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21st Century Skills

## Focusing Web Searches for K-12 Students

By Bridget McCrea • 04/16/13

Today's K-12 students have a plethora of information at their fingertips—a phenomenon that presents a double-edged sword for educators who want to give pupils access to the information superhighway in a safe, age-appropriate manner. [Forsyth County Schools](#) of Cumming, GA, tries to strike that balance by using an educational search tool designed for schools.

Known as [netTrekker Search](#), the tool curates web resources and connects that information to leading resource collections. The learning resources are all reviewed and tagged by experienced educators to help teachers find the most relevant content for students. netTrekker Search is a subscription service, with the price based on the number of users.

Jill Hobson, Forsyth County Schools' director of instructional technology, said the district has been using the education-focused search tool since the early 2000s. In 2012, the district upgraded to a new version of netTrekker Search that allows users to sort and refine results based on academic or reading levels, access teacher-specific content (including standards, lesson plans, and instructional resources), and save, organize, and share digital resources.

According to Hobson, the district initially used the search engine to aid in its transition from print-based to digital curriculums. "We wanted to adopt the very best resources," said Hobson, "and ensure that our teachers didn't have to go out and hunt across the entire internet to find the information and support that they needed."

During the initial netTrekker adoption, Hobson said the tool stood out because it aligned to educational standards. At the time, she said, few if any educational search engines incorporated standards into their offerings. "In the early 2000s, we were in the process of moving to a new set of state performance standards," she recalled. "Teachers were just learning the standards and also being asked to teach to those standards and find appropriate resources to do that."

Forsyth County Schools also liked the fact that educators reviewed the search engine's resources. "We wanted a kid-friendly resource, not some robot with words incorporated into it," said Hobson. "We knew teachers would use and gravitate towards a resource that fellow educators had already looked at and approved."

### Joining the Search Party

Getting 39,000 students and roughly 3,000 educators to use the new search engine was a challenge for the district. Hobson said making the resource easily accessible was the first step, so it helped that the search engine is web-based and required no additional software or hardware.

When students launch their browsers, they are automatically directed to netTrekker "without having to do anything else," said Hobson. A link to the search engine is also bookmarked on the district's school websites and its virtual private platforms.

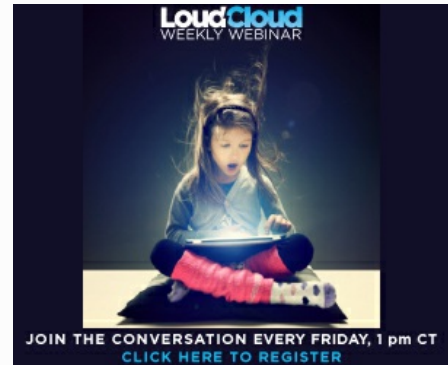
"We try to cover the bases by making the service available in various places," said Hobson, who added that her biggest challenge is getting students and parents to think past [Google](#) when searching the web. "Google has its place, but not necessarily in the K-12 learning environment."

With the specialized search engine, for example, users have fewer irrelevant or inappropriate results to wade through. Also, netTrekker offers K-12-focused information like images, timelines, author searches, and teacher resources—the latter of which includes a read-aloud function designed to help English language learners. After searching for a specific term or concept, for example, the search engine will "read aloud" any highlighted information. "This is a feature that you won't find in a free search engine," said Hobson.

### Age-Appropriate Search

Hobson said the district tweaked its appropriate use procedures for internet usage about three years after implementing netTrekker. At the elementary level, for example, students can only use a kid-friendly option like netTrekker. For middle schoolers, the district *recommends* using the educational search engine unless an adult is advising them to use an alternate choice.

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