

Out of sight, out of mind?

by BROCK WEIR

I don't know about the rest of you, but I get a rude awakening just about every Sunday morning.

Despite my best efforts, and valiant attempts to stop and find alternatives, I'm in the terrible habit of charging my phone overnight on the bedside table. It's a practical location, sure, but leaving it there to do its thing is not only habit forming in and of itself, but it also leads to other habits. For example, it sometimes seems like a wasted morning if I don't solve the daily Wordle puzzle before getting out of bed to truly start the day, but, at the same time, it's made getting up and at 'em as soon as possible every day more and more of a chore. Completely my fault.

And yet, just about every Sunday morning, comes an on-screen notification on just how much of my time was spent looking at the device over the previous seven days and the percentage change from week to week.

It's informative, I'll grant them that, but it can also feel a little judgemental when the number ticks up, particularly if one already knows not-so-deep down one's usage is up.

If you'd told me when I got my first mobile phone back in my high school days that this would ever be a worry, it would have been laughable. The first mobile phone I ever encountered was not, as is the case of many of my generation, seeing Mark-Paul Gosselaar's Zack Morris in *Saved By The Bell* talk into his oversized, hulking device. Instead, it was a groovy little number my grandfather had installed in his car, which gave him to my young eyes a sort of super-villain mystique. But it was a good decade before I got my own, and even then it was only secured by my mother after a spate of threats were made to my school. Given its intended use, I thankfully had little reason to use it, but it was nice to have just in case.

Now, not having a connection like that readily available at all times, is almost unthinkable. Yet, I'm interested to see how the Provincial Government's Sunday announcement of a crackdown on cell phone use in Ontario schools will go over and evolve before its targeted implementation in the fall.

'We have heard loud and clear from parents and teachers alike that cellphones in classrooms are distracting our kids from learning,' said Minister of Education Stephen Lecce. 'Our government is introducing the toughest policy in Canada to tackle the issue by cracking down on cellphone usage during class time, as well as banning vaping in all schools. When it comes to cellphones, our policy is 'out of sight and out of mind,' as we get students back to the basics of restoring focus, safety and common sense back in Ontario schools.'

Should the new rules come into force as written, students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 will be 'required to keep phones on silent and out of sight for the entire school day, unless explicitly permitted by an educator.' Further, social media websites will be 'removed' from all school networks and devices and, if that wasn't enough, report cards this fall will include remarks from teachers on 'student's distraction levels in class.'

Older students 'those in Grades 7 to 12' will have a little bit more leeway with cellphones being permitted during class time only with the explicit direction from the teacher or educator.

'At a time when young people are facing so many distractions, mental health pressures, and even potential dangers, such as addictions, cyberbullying and online predators, we are taking measures to protect students by cracking down on vaping and other addictive substances, removing social media from school networks and devices, and increasing student mental health supports,' said Burlington MPP Natalie Pierre, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education in a statement. 'Students deserve positive and distraction-free schools that promote positive mental health and allow for uninterrupted learning.'

One can't argue with the sentiments, but I feel a missing piece of this puzzle is just exactly what kind of role parents and parenting will play in this. After all, in most cases, the phones and devices provided to students are done so within the household, as is the amount of data they are able to use, and, when push comes to shove, the content they're able to consume.

I also question whether the principle of 'out of sight out of mind' will hold water in this case.

The very absence of a device could, in my view, prove an even greater distraction and make 'out of sight out of mind' simply wishful thinking.

In March, for instance, the Peel District School Board, Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic School Board, and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, joined together to begin legal action against the owners of such popular platforms as Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, and TikTok for 'disrupting student learning and the education system' and calling for the tech giants to provide resources to the Boards to address mental health costs and costs related to 'redesigning products to keep students safe.'

'The lawsuit claims that social media products, negligently designed for compulsive use, have rewired the way children think, behave, and learn, leaving educators and schools to manage the fallout,' the plaintiffs said in a statement. 'Students are experiencing an attention, learning, and mental health crisis because of prolific and compulsive use of social media products. The fallout of compulsive use of social media amongst students is causing massive strains on the four school boards' finite resources, including additional needs for in-school mental health programming and personnel, increased IT costs, and additional administrative resources.'

Added Brendan Browne, Director of Education for the Toronto Catholic District School Board: 'Fostering a nurturing environment of learning is critical to student success and stands at the heart of our educational mission. Yet, the intricately crafted and inherently addictive nature of social media platforms can hamper a students' capacity to absorb knowledge. Social media has an undeniable toll on student mental health which cannot be overlooked. In the absence of effective measures from the architects of these digital platforms, our educators find themselves increasingly involved in mitigating social media-induced matters, diverting precious time away from academic instruction.'

Social media has indeed had an 'undeniable toll' on student mental health and, I would argue, mental health for people in just about every demographic, but pressing measures from the aforementioned digital 'architects' would go further than an outright ban. Further, it shouldn't be forgotten, that as harmful as these platforms are, students and people of all ages might be using them to seek out those individuals and resources that offer coping mechanisms and other methods to deal with many of the listed problems 'and apps that offer music for concentration and study, that help comfort and calm the individual, and expand educational horizons.

The upcoming rules are well-intentioned, well-reasoned and practical 'but if these platforms have 'rewired' the way youth think and behave, I certainly hope going in this direction doesn't exacerbate an existing issue, or create an entirely new set of challenges.