware
- **Dr. Richard Beach**, Professor Emeritus of English Education at the University of Minnesota

Although the work of the Committee is far from over, the integration of technology is readily apparent across Benchmark classrooms, and the future looks exciting. “It will take some time, since it’s a learning curve for all of us, but we also want our teachers to be comfortable with the technology and to get a sense of how it fits in with what they are already doing instead of just throwing new technology into classrooms,” Joyce said. “There are great things coming.” 🌱

