

EP 22 Cell Phone Use in Schools

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:11]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Consultant at OPC.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:20]:

And my name is Suzy Lee Fernandez, Director of Professional Learning and Engagement.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:25]:

As co hosts, we will engage educational leaders and authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the diverse journeys and stories of educators and leaders from across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:42]:

We hope that Leadership Talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy and valuable perspectives and strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:54]:

Happy to be back for another episode today and we're really going to be digging into a very relevant topic for I know all of our members and listeners out there. We're going to be talking about cell phone use or device use in classrooms in schools across Ontario. So this is a very, I think, timely conversation to be having. And we're really happy to be welcoming today Josh Windsor, who is a principal with the Waterloo District School Board, and Dr. Alison Young, who is a family physician and who has a perspective to share regarding some of the implications of overuse of devices and perhaps social media and other related issues to students having access to their devices at all times and in particular during the school day. So I'm really excited to welcome you both here and dive into this conversation because it's very relevant and timely, I think. So before we dive into that, maybe Josh, I could get you to introduce yourself and talk a little bit about your role and what brought you to this conversation today.

Josh Windsor [00:02:02]:

Yeah, sure. Thank you very much. My name is Josh Windsor and I am a principal. I've been a principal for approximately six years at Grand River Collegiate which is in Kitchener and we have about 1500 students here. One of the key reasons that I started to think about cell phone

use and social media use in schools just was as a result of some of the information that we were getting back from teachers with regards to students time on task and the amount of disruption and interruption that cell phones and social media use in the classroom were having and the impact that it had on learning. So we started to do some investigation here at the school and that's when Alison and I reconnected. So Alison was a student in a school where I was a teacher quite a few years ago and we touched base on some things because Alison has some great insights and has a lot of research basis, from her own practice, but also from the research that she's done on her own with regards to cell phone use and media use with teenagers.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:07]:

And, Alison, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about why you're interested in this topic?

Alison Young [00:03:13]:

Yeah. So I've been practicing in Kitchener for about a decade now. I got into this space because over the time that I've been practicing, I've just been noticing a change in the way that kids are coming in for mental health visits. There's been more visits, more complex presentations, more admissions to hospital. All these things have kind of been happening over the decade, and there's been this marked change, more complexity in the treatments that they've required, and they really just haven't been getting better the way that they once did. And when I started to dig a little deeper with the kids and ask them about, you know, their hobbies and what they enjoy doing, I found myself getting the same answer over and over again, where they would just tell me, "not much". They go on their phone or they go on YouTube. And so I was, you know, I'm like, there must be something to this.

Alison Young [00:04:04]:

And when I dove into the research, it just became so clear that this is underlying so much of what we're seeing in the community. And I think there's generally a lack of knowledge on it. I didn't graduate all that long ago, and we didn't learn about any of this in my medical training. So I just felt like I needed to speak out and try to touch parents and educate that way, because I think knowledge is power. And then I'm also married to a high school teacher, and so I kind of got connected with different principals, including Josh, in the community. And I've been going out and giving educational talks, both teachers and parents, about the topic.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:04:43]:

Josh, maybe you could just explain for us. I know you mentioned that, you know, you were hearing from your teachers some challenges around time on task and those kinds of things. So maybe can you elaborate a little bit on that? What kinds of things were teachers coming to you with?

Josh Windsor [00:04:59]:

Yeah, sure. I mean, part of the daily activity in a high school, and if most of us have been to a high school at some point in time in our lives, so we can remember, every once in a while there's an office visit. And often that has to do with behavior and, or things that are happening in

the school that students partake in that are undesirable. So a lot of the initial information came from the number of students that were getting sent down to see vice principals with regards to behavior around cell phone use. And as we started to explore some of those conversations with teachers, we were getting more and more information about how it was really impacting the classroom. So early last spring, I would say just after March break, we put out a survey to our staff because we were thinking about implementing a policy here with regards to restricting cell phone use in the classroom, which we knew was going to be a really difficult process to try to retrain students and making sure that we're communicating with families. So some of that survey information that came out from our staff kind of had to do with learning.

Josh Windsor [00:06:04]:

So when we had about 80 teachers respond—I have about 90—the question was, how does having a cell phone affect your student learning? And choose the best answer. 82% said it was negative, and 16.5% said positive and negative. And the only other response was I don't know. So that was overwhelming to us that there was an impact on student learning in the classroom and that teachers were really struggling with what to do with regards to the classroom. We also asked a question about impact of physical and mental health, and we had 70, almost 80% of teachers saying that it was negative and another 12% saying positive and negative, and then another 12% or so saying, "don't know". And so there was really, in any of the data that we collected, just from teachers, through what I would say is not a scientific survey. But before I started going down the road of looking for a policy, I wanted to make sure our staff were on board. And we really had almost full buy-in to committing to some action in the classroom that was supported by administration in order to make sure that we're trying to help students regulate when we know that they're having difficulty regulating on their own.

