CORONA-NORCO: 'Digital badges' inspire students to learn

STEPHEN WALL/FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER
Dylan Palacpac, 15, looks at the digital badges he has earned Friday Oct. 4, at John F. Kennedy Middle College High School in Norco. The Corona-Norco Unified School District introduced the digital badging concept in March as part of its college and career-readiness initiative.

BY STEPHEN WALL | CORRESPONDENT | Published: October 11, 2013; 03:52 PM

Bryn Hellickson takes out his iPad Mini and shows off his high scores to his friends.

The 15-year-old isn't bragging about his video game numbers. He's displaying his academic achievements in a digital format.

The 11th grader has compiled a digital profile of his major accomplishments at John F. Kennedy Middle College High School.

The Norco school is on the cutting edge of developing new learners, pioneering a concept known as Digital Badges.

"Digital badging provides a powerful opportunity for us to motivate learners who otherwise may not be motivated by traditional report cards and transcripts," said JFK Principal April Moore.

The Corona-Norco Unified School District rolled out Digital Badges in March as part of its college and career-readiness initiative.

"Our district is dedicated to making sure you're not only eligible for college, but ready for success." Moore said.

Moore demonstrated the digital badging concept with a small group of students Friday, Oct. 4.

Digital badges have their origin in gaming. Unlike physical badges, digital badges can be showcased through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

"It's like a digital resume," said Kimberly Leigh, a math and renaissance teacher at JFK. "It shows how well-rounded you are as a student."

About two years ago, Corona-Norco Unified was looking into issuing physical passports to students for specific academic and behavioral accomplishments starting in fourth grade.

Around the same time, the district found out about grant funding that was available to help organizations get started with digital badging. Mozilla, a free software community known for producing the Firefox web browser, collaborated with the MacArthur Foundation and others to award the grants.

Though Corona-Norco's grant proposal was unsuccessful, Moore said the district was invited to a conference where they met movers and shakers in the digital badging world. Through that, the district got connected to a Chicago software developer that works with schools.

The district board of education in July 2012 approved $46,000 to launch the student digital badge portal through a contract with Forall Systems.

The program is password protected and linked to the district's student information system to automatically issue badges. In November, district administrators plan to go open source with their portal at a conference in San Jose, allowing other school districts to download the portal and issue badges to their students.

While individual classrooms and schools are offering digital badges, Moore said she has not heard of other school districts in California implementing the concept on the scale of Corona-Norco.

"I think we're definitely pioneers in the field," she said.

The district offers 12 digital badges. At the elementary level, students earn badges for attendance, behavior and work habits.

In middle school, they receive badges for meeting math standards, taking practice college preparation exams and developing career plans.

High school badges are awarded for fulfilling college-entrance requirements and scoring proficient or higher on the high school exam exit. They are also earned for a score of 1,500 or higher on the SAT or 21 or higher on the ACT test.

Students can choose to upload their badges using Mozilla's Open Badge Infrastructure, enabling others to view their accomplishments on social media. They must be at least 13 years old to make their information available publicly.

JFK students said digital badges give them an opportunity to show off their credentials to universities and prospective employers.

"It's definitely motivating because you are able to express what you have done and really showcase yourself in a good way," said Sunny Trivedi, 16.

In addition to the 12 badges demonstrating preparedness for post-secondary success, school sites are in the process of developing their own unique badges. Students are working with teachers and administrators to identify badges that their peers would want to earn. Possible examples include badges for community service and extracurricular activities, Moore said.

"I would couch it as personalized learning," said Kelly Bruce, the district's administrative director for curriculum and instruction. "We're taking advantage of the technology to allow students to have their own roadmap."

Moore said the district is also working with local businesses to develop a system to allow students to receive free gift cards, food discounts and other rewards for digital points earned.

"This is a good tool for a lot of students who might not go to college," said Andrew Brown, 16. "If they have all these badges, they can advertise to their employers and show they put a lot of hard work into their high school diploma."