



Marie Belle Vargas has made it her mission to level the playing field for the kids and families in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the nation. Regardless of their access to devices or internet at home, she aims to give her students the tools they need to thrive and succeed in a world of media and technology.

Now in her 10th year as media specialist at PS1X Courtlandt School in the South Bronx, Vargas has led a school-wide implementation of Common Sense Education's Digital Citizenship Curriculum. Vargas, with the support of her administration and fellow teachers, helped PS1X earn Common Sense Digital Citizenship Certification for the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years.

Why Digital Citizenship?

When asked what their students' biggest challenge is, Vargas and her colleague Anthony Nuñez, technology teacher at PS1X, don't hesitate to answer: the digital divide. For PS1X students and their families, the public library or school library are often the only places they have access to the internet. And without internet access at home, Vargas' students have fewer opportunities to regularly build important 21st-century skills.

"They can't practice how to be safe on the internet. How to be a good digital citizen. How to find and use the best resources," Vargas points out. And while some of the students at PS1X do have internet access through a parent's or sibling's cell phone, their parents often don't have the knowledge or confidence to guide their child's tech use.

This is why Vargas turned to Common Sense Education. In 2014, she was looking for resources to provide her students and their

families much-needed media-literacy and digital citizenship support. She recalls how she struggled to find age-appropriate materials and the time to gather the resources she needed to create an effective program. Then she attended an NYCDOE workshop offered by Tali Horowitz of Common Sense Education.

"I learned that Common Sense Education could provide me with everything I needed," Vargas said. "It's research-based. It has the vocabulary. It has the assessments. It has a component for families. It's very easy to use. And you cover all the areas at an age-appropriate level."

When Vargas brought the Common Sense Digital Citizenship Curriculum back to her colleagues and administration, they were all on board. Principal of PS1X Jorge Perdomo recognized how digital citizenship instruction would greatly benefit PS1X students.

Perdomo says, "With the amount of time spent online increasing, we know that online safety is a concern. And we know the internet plays an essential role in a child's life. So we feel that engaging students in appropriate conversations and lessons [about media use] can help them become more aware of the challenges and risks of being online."

But safety isn't the only benefit Perdomo sees in implementing a digital literacy and citizenship program. He also acknowledges the importance of helping his students build media-literacy and tech skills they can take with them as they move on to middle school and high school. These skills, he notes, are essential not only for the child's education but also their success in life.

STATISTICS

No. of Students: 686

Ethnicity of Study Body:

Latino: 74%

African-American: 23%

White: 2%

Asian-American/Pacific Islander: 0%

Economically Disadvantaged Students: 98%

English-Language Learners: 27%

To learn more about Common Sense Education, visit www.common sense.org/education.

Implementation

Starting in the 2015–2016 school year, Vargas worked collaboratively with the classroom teachers as well as the technology teacher, Anthony Nuñez, to implement the Common Sense Digital Citizenship Curriculum at PS1X. Vargas recognized that teachers agree on the importance of teaching digital citizenship “but are at a loss on how to do it.” To fill in the gaps, Vargas led professional development workshops for the PS1X teachers on the Common Sense lessons and resources.

Vargas and the grade-level teachers co-teach between five and six digital citizenship lessons in the library for students in grades 2 through 5. At the beginning of the year, students visit the library to learn research skills, so Vargas teaches lessons on information literacy, copyright, and internet safety. Next, she teaches digital footprints and, in the second term, cyberbullying and privacy.

In the technology classes throughout the year, Nuñez uses the interactive games, Digital Passport and Digital Compass, with his students. Vargas praises the games for being “highly engaging” and for “reinforcing the skills that are taught in the library.” Because PS1X is a “very data-driven” school, Vargas uses the student overview tab as a formative assessment tool so the administration can track students’ progress.

A key part of the program at PS1X is parent and community support. As Vargas and Nuñez explain, many of the PS1X parents are hungry for guidance on managing family media use. Vargas leads workshops for parents at the school, introducing them to Common Sense resources such as Common Sense Latino and the Common Sense Media ratings and reviews. She’s offered small parent discussion groups on topics such as cyberbullying, privacy, and digital footprints and distributes the Common Sense Family Media Agreement and Family Tip Sheets to all parents. Additionally, Vargas meets with the parent coordinator regularly to discuss parent concerns.

Impact

Vargas, Nuñez, and Principal Perdomo agree that the Common Sense lessons have had lasting impact on the students and families at PS1X.

Vargas and Nuñez also recount numerous stories in which students have connected the lessons learned from the digital citizenship curriculum to real-life situations.

In one story, Vargas describes how a group of second-graders had a collective “aha moment” after viewing the Common Sense video “My Online Neighborhood.” For very young students, it’s sometimes difficult to make the connection between online and real-life safety. Vargas recalls that her students were able to make that connection between their real world -- the South Bronx -- and the digital world. They recognized how the South Bronx has good parts and then parts they’re not supposed to go to, parts that aren’t safe -- and how on the internet, the digital world is the same.

“The kids started making connections right away,” says Vargas. “Like, OK, in the real world, I tell my mom where I go. I don’t go with a stranger. So then in the digital world, I have to do the same thing. I’m going to tell my mom where I’m going. And if I don’t feel safe, this is what I have to do. I will block it. Get out of it. And tell an adult right away.”

Nuñez and Vargas both recall when a student shared with the class how she was bullied while playing an online cell phone game. She told the class that she remembered what she’d learned from a Common Sense Education video and quickly blocked the bully, quit the game, and

told her mother. A friend of hers listening to her story realized that what he thought of as joking online might actually hurt someone’s feelings. Vargas explains, “Her story resonated with one of my students. He never thought that by making comments -- he said, ‘I thought I was just joking’ -- that he could hurt somebody. So when he realized that his friend was being hurt, it became a teachable moment for all of us.”

Principal Perdomo also points out how the digital citizenship program is helping PS1X students develop stronger leadership skills. He explains, “Our students love to share the learning and to express themselves. And I think Common Sense is really beginning to help students become more confident and empowered in the information that they access and how they use it.”

Though PS1X is only one of over 40 schools in a district serving close to 20,000 students, Marie Belle Vargas is committed to extending the digital citizenship program throughout the district. She’s in conversation with the nearby middle school about becoming Common Sense Digital Citizenship Certified and is planning to do extensive outreach to other schools throughout the South Bronx. Vargas also has been in talks with the district superintendent and has

hopes the South Bronx will pursue Common Sense District Digital Citizenship Certification in the future.

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**MARIE BELLE VARGAS,
MEDIA SPECIALIST AT PS1X**



“Our children have developed an understanding of their digital footprint and are more mindful of respecting others’ feelings and their creations. Also, our students’ families are using Common Sense Media tools to learn how to determine which media is appropriate for their children.”

**JORGE PERDOMO,
PRINCIPAL OF PS1X**

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