Josh Windsor [00:07:19]:

So that's kind of where we started.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:07:21]:

Alison, I know Josh is sharing that, you know, teachers believe there's a relationship between cell phone or social media use and some of the mental health challenges. And you mentioned this already. Outside of your own practice and what you're seeing there, you know, being presented from your own patients. I know you've done some research on this as well. So what is your research telling you about the connection there?

Alison Young [00:07:43]:

What we're seeing in terms of trends over the past decade, and a bit so around 2010, 2012, is when we see this real elbow on the graphs going up in terms of rates of depression, self harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts, eating disorders, loneliness, all these things are getting worse for adolescents. And there's that correlation between around that same time is when smartphone use and social media use began to boom. And you were kind of in the minority if you weren't partaking in it. So there is that correlation there. And I think it's such a nuanced topic and there's so many things that are happening, but I think it really ties into these two sort of umbrella ideas of the time that the kids are spending on these platforms as well as the content

that they're seeing. So I mean, if you think about the time, kids are spending a median of four hours a day just on social media alone, nine and a half hours a day on screens that are not related to academics. So in that time, I mean, that's replacing real world relationships, which is where we learn our social skills and we learn how to regulate emotions. It's replacing our physical activity and time outdoors, which is so important for mental health, as is the case for over 50% of teens, it's impacting their sleep, that time is eating into their sleep.

Alison Young [00:09:13]:

And lots of educators talk about how the kids come half asleep to school and just decreasing their motivation to do other things. And then there's all the harmful content in itself that can impact their mental health. You know, the bullying, the comparison culture, the addictive algorithms and how those can get so dark, the pornography that they're being exposed to. So it's, it's so multifaceted and I think there's so much that even the research hasn't even touched on, but there's really no evidence to say that it's good for mental health. So I think that's really important to pay attention to as well.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:09:48]:

You know, I think in a minute we can talk a little bit about the recent ministry announcement about, you know, enhanced restrictions on cell phone use in schools starting next year. But I wonder before we do that, if we could talk a little bit about, you know, the arguments that, you know, use of technology in classrooms helps prepare students for the real world, the world of work, even where technology is going to be used in the workplace. And so, you know, it's probably incumbent upon us as educators to get them ready for that. So do you see any benefits to having access to technology, especially hand handheld technology? Maybe we'll start with Josh and get your perspective on that.

Josh Windsor [00:10:31]:

I think there is a place in the classroom for technology. Now where our school board is a one to one technology school board, so we give every grade nine student a Chromebook when they come into the classroom starting in September. And that's not handheld technology, but it is a response from our school board to suggest that we know that technology is something that students need to learn to use. And I would say as we start to look at what's available commercially. So if we're talking about handheld technology, which is really smartphones, there is innovation that occurs daily. And I do believe students need to have access to that, which is why our policy here is a real flexible policy where we allow teachers in the classroom to make those decisions. And so our support from the perspective of helping with behavior and regulation just comes down to when a student is not been given permission to use the technology that they have access to in order to do schoolwork, then they would come down to the office, visit a vice principal, have a conversation. And so we have steps that we put in place to help students regulate if they're not able to do that on their own.

Josh Windsor [00:11:47]:

And I would say that has worked really well for us. We've continued to extract data from teachers. They're feeling supported, they're feeling like they can manage what's going on in the

classroom. And of course, each teacher is on the continuum of flexibility to rigidity, depending on what they're doing. It could be daily, but it could also be just generally how they feel about the use of technology in the classroom. And that does depend on the type of class they're teaching also. Right. So there are times when they will allow students to use the technology, and there are other times where they won't.

Josh Windsor [00:12:20]:

And some teachers will allow it more often than others. And students need to learn to deal with that, the flexibility of those rules as well, because as they get out into the workforce, there are going to be places where the use of their phone is going to be acceptable, and there are going to be other workplaces where it's not. And so they will need to navigate those issues and solve those problems as they move through kind of the rest of their life. So I think, in general, yes, we need to embrace technology and we need to help students use it, but we also need to help them regulate when it's not being used for the purposes of education while they're in the classroom.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:13:00]:

And, Alison, I'm sure I'm certainly not a doctor or a researcher in this area, but I'm not sure what kind of clinical diagnoses might go along with this thing, the use of technology, et cetera. But I'm sure that we could consider practically at least that many students are sort of addicted to the use of social media or handheld technology. So if we are going to move towards greater restrictions and trying to help them to moderate their use of technology during the school day, are they going to need some clinical support in some cases for this kind of a change?

