Entry Name:
iPad unlocks new world for Ben and other students with communication challenges

Organization Name:
Tacoma Public Schools

Category:
Excellence in Writing
Why did we tell Ben’s story?
If ever there was a story about how schools can change the trajectory of a student’s life, this is it. High school freshman Ben Ailes has autism coupled with a speech disability, making it difficult to express himself verbally. After 14 years of struggle at home, at school and everywhere in between, someone said, “Let’s get him an iPad.”

With this one piece of technology supplied by Tacoma Public Schools, Ben’s world opened. He could speak for the first time. His aggression is severely diminished, his participation at school is drastically increased, and his independence gives his mom hope for his future.

His transformation is undeniable, which is a story in itself. But we also wanted to demonstrate the school district’s long-term role in working toward success with Ben, which reflects our values as an organization.

What challenges lay in telling this story?
The need to be sensitive and true to the experience of Ben, his mom and school team was paramount. We had to get this right. To be sure the reporting was thorough, we interviewed his mom and four school district staff members. We also spent time observing Ben in class. We previewed the story with each person sourced in the story, wanting to respect their feelings and not share details that are just too personal.

We also tried to find the balance between respecting Ben’s experience and our need to relate it to the importance of technology funding. After all, it’s stories like Ben’s that help the public understand the work schools do and the funding required to do it.

Target audiences
Telling Ben’s story was a way to personalize the need for technology levy funding. We needed that message to reach this set of voters so they could understand what they would be supporting with their vote:
-Parents of students currently enrolled in our schools
-People of voting age without students currently in our schools
-Tacoma Public Schools’ staff

We ran Ben’s story in tools that would reach those audiences. They included our “Spotlight” newsletter, district e-newsletter and website, and social media.
iPad unlocks new world for Ben and other students with communication challenges

Imagine you’re dropped in the middle of a foreign country and don’t speak the language. You can’t find the bathroom, get food or anything else you need. You can’t leave that spot until you can say what you need.

You’re stuck.

Before 14-year-old Ben Ailes learned to use an iPad at school, Ben’s world seemed like that, said his mom, Carol Emerson.

Ben, a freshman at Foss High School, has autism coupled with a speech disability, making it difficult to express himself verbally.

But it turns out, Ben has a lot to say. And this year, he’s learning to say it with the help of a critical piece of technology.

“Up until now I was Ben’s speech device,” said his mom. “Without me, other people could not understand him. But now, he can use the iPad to say he’s hungry, he needs a break—basic things that the rest of us take for granted. Our world is very verbal, and you don’t realize that until you can’t speak.”

Because Ben couldn’t easily let people know through words how he felt or what he needed, he sometimes expressed himself through aggressive behavior. His family worried about his future at school and his life at home.

Enter Corky Lynn, who has a critical dual role with Tacoma Public Schools as a speech therapist and assistive technology specialist. After trying different communication strategies in elementary and middle school, Ben’s support team asked Lynn to weigh in. Lynn thought an iPad with the appropriate software might help him.

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Ben and his mom took the iPad home to learn how to use it together. The concept? A set of core, commonly used words such as “I,” “want” and “no” serve as the introductory menu of word choices. After Ben taps a core word icon, the iPad expresses it out loud. Ben then selects from a secondary menu of other types of words, such as actions or people. After he hears the iPad say the word, Ben usually now says it, too.

The word choice menus are eventually customized to suit the user.

After getting over the initial learning hump, Ben picked up the system at lightning speed. “No” was a favorite word as Ben started to learn the program, his mom remembered with a laugh.

But it was an important word—one that gave him some power and led to the start of substantial behavior change. And the totality of the change today, according to his mom, is transformational.

“The iPad gives him choices and power,” Lynn noted. “Ben is now functionally communicating and getting what he needs. When he communicates his needs, the striking out decreases dramatically. He’s participating in whole group learning. This device has opened a door for a new way to participate in social relationships with peers and adults in classroom conversations.”

A new day at school

On a Friday morning, Ben sits at a table in his classroom, snacking and playing with a blue fidget toy. His iPad is propped in front of him.

“After snack, what will we do?” asks one of his teachers, Janet Beatty.

“Calendar,” he says confidently. He knows the morning routine, and he’s ready for it.

Beatty greets another student with a singsong “good morning,” and Ben mimics her out loud with a smile.

When asked what day it is, Ben sings, “Friday,” and taps the “Friday” icon on his iPad. The iPad offers the same answer in return. The pattern repeats with each day of the week question.

It sounds so simple, but this routine and the behavior that accompanies it are still fresh.

“Up until we used this device last year, he rarely participated in school,” Emerson said.

Now, if Ben gets agitated, his teacher or paraeducator knows what he needs—because he tells them through the iPad or using his own voice. Often, he needs pressure—a kind of massage on his shoulders, legs or head—that relieves anxiety and frees him up to engage and participate again.

During their calendar work, Ben taps Beatty’s leg to get her attention. She asks what he would like.

“Pressure, pressure,” Ben responds.

She rubs his knees and head, and he says, “Thank you.”

Today, Lynn estimates Ben’s communication at school at about 70% through the iPad and 30% spoken. Her immediate goal for him is to increase the percentage of his spoken words, but she’s thinking far beyond that for him, too.

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“Communication can be a barrier in the classroom for Ben and students who have difficulties due to factors of autism, or behavior or medical conditions. They might not be able to let people know their needs and wants, or just how they are feeling,” West said. “Now, they have a voice all the time, and their frustrations are reduced.”

Next school year, West hopes to expand iPad distribution and teacher training to 200 more students in 19 more classrooms if voters approve the technology levy.

For Ben’s mom, the change that Ben’s iPad brings to him, her and the rest of their family was unexpected—but welcomed. It reassures her when she thinks about his future.

“He can now talk to his doctors in a way he never could before. He can say what he wants and needs,” she said. “I feel like if something happened, he could communicate by typing on a text pad in an emergency.”

It’s also helps her see more of her happy go lucky kid, the one she knew was there.

“It’s just opened up his world. He’s a different kid,” Emerson said. “He would just come home so miserable. And now, most of the time, he’s happy.”

Funding iPads for students who need them

Ben’s needs and the relief provided by the iPad are not unique to him. Across the school district, 250 students in 25 classrooms have iPads to help with their complex communication needs.

Staff in those classrooms are also provided iPads and training on how to use them with the appropriate software. The hardware, software and training are all funded by a voter-approved technology levy. The district’s ability to continue to provide technology access to all TPS students will be presented to voters in a levy on the February 2022 ballot.

Student use of iPads to assist specifically with communication needs started in 2018, after Traci West and the Student Services team proposed a plan dedicated to the needs of these students. West serves as the assistive technology facilitator for Student Services.
How did we share Ben’s story?

- Hard copy “Spotlight” newsletter, mailed to all mail stops in school district boundary
- District website
- District eNewsletter
- District social media

NEW WORLD OPENS FOR BEN: A piece of technology turned out to be the critical link connecting a Foss High School freshman to his classroom, his family – and his own ability to speak.

Ben has autism coupled with a speech disability, making it difficult to express himself verbally. This year, Ben started learning to share his feelings and speak with the help of an iPad.

Ben’s technology is made possible by a voter-approved technology levy. The school district’s ability to continue to provide technology access to him and all TPS students will be presented to voters in a levy on the Feb. 8 ballot.

Read Ben’s story: https://www.tacomaschools.org/.../ipad-unlocks-new-world...
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