



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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To: Westport Board of Education Members
From: Thomas Scarice, Superintendent of Schools
Re: Cell Phone/Wearable Technology Recommendation
Date: June 3, 2024

For decades schools have used technology to enhance the teaching and learning process. The increased use of media and machines in the classroom, and the earliest versions of modern technology, can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. These early tools were exclusively driven by the purpose of improving teaching and learning.

With the explosion of new technologies at the beginning of the 21st Century, more specifically, personal technologies (i.e. smartphones, wearable devices, etc.), the purpose of these machines began to blur. Devices with the potential to significantly add to the learning experience now serve a myriad of individual purposes well beyond the classroom.

Unlike their nascent predecessors, these new devices serve personal functions that distract individuals from the core purpose of learning in the classroom. Additionally, these new machines, intentionally engineered to elicit addictive responses (i.e. dopaminergic), are prone to negatively impact the mental health of users. Some studies estimate that teens spend over 8 hours each day on their smartphone. This was not an issue a generation ago.

A growing body of research continues to point towards a direct correlation between increased smartphone/social media use, and increases in students' inability to maintain attention and focus, and increased levels of anxiety, depression and lower psychological well-being. In fact, recent literature makes a case for not only correlation, but causation.

As this problem has recently emerged over the past 15 or so years, it is fair to maintain that our current understanding is incomplete, and more research is needed before definitive policy decisions are made. Furthermore, a case can be made that there are operational challenges (e.g. how to enforce a "phone free" school environment, etc.) and necessary systems in our schools (e.g. accessing daily schedules, Google Classroom, Schoology, etc.) that rely on student access to smartphones and wearable technology, so changes in policy will inevitably fail.

I can explain these lines of thought, but I cannot justify them.

If there was a collective will that a "phone free" school environment was the ideal, and a well-being necessity, I am confident that the school community would solve each and every one of these challenges, and identify new tools and methods to replace our reliance on current technologies.

How Are School Changes Made in Policy and Regulations?

Policy

According to BOE Bylaw [#9311](#) the Board of Education acts through establishment of school policies. The Board of Education is statutorily bound to adopt formal policy that governs the entire system. The Board's policies and bylaws can be found in the Board's [manual](#). These policies are intended to guide the discretionary action of the administration and staff.

Regulations

Administrative regulations list the requirements to be met by staff and students in executing Board policies in the day-to-day conduct of school activities. In my capacity as Superintendent of the Westport Public Schools, the Board of Education delegates the authority to develop regulations to the administration.

Board policy can, and does, influence the formulation of regulations. For example, within the parameters of Board policy, changes to the rules governing student personal technology use were instituted by the administration at the start of the 2022-2023 school year.

- All personal technology (smartphones and wearable technology) was banned at the elementary level.
- Middle school students were required to put all smartphones and wearable technology in their lockers or backpack for the entire school day.

- High school students were required to put personal technology devices in wall mounted smartphone holders to keep them off limits during instruction.

Although the administration can technically make immediate changes (e.g. an outright ban of all smartphones and wearable technology in all schools) to the 2022-2023 regulations above for the start of the 2024-2025 school year, any such administrative regulation changes can be overwritten by the Board of Education through the establishment of new policy.

Given the wide interest across the school community (i.e. faculty, parents, students, BOE members, etc.) on the topic of smartphones and wearable technology, the relatively recent rise in awareness of this topic, and the range of polarizing opinions, I will make an unequivocal recommendation in this correspondence, but I will withhold any precise implementation plan until I determine there is sound consensus (not necessarily unanimity) across the community supporting the recommendation. Otherwise, if not broadly supported, my recommendation could serve as a “false start” and be overwritten by the Board through a policy change.

Recommendation

I unequivocally recommend that the Westport Public Schools establish completely “phone free” environments for students in all schools (K-12), prohibiting access to personal smartphones and all wearable technology, by employing tools and/or methods that do not require faculty and staff to be responsible for the primary enforcement of these restrictions.

Rationale

There are a number of reasons for this recommendation, including the list below.

I have found notable conclusions drawn from the literature on this topic, yet given that this phenomenon is young and evolving, there is a limited pool of peer reviewed and empirical research. Again, it is fair to maintain that our current understanding of the research is incomplete, and more research is needed.

That said, the intentional engineering of modern technology for addiction, the emerging overall evidence (i.e. mental health, distraction, etc.), and the current experience and anecdotes in our system point towards a compelling case for the value of entirely “phone free” schools.

On the contrary, I struggle to make as strong a case for the status quo (i.e. allowing smartphones and wearable technology to be brought into our middle schools while relying on faculty/administrative enforcement, and allowing unfettered use at the high school level in all non-instructional times).