Alison Young [00:13:40]:

Yeah. I think this is a really important question, and it's kind of an evolving one. Right. Because if you think about somebody who has an addiction to alcohol, like, there are well known established resources and programs that work for that. And when you think about technology and smartphone addiction, number one, it's something that is very hard to completely abstain from, as, you know, we're talking about here. Like, you kind of need technology in your life. You can't just completely abstain the way you would from something like alcohol. And at the same time, they need to have those boundaries set in place.

Alison Young [00:14:19]:

So I think the answer is yes. There's a continuum of addiction, too, right? Like, not every child. I would say just like the same as you and I, we might habitually pick up our phone. It's a bad habit, but we're not addicted to it. It's not interfering with our ability to work or function day to day. But those kids that truly are addicted, you know, there's going to have to be a lot of education that goes into educating their parents and also seeking professional help. That being said, there's not a whole lot of places that are equipped to necessarily counsel around this specific kind of addiction.

Alison Young [00:15:00]:

It's. It's quite nuanced. So I think that that's something that needs to come and be developed. But most of the cases, I would say even kids who are quite addicted to this technology, I mean,

kids are so versatile and so adaptable, and so it may be a rough couple of weeks for them where you might see some pushback and some behavior increases and things like that, but they really do adapt. And I think that's the key message is they will be fine. It's just they're going to take a different amount of time to get there, depending on the kid and the level of addiction.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:15:35]:

So let me ask you a direct question then about, you know, the recent announcement by the ministry to move towards greater restrictions. Do you think schools are well prepared to sort of handle student reaction to these new expectations?

Alison Young [00:15:51]:

I think if we look at places where it's been done, like other places, other countries, if you look at the reports from that, the outcomes are overwhelmingly positive. And I think there is probably a lot of anxiety around what's going to happen and how kids are going to handle it, but I think overall it's a lot less pushback than you would actually realize or think of. Well, and Josh could speak to how his kids reacted, but there was another school in our region that implemented it a couple of years ago before anybody else had had. And the feedback from there was amazing. Like, the principal told me she was expecting to have 400 cell phones in her office every day, and the most they ever had was 10. So I think if you do it in a way where the teachers are educated, you've talked about how to troubleshoot and what to expect, and you've sent something home to parents, I think that you'll be fine, truthfully.

Alison Young [00:16:51]:

But Josh could probably comment more.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:16:54]:

Yeah, Josh, maybe we could get you to weigh in on what you anticipate or what you've already experienced in terms of student reaction. But I wouldn't mind hearing how your parents and caregivers have reacted to this as well.

Josh Windsor [00:17:06]:

I expected to have some negative contacts with parents just with regards to the policy that we implemented. We sent out a message late August just to say, this is going to be a change here at our school, and this is what the policy is. I expected some pushback. I got zero pushback. I had one phone call from a parent whose child uses their smartphone in order to regulate their blood because they're diabetic, their blood sugar levels. And so we had a very quick conversation about that. I said I'd reach out to teachers and let them know that that would be why the student was accessing the cell phone and if they had any concerns that they should maybe speak to us and we could talk to the parent about whether or not there are other things being done during that time where the student is regulating their blood pressure.

Josh Windsor [00:17:55]:

But that was the only phone call I received, and otherwise the response has been overwhelming. We run a grade nine parent night during the first few weeks of school, and we

actually, we kind of run a little bit of a boot camp where we're explaining high school to our grade nine parents. We get about 200 to 300 people at that. And Alison was actually a guest speaker during that evening. And the overwhelming positive response from parents that we received with regards to Alison's talk was, "thank you so much. My kid keeps telling me everybody's doing this, and I'm not sure how to respond."

Josh Windsor [00:18:35]:

"I don't know how to say no." And this was really helpful to us because it kind of gives us the ammunition to speak to our adolescents and say, "listen, this isn't necessarily good for you, and just because everybody else is doing it doesn't mean you should." And so parents have really been not understanding what social media and cell phone use is doing to their child. And they're having a real difficult time having those conversations. But with people like Alison speaking out and, you know, school administration making sure that we're being supportive, we become a partnership then with students and I think with students, parents and our community to make sure that we're helping students understand what's positive use and what isn't. And I think that's one of the key issues.

