



THE WAY



FROM THE SENIOR SCHOOL DIRECTOR OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Sydney Morning Herald recently featured an article (16/11/2024) about Waverley College embarking on an innovative technology-free experiment. For one week, every lesson across Years 5-12 was conducted without laptops or digital devices. Instead, students relied on hard copy textbooks, writing paper, pens, and photocopied notes.

By the end of the experiment, teachers reported that students were noticeably more engaged and focused. Inspired by this success, the school is now considering implementing tech-free periods each week.



This experiment aligns with findings from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which highlighted the following key insights about digital device usage in schools:

- Excessive use of digital devices for leisure in classrooms negatively impacts academic performance.
- 58% of students in France reported being distracted by digital devices during at least some maths lessons.
- 59% of students across the OECD said their attention was diverted by peers using phones, tablets, or laptops in at least some maths lessons.
- Students distracted by peers using digital devices during maths lessons scored significantly lower in maths tests.
- Even in schools with phone bans, 29% of students reported using smartphones several times a day, and 21% used them almost daily.
- 43% of French students reported feeling nervous or anxious when separated from their phones.
- While digital technology offers educational opportunities, it also presents risks, including cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and privacy concerns.
- Positive literacy outcomes are associated with children using screens with family members, while negative outcomes arise when screens are used alone.
- Policies like smartphone bans can reduce distractions, but effective enforcement and additional strategies are essential to maintain focus in classrooms.
- Equitable access to digital tools, coupled with age-appropriate support and supervision, remains crucial for modern education.

(Source: OECD, 2024, “Students, Digital Devices and Success”)

Meanwhile, Pymble Ladies’ College is introducