Achieving a Healthful Digital Diet
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Think of the Internet and other digital technology as food. Limit the intake of empty digital calories, and do not consume too much over all. That is the advice of experts who study children's use of media and who have some tips for parents and children on how to use technology in more healthful ways. Michael Levine, executive director of the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, which studies media and learning, said parents should take the time to assess whether a Web site or game had clear educational value. Then, he suggested, tip the balance so that 50 percent of a child's computer time is spent on activities that teach.

"The primary use of technology by young people is for entertainment," he said. "There needs to be a more balanced diet."

Vicky Rideout, a researcher who has overseen studies on media and health for the Kaiser Family Foundation, said it was crucial to limit multitasking and entertainment while studying. "Don't have the instant-messaging function open. Don't have Facebook open," she said. "Put that challenge out to the kids."

Some of the expert advice focuses on the example set by parents.

"What kind of role model are you?" asked Liz Perle, editor in chief of Common Sense Media, which helps families navigate a media-saturated world. "Are you constantly on your BlackBerry, play online games regularly — are you addicted to Facebook, too?"

Ms. Perle urged parents of younger children not to constantly entertain them with screens, like giving them the iPhone to quiet them in a restaurant. And older children should be given basic phones for talking and texting, not smartphones that can be loaded with applications.

Eventually, Ms. Perle said, older children must take responsibility. She suggested they ask questions like those asked by people with addictions: "Who is in control? Me, or the technology? Is the game calling the shots?"

WHS juniors, seniors to get iPads

Westlake High School juniors and seniors will have everything from the Internet to their textbooks at their fingertips when they are issued iPads upon their return Aug. 22.

This school year, instead of using heavy textbooks, Westlake High School students will carry around one lightweight, slim device – the iPad.

As part of the Westlake Initiative For Innovation program, juniors and seniors will be given iPads to use for several of their textbooks. The school district purchased 1,605 iPads recently for $770,000, according to district Communications Director Claudia McWhorter. The computers, purchased with bond money, will be handed out to WHS teachers, seniors, juniors and some sophomore students taking advanced placement courses.

"For a number of years, our school has been looking for ways to improve student engagement, collaboration and creativity in the learning process," Principal Linda Rawlings said. "We have embraced the idea of teaching students differently as we recognize that your generation has access to a world of knowledge at your fingertips that your parents and I did not have. We decided to pilot tablet computers because of their portability, cost and long battery life."

Students will be allowed to purchase insurance for the device in case of accidental damage during the school year. Students will also be allowed to use their own iPads if they want.

"Families have the option of purchasing an insurance policy for $35," Rawlings said. "If the iPad is lost, broken or stolen, families are only responsible for 30 percent of the value of the iPad."

"[I'm] just a little bit [worried about accidentally breaking an iPad], but if there are cases, I would probably be OK," junior Hattie Hazen said.

The WIFI program has many benefits, such as keeping students engaged in the lesson, having an updated textbook and improving communication between the students and teachers. Not only does the program have benefits for the students and the school faculty, but it also helps reduce the cost of paper and copiers. This year, the iPad will be used as textbooks in math, English and foreign language classes.

"The tablet computer is another tool for the teacher in the classroom," Rawlings said. "A few textbooks will be available online. Because these are online, they can be updated quickly. This gives textbook publishers more control over the accuracy of the materials and gives them the ability to update their texts with current information. In the future, we look forward to the science and history books being available online as well. Even in classes, however, where the text is not online, students will have immediate access to additional information through the Internet."

This year, the WIFI program will be used to study the effectiveness of tablet computers for students. Key to the study will be how the devices improve student engagement, communication between students and teachers, and the learning experience. At the end of the year, recommendations for the future will be given to the Board of Trustees based on this study.

"I believe that the tablet computers are very intuitive and are easy for people of all ages to learn," Rawlings said. "The learning curve for us will be in applying technology to our curriculum and lessons. We are a dedicated, high-achieving staff, and we are eager to take on this challenge."

Rawlings feels certain that students will enjoy having 24/7 access to key information without carrying around a backpack that weighs 30 pounds.

As the summer winds down and everyone prepares to head back to school, both students and faculty are excited about the new technology.

Junior Josh Willis said he likes the idea of bringing schools into the 21st century with newest technology.

"Although, I am a little skeptical about issuing something so fragile for students to use." Willis added.