

LA Students Get iPads, Crack Firewall, Play Games

John Rogers, Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Education officials in the nation's second-largest school district are working to reboot a \$1 billion plan to put an iPad in the hands of each of their 650,000 students after an embarrassing glitch emerged when the first round of tablets went out.

Instead of solving math problems or doing English homework, as administrators envisioned, more than 300 Los Angeles Unified School District students promptly cracked the security settings and started tweeting, posting to Facebook and playing video games.

"'Temple Run.' 'Subway Surfing.' Oh, and some car racing game I can't remember the name of," said freshman Stephany Romero, laughing as she described the games she saw fellow Roosevelt High School students playing in class last week.

That incident, and related problems, had both critics and supporters questioning this week whether LAUSD officials were being hasty or overreaching in their attempt to distribute an iPad to every student and teacher at the district's more than 1,000 campuses by next year.

"It doesn't seem like there was much planning that went into this strategy," said Renee Hobbs, director of the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. "That's where the debacle began."

It's crucial, she said, to spend extensive time drawing students into a discussion on using iPads responsibly before handing them out. And, of course, installing a firewall that can't be easily breached.

At Roosevelt High, it was the unanimous opinion of more than a dozen students that the school district's security setup was so weak that even the most tech-challenged parent could have gotten past it.

"It was so easy!" said freshman Carlos Espinoza.

He explained that all one needed to do was access the tablet's settings, delete the profile established by the school district and set up an Internet connection. He did it, he said, because he wanted to go on Facebook.

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"They kind of should have known this would happen," said Espinoza's friend Maria Aguilera.

"We're high school students after all. I mean, come on," she added.

As word spread, with the speed of a microprocessor, that anyone could crack the firewall, officials quickly confiscated the devices and put a freeze on using them off campus. In the meantime, they promised to improve the security settings.

When they started distributing the iPads at 47 district schools in August, administrators touted the move as a means of leveling the academic playing field in a public school system where 80 percent of the students come from low-income families.

Now, they said, everyone would have equal access to the most cutting-edge educational software programs, not just the children of parents with deep pockets.

But after the first shot in that digital revolution led to a flood of tweets, other concerns arose.

Among them:

— Who pays if a kid drops one of these \$678 gadgets into a toilet or leaves it on a bus?

— Is it realistic to tell a student she can use it to do her homework, then not allow the device to connect to the Internet from home? (Schools will be wired.)

— And since the tablet without Web access is only as good as the educational software placed on it, how good is that software?

A parent, Scott Folsom, said he heard from one source that families would have to pay for broken iPads and from another that the school would.

District officials have said there was confusion over that issue but that it's been decided schools will cover the cost of an iPad accidentally broken, lost or stolen, while families are on the hook for one negligently damaged.

Of more serious concern to Folsom is the software. He sampled one of the new iPads, he said, and found no program to adequately support English-as-a-second-language students. That would seemingly be crucial for a district whose students are 73 percent Hispanic and where only 14 percent of English learners can speak the language fluently, according to a 2011 Department of Education study.

As a parent representative to the district's bond oversight committee, Folsom voted

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to recommend spending \$30 million last June to buy the first batch of iPads. He says he still supports the program but worries that maybe educators are trying to implement it too quickly.

"This is the future," he said. "But whether LAUSD is stepping too quickly into the future — based on the fact that it's so big, and we seem to be in such a hurry — those are questions to consider."

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