Josh Windsor [00:19:26]:

The announcement from the Minister of Education, I think was, I mean, in my perspective, welcome. Because what it allows us to do is then have that conversation using kind of that third party response like this is coming directly from the Minister of Education, this is the direction from our ministry. And so it allows me not to be as an administrator, it allows me not to be kind of out on an island. And even though I'm willing to stand out and say, no, we're doing this anyway, it does provide us with that support kind of from those different levels of government in our public education system to make sure that our parents are recognizing and understanding that we're following the process that we're supposed to follow, but also that we're doing it because we care about their children.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:14]:

And Alison, I know that's the Ministry of Education, which maybe doesn't directly influence your profession, but do you see this announcement as helpful to the work you're doing as well?

Alison Young [00:20:25]:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think in general this, this topic is kind of out there right now and it's kind of the buzzword, I think, because I have this Instagram account that I kind of speak out on different things. And there was a lot of chatter when that announcement came out, both from parents and educators as well. And I think, you know, overwhelmingly, I think parents are in favor of it. I think, think sometimes there's this fear that parents are going to really be upset, but I think overwhelmingly they're supportive. And from the teacher's perspective, I think the announcement is good because hopefully it can, like Josh says, give schools that ammunition to really just do it now; we don't have a choice, but I think how you implement it is going to be important. But teachers are concerned, understandably, that it's going to completely fall on their shoulders.

Alison Young [00:21:18]:

And so I think some thought needs to go into that just from a logistical standpoint of how to make it easier for the teachers to actually enforce the policies.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:21:30]:

So listen, as we kind of move towards the close of our conversation here, I'm just maybe going to ask each of you this question. You know, if there's one thing that you could suggest or leave our listeners with as school leaders in terms of how to manage or navigate through this as these changes come into place. What might that be? And maybe we'll start with you, Josh.

Josh Windsor [00:21:53]:

Sure. I guess what I would say to anybody that's looking to support students around self regulation with regards to technology use, it would be to make sure that you are looking at things from a trauma informed perspective, that the consequences that you implement for, you know, inappropriate use of technology are not punitive and that you're looking at it from the perspective of trying to shift behavior as opposed to anything carceral. Right. And I, and I think that's what we've really tried to do here is we're not, we're not suspending kids or sending them home for use of technology. We're really looking at it from a learning perspective. So how do we educate the student? How do we provide them with additional information so that they recognize and understand that we're trying to be supportive? And then the other part of that is to make sure that you're working with families and helping families recognize that were both partners in kind of this attempt to try to help their student become good community members and be successful in the goals that they've set for themselves. So that's what I would suggest.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:23:05]:

And how about from your perspective, Alison?

Alison Young [00:23:07]:

Yeah, I was going to say the exact same thing about the non punitive approach. I think in my talks I try to let everybody know that there's this idea that kids should be able to regulate, they should be able to just put the phone down. I think it's really important to understand that a lot of this is not, it's, it's not their fault, none of it is their fault. They are in a, in a losing battle in, in terms of the tech companies doing everything that they can to make their platforms as addictive as possible and hold their attention for as long as possible and their brains, as you know, are not fully developed in terms of being able to have that insight and judgment around regulating themselves. So I think the non punitive approach is very important. And the other thing that I would say, I mean this is just my opinion and I'm not saying this is how it should be because I don't work in education and I don't know all the nuances in terms of using technology within the schools, but I do feel like a phone away all day approach is I think, think easier for the kids and probably easier for the teachers in terms of enforcement just not allowing kids to have the phones on breaks because I think the longer we know just with the dopamine and everything like that, the longer that they have away from it, the easier it is to actually forget about it and not feel that impulse to pick it up. So if you're looking at like away from the beginning of the end to the end of the day versus is having it in between classes, I think in an ideal world away all day

would be the way to go from sort of that addiction perspective. But again, the education piece might change that.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:24:53]:

Well, listen, I want to thank you both for taking the time to speak with us today. I think you've given us lots to consider, some really well-informed perspectives on what this means for schools and for students. And I know that the longer we have to live with these devices, I think that the evidence will continue to mount about the potential negative impacts of sort of being connected to social media for extended periods of time. So I really appreciate you both being with us today and for sharing your perspectives. Thank you very much.

Alison Young [00:25:29]:

Thanks for having us.

Josh Windsor [00:25:31]:

Thank you.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:19:10]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:19:22]:

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