The reasons for this recommendation are as follows, many of which were uncovered in this recent body of literature:

- **Addiction:**
 - Smartphones and social media are engineered to elicit an addictive/dopaminergic brain response. Most dopamine triggering activities are highly regulated (e.g. gambling, alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs, etc.) and prohibited for young children and teens. I suspect that if this discussion were about a relatively new substance/activity, and not smartphones, with the same deleterious effect, there would be a robust public health conversation informing decisions and policies.
- **Distraction/Focus:**
 - The presence of smartphones encourages multitasking, which is detrimental to focus, deep learning and information retention.
- **Mental Health/Psychological Well-Being:**
 - Evidence suggests that there are adverse effects with excessive digital consumption, including increased anxiety and depression, which are exacerbated by social media platforms contributing to cyberbullying, social comparison, and negative body image. This is particularly true for those youth susceptible to mental health and psychological well-being issues.
- **Bullying/Cyberbullying:**
 - Evidence suggests that smartphone bans are linked to decreases in bullying incidents by reducing opportunities for cyberbullying during the school day.
- **Improved Academic Performance:**
 - A number of studies have shown that schools implementing “phone free” approaches have reported improvements in standardized test scores and overall academic achievement.
- **Enhanced Peer Interactions:**
 - Studies report that schools experience increased peer interactions during breaks, lunchtime, and free time, as

students are less reliant on virtual communication and more inclined to engage in increased face to face interactions with their peers.

- Other Reasons

- Once Changed, Never Going Back
 - I am unaware of any district who has implemented a completely “phone free” school environment and reversed its decision to return to smartphone access for students.
- Student Discipline:
 - A preponderance of student discipline matters in our secondary schools involve the use of a smartphone or social media.
- Teacher Enforcement is Unsustainable:
 - Our current model relies heavily on teacher enforcement of the rules and regulations. As a parent of teenage children, I personally confront the screen time challenge and find it exhausting with three kids who each have a range of addiction to their devices, like most kids. I find this approach of teacher enforcement unsustainable.
- No Harm Done:
 - There is no potential for harm to be done if smartphones and wearable technology are banned, but evidence suggests that there is potential harm if we do not.
- Mere Problems to Solve:
 - Again, if there was a collective will that a “phone free” school environment was the ideal, and a well-being necessity, I am confident that the school community would solve each and every one of the operational challenges, and identify new tools and methods to replace our reliance on current technologies.

Other Considerations

Of course, there are many considerations to take into account before an implementation plan is executed. In fact, many of these considerations may lead to greater consensus once addressed.

- Exceptions

- Without question, there will need to be exceptions. Some smartphone technologies are life saving. For example, there are over 1,000 diabetes apps alone. These are case by case matters and certain technology tools will be needed in these cases. Additionally, there are life changing technology tools for students with disabilities. There are many tools that do not require a smartphone, but unquestionably, there will be exceptions for students with medical conditions or disabilities.

- BYOD (Bring Your Own Device)

- Students may bring their own device to school to use in instructional settings. As students use these devices, the district cannot regulate student activity on their personal devices that use cell signals. However, our technology department can, and does, regulate and block access to websites, apps, etc. when students are accessing the internet through our network.

- Student/Parent Communication

- I am guilty of communicating with my own high school children during the school day through text messages. It will be important for the district to identify alternative methods of communication during the day that do not rely on smartphones. These tools exist. It will be a matter of finding the most effective if there is the collective will.

- Student/Coach/Advisor Communication

- I understand that athletic coaches and extracurricular advisors communicate with students using personal devices. This practice warrants an entirely separate discussion and that will happen prior to the start of the 2024-2025 school year. That said, there are tools and platforms that districts use to facilitate student/coach/advisor communication that do not require the use of a smartphone.

- “Runway” for Upperclassmen

- There is a great opportunity to discuss the value and possibilities of a different level of accountability for upperclassmen (i.e. high school juniors and seniors). This could be a vexing management challenge, yet it is worth considering as these cohorts will be exiting the system in short time into higher education and the “real world”.

- The “Honor System”
 - Without question there will be elements that rely on the “honor system”. I find this appropriate. Many of our systems rely on this approach now. This recommendation does not carry high stakes, such as strategizing to keep explosives off of an airplane. It is simply about implementing as many reasonable tools to maintain “phone free” school environments for the aforementioned reasons. Some students will “outsmart” the system. We will plan for this and respond appropriately when it happens, but this is simply not a credible reason to forgo pursuing the ideal, which is providing completely “phone free” school environments for our children.
- Students Who Rely on Their Phones for Social Interaction
 - A case has been made that there are students who rely on their phones for social interactions, namely in spaces like the cafeteria. I struggle to find merit with this argument. I have no doubt that we serve students who rely on their phones for social interaction, and who rely on their phones for challenging moments, those moments where socializing is a struggle and very painful. As a former licensed counselor, I invested a good portion of my career into working with students sharing this profile. I found this work most fulfilling. That being said, in good conscience, I cannot endorse a device for students with this profile that has demonstrated to lead to increased isolation, depression, and anxiety, particularly for those prone to such challenges. We have a talented and dedicated team of mental health professionals on staff who I am certain could identify alternative interventions to providing a smartphone to mitigate these challenges.
- Do “Phone Free” Schools Truly Prepare Students for the “Real World”?
 - It is true that our students will leave our schools and transition to spaces with unfettered access to smartphones and wearable technology. These students will need to exercise discipline and executive functioning skills in order to thrive in the years after formal schooling. Perhaps among the most critical of these “life skills” is in the interpersonal realm, face to face communication skills. In my judgment, I would prioritize the development of face to face interpersonal skills, at every opportunity, over the incremental exposure of smartphones for the mere reason that they will have unfettered access after they graduate. There are many experiences and activities that unfold in an individual’s life once they hit milestone ages. In Connecticut, students can openly partake in a series of dopaminergic activities (i.e. gambling, smoking, drinking alcohol, etc.) at the age of 21. Yet, I would not recommend access to these activities prior to 21 because eventually they will have access at their discretion.
- Smartphones in Emergencies
 - Simply, the literature does not support the argument that personal student smartphones are needed in the event of an emergency. In fact, our local first responders would make the case that this was highly problematic when confronted with a “swatting” incident last year which resulted in the driveway to Staples being overcrowded while first responders were called to action. There are now hardwired phones that can make outgoing calls all over Staples and there are devices in the hands of well over 300 adults in the school. I’m certain that there are a number of hypothetical situations that can make this case, yet I find the likelihood of a student smartphone needed in an emergency much lower than the likelihood of any of the deleterious effects of smartphones impacting many students.
- Overall Screen Time
 - In short, this dialogue compels us to look closely at our current screen time practices. There are clearly questions for the district to consider with regards to the amount of screen time we impose on our students. This must be part of our overall consideration.
- Learning From Those Who Adopted “Phone Free” School Environments
 - We would be far from the first district to pursue completely “phone free” schools for kids. I am confident that we can learn from those who have already made this shift. What successes were most evident? What would you “do over” if you could? What unintended consequences surfaced? Etc.
- Is This a Value Judgment or Is This a Public Health Risk
 - At the last Board meeting, I made the case that I will provide an unequivocal recommendation. Yet, if the consensus of the community is opposed, then I must either make a stronger case, or accept that the elected officials who represent the community (i.e the Board of Education) will legislate according to their conscience and the will of the community. During public comment, a parent challenged my position and insisted that this is not a value judgment, but a public health risk for students. Although I agree with this parent’s caution and warning about the public health risk for students, I believe the process is set up for a democratic resolution. This is similar to the way that school start times have been debated in school districts across the state and nation. There are public health risks, yet boards of education can legislate in any way they deem appropriate.

- Parent Support

- Again, as a parent of high school students, I can entirely relate to the challenge of moderating smartphone and social media activity. The district must consider how we can partner with the broader community to provide resources for parents. However, parents must acknowledge that they are not solely to blame. Blame needs to be shared by the technology companies who provide tools that are not ideal in helping a parent succeed in minimizing screen time. This is not a failure of self-control for parents or children. It's a false narrative to shift blame from these corporations to parents. Devices, software, and applications have been developed to make our kids so dependent that they are completely unaware of their addiction. These corporations do not rely on physical resources (i.e. metal, oil, etc.) to make profits. They give their products for free (i.e. Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, etc.), then they target ads at children and use their data to increase revenues. Minors are a significant percentage of technology company revenues, some estimate as much as \$11 billion in advertising for teens. Internal documents of "Meta" brought to light in court proceedings showed that Meta executives estimated the lifetime value of teens using their services at approximately \$270 per teen. The need for tech companies to gobble up data and time from our kids is a financial need. It is lucrative. Parents are simply up against a multibillion dollar industry. Collective support and action is needed for parents in the modern world, unlike any time before.

Summary

Again, given the backdrop of the rationale provided, I unequivocally recommend that the Westport Public Schools establish completely "phone free" environments for students in all schools (K-12), prohibiting access to personal smartphones and all wearable technology, by employing tools and/or methods that do not require faculty and staff to be responsible for the primary enforcement of these restrictions.

There will be no changes for the start of the 2024-2025 school year.

With consideration for appropriate school community engagement and input (i.e. parents, students, faculty, BOE members, etc.), and the numerous considerations listed above, I will withhold any precise implementation plan until I determine there is sound consensus (not necessarily unanimity) across the community supporting the recommendation. Yet, if the consensus of the community is opposed to my recommendation, then I must either make a stronger case, or accept that the elected officials who represent the community (i.e the Board of Education) will legislate according to their conscience and the will of the community.