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### EDUCATION

# Putting kids on the right Internet learning path

By **MARIA CALABRESE**, North Bay Nugget  
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Jan Reynolds, lead teacher for library at the Near North District School Board, and Rob Graham, an associate professor at Nipissing University's Schulich School of Education training future teachers, want parents and educators to embrace Internet research for children by using the board's Virtual Library. (MARIA CALABRESE The Nugget)

**NORTH BAY** - The boys made multi-coloured alien spaceships, giant bugs and believable heavy equipment. The girls built homes with flowers near the door.

They rifled through boxes of LEGO blocks at the Callander Public Library as it promotes Saturday Cybercamps for kids to link them to safe online information.

"There's so many databases, it's incredible," says library CEO Helen McDonnell as she clicks through kid-friendly links to teen health and wellness, looking at what different careers are like, encyclopedias and resources from a Canadian point of view.

Educators in North Bay want to take this online potential further and link students to each other.

"The greatest barrier is teachers and educators not being willing to open their minds to the possibilities," says Rob Graham, an assistant professor at the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University.

He's a specialist in technology enhanced learning and one of the first elementary teachers to use a Virtual Library created by the Near North District School Board more than a decade ago when he was teaching Grade 7 and 8 students at W.J. Fricker Senior Public School.

Graham says students are going to go online for research, so there's no reason to be afraid of the Internet or

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all the information out there for young minds to discover.

The Near North board created the Virtual Library to give elementary and high school students a series of steps to go through to conduct safe and relevant online research. For younger students, the first step is online encyclopedias – some free and others available by subscription paid by the province. The next steps are age-appropriate books, magazines, newspapers, Internet links to such services as National Film Board films or public health unit information, then government sites, atlases and maps.

Graham instructs his class of future teachers that telling curious kids to “just Google it” doesn't cut it, and that's why search engines are the last step for online research. Google isn't even one of the choices.

The problem with search engines, he says, is they give too much information, and much of it is inappropriate or questionable.

“The challenge today is to take this Virtual Library ... from just connecting kids to information and then connect them to other kids,” Graham says.

“A lot of the research shows we can learn a lot informally through these online communities of practice.”

This type of Virtual Library doesn't exist anywhere else in the province, and it's evolving to let students share opinions about books by recording audio clips, and only identify each other through icons like a duck or a bird.

Educators see the potential of having kids join in conversations about cyberbullying and other hot topics that affect them.

Not all teachers are using the Virtual Library, says Jan Reynolds, lead teacher for library at the Near North board.

They may not be motivated, or in some cases might have a slow Internet connection in their classroom, although that's changing, Reynolds says.

University students analyze websites to help add choices to the Virtual Library and make the board aware of links that aren't working, in exchange for access to some parts of the library that are otherwise only accessible to Near North staff and students.

Without the Virtual Library, teachers and parents can still limit what sites students are allowed to use, or create their own libraries with credible websites and links.

It doesn't replace books, the educators says, but there's no reason parents can't share a good website with their kids.

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