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Contact:
Amber Taylor, 703-276-2772, ext. 17

As Schools Lose Relevancy,
Students Take Charge of Their Own Learning

Annual Survey Finds Students Moving Ahead with Learning on Their Own;
Offers Insights for Improving American Education with Emerging Technologies

Washington, D.C. – In the absence of a more relevant learning process in schools, our nation's students increasingly are taking their educational destiny into their own hands and adapting the various tools they use in their personal lives to meet their learning needs and prepare themselves for the future, according to the 2009 Speak Up survey of 300,000 students nationwide.

The 2009 Speak Up national findings provide compelling evidence that our nation's K–12 students increasingly are taking responsibility for their own learning, defining their own education path through alternative sources and feeling not just a right but a responsibility for creating personalized learning experiences.

"Students are no longer waiting for policy changes within their schools, or from Washington, D.C.," said Julie Evans, chief executive officer, Project Tomorrow. "Students want their voices heard by those making education policies, but we are now seeing them move beyond their attempts to share their needs with adults. They are taking the technology they have grown up with and using it to help them learn—inside and outside of the classroom."

This "free-agent learner" student profile accurately depicts the way many of today's students are approaching learning. For these students, the schoolhouse, the teacher and the textbook no longer have an exclusive monopoly on knowledge, content or even the education process. These students are leveraging a wide range of learning resources, tools, applications, outside experts and each other to create a personalized learning experience that may or may not include what is happening in the classroom.

The first report based on the 2009 Speak Up data, *Creating Our Future: Students Speak Up about their Vision for 21st Century Learning*, describes three essential elements of this emerging student vision for education:

- **Social-based learning** – students want to leverage emerging communications and collaboration tools to create and personalize networks of experts to inform their education process.
- **Un-tethered learning** – students envision technology-enabled learning experiences that transcend the classroom walls and are not limited by resource constraints, traditional funding streams, geography, community assets or even teacher knowledge or skills.

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- **Digitally rich learning** – students see the use of relevancy-based digital tools, content and resources as a key to driving learning productivity, not just about engaging students in learning.

"A growing chorus of students say they are required to step back in time when they enter the school building each morning, powering down the productivity, learning and connectedness tools they use outside of school and that many adults now take for granted," added Evans. "And this is despite overwhelming agreement among parents, teachers and principals that the effective implementation of technology in schools is crucial to student success."

Social-based learning
Students continue to use technology to communicate with each other and with their teachers. This year, 43 percent of high school students report using social networks to communicate and collaborate, but these networks continue largely to be blocked in schools. One-third of middle and high school students want their schools to provide tools they can use to communicate electronically with teachers.

Students' vision for this sort of social-based learning is not divorced from curriculum or content. When asked to describe what would be most helpful in learning math, 47 percent of middle school and 40 percent of high school students selected "discussing how to solve a problem with my classmates" and "helping other students with their math problems." And, students report using technology for both of these activities. For instance, among high school students, 24 percent used technology to tutor other students and 26 percent sought help from other students via social networks.

Un-tethered learning
Students see the Internet and the resources available to them in the world as a giant learning sandbox they can explore at their own pace and in their own time. In many communities, the students feel a strong need to access online resources due to the lack of resources in their own community or concerns about the quality or effectiveness of their teachers or textbooks. In that sense, un-tethered learning that leverages the best educational content and learning experiences wherever they may be in the world truly is the ultimate classroom for today's students.

All of these resources require access to technology, which is increasing prevalent among students—outside of school. Among high school students, 85 percent report having an iPod, 70 percent have a laptop or netbook and more than 30 percent have smart phones. For the first time since 2003, when asked to identify the major obstacle to prevent use of technology in school, students in grades 6–12 said "I cannot use my own cell phone, smart phone or Mp3 player in school." Previously, the top response was "school filters and firewalls."

Parents and teachers continue to see the value of mobile devices in student learning, particularly their potential for engaging students in learning and improving communications. Only 11 percent of teachers and 16 percent of parents dismiss mobile devices as having no positive impact on learning. And, teachers' biggest concerns about mobile devices being used in schools are valid: 67 percent think students will be distracted and more than half are concerned that not all students will have access.

Digitally rich learning
Today's students are totally immersed in the sophisticated use of digital media, tools and content in most aspects of their lives. Being technology-enabled, these resources and applications are highly engaging for the students, but they also provide the students with new ways to approach self-directed learning and educational productivity.

When looking at how students use digital media tools and content in and out of school, it is clear that students are doing more creation and manipulation of digital media in their personal lives. This process

of creating content from other content is a key characteristic of the "free-agent learner" who relishes the learning opportunities presented through interactive experiences. In a change from traditional education, the process of creation is as important and sometimes more important than the end result of the activity in a digitally rich learning environment.

For schoolwork, high school students use digital tools, content and resources to:
- complete writing assignments (79%);
- create slideshows, videos and Web pages (66%);
- take tests online (34%); and
- use online textbooks (33%).

But outside of school, middle school students use digital media to:
- upload/download videos, podcasts or photos (65%);
- participate in online games (51%);
- create or modify digital media (40%);
- mashup (25%); and
- contribute to a blog (20%).

About Speak Up
Speak Up is a national initiative of Project Tomorrow, the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring today's students are well prepared to be tomorrow's innovators, leaders and engaged citizens. Since fall 2003, the annual Speak Up National Research Project has collected and reported on the views of more than 1.85 million K–12 students, teachers, administrators and parents representing more than 23,000 schools in all 50 states. The Speak Up data represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder input on education, technology, 21st-century skills, schools of the future and science and math instruction. Education, business and policy leaders report using the data regularly to inform federal, state and local education programs.

In fall 2009, Project Tomorrow surveyed 299,677 K–12 students, 26,312 parents, 38,642 teachers, 1,987 preservice teachers and 3,947 administrators representing 5,757 schools and 1,215 districts including public (97 percent) and private (3 percent) schools. Schools were located in urban (38 percent), suburban (31 percent) and rural (32 percent) communities. More than one-half of the schools were Title I-eligible (an indicator of student population poverty) and 42 percent of the participating schools had more than 50 percent minority population attending.

The Speak Up 2009 K–12 audience-specific surveys were administered online between Oct. 18, 2009, and Dec 18, 2009. The surveys included foundation questions about technology use, 21st- century skills and schools of the future, as well as emerging technologies (online learning, mobile devices and digital content), math instruction and STEM career exploration, and the challenges faced by teachers and administrators.

Speak Up 2009 is supported by many of our nation's most innovative companies including Blackboard, Inc., CDW-G, K12, Inc., Schoolwires, SMART Technologies and Wimba. A network of more than 75 of the nation's leading education associations and organizations including iNACOL, the National School Boards Association, State Education Technology Directors Association and the Southern Region Education Board assist Project Tomorrow by providing input for survey questions and outreach to schools nationwide.

For more information, visit www.tomorrow.org.