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More Schools Taking Up Issue Of Tech Literacy Adding It To Courses

Specific knowledge of programs is less crucial than general capability

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These days, all of us have to be tech literate - not just computer scientists and information technology workers.

But that doesn't mean we have to master arcane programs. It's more about gleaning information literacy - how to wade through masses of online information, determine what's real, put information from different sources together, and communicate it to others. With that in mind, schools look to ensure that students have those skills before they reach the work force.

Many educators believe that students learn tech literacy best when it's integrated into other courses. That's the approach of Virtual High School, a nonprofit organization that offers credit courses to students around the world.

"We want to do it as transparently and seamlessly as possible, so that they're learning with technology instead of about technology," said Liz Pape, the school's chief executive.

How does it work? Biology students, for instance, can do virtual lab simulations. Social studies students can collaborate online, sharing data about population growth in their region.

The skills they learn will be critical for higher education and the working world, Pape says.

Virtual High School is one of many entities - private and public - trying to determine what tech-related skills students will need and how to deliver them.

Employers also are taking steps to ensure that future workers have the right skills.

Twenty-eight corporations and organizations have formed the Partnership for 21st Century Skills in order to create digital literacy standards.

The idea is to give prospective workers a broad aptitude for technology, says Mike Schmidt, an executive with the Ford Motor Company Fund, one of the group's members.

How workers can use tech skills to take initiative is the issue, he says. That applies to all professions, from the automotive industry to computers to health care.

"It's so different from job to job," Schmidt said. "The important thing is how they're using the technology, not what technology they're using."

Most workers have some exposure to technology, and many try to get by on that, says David Saedi, chief executive of **Certiport**, which provides training and certification in tech skills for schools, businesses and the general public.

"That's often assumed to be enough," he said. "It's not enough."

And tech skills are a moving target, which makes education a bigger challenge.

"Even literacy at a basic level keeps moving up," Saedi said.

Certiport's certifications are used internationally, including in Japan, South Korea, China and all major European countries.

Its training covers the desktop applications that most office work requires - word processing, spreadsheets and presentations.

Certiport works with public schools to develop tech standards and do training in a number of states. The federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates that every state have tech literacy standards for students.

Hawaii has taken its digital literacy efforts further than most. Students there not only get tech training, but also **Certiport**'s internationally recognized certification.

Some 14,000 students a year are learning basic desktop applications. The Hawaii program, which started in fall 2005, also includes education in "living online" - using the Internet, safety and security, and cyberspace etiquette.

Gayle Loui teaches technology to eighth-graders using **Certiport** materials at Waipahu Intermediate School in Waipahu, Oahu.

Her students are learning tech in stand-alone classes. That will change next year, as tech content is incorporated into other subjects, says Loui.

Even experts acknowledge that they don't know what tech skills should be taught at what ages.

"It's very hard to make any kind of blanket assumption about what to do at what age," said Steve Jacobs, an IT professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Tech skills aren't always learned in the classroom, notes Jacobs, who runs a lab that develops informal methods to improve digital literacy - including through the media, museums, game technology and the Internet.

And tech ability can cause its own problems, he points out. "In some ways, tech tends to reduce our skill set," Jacobs said. "To the nonacademician these days, research means you look at Google, and if it's not there, it never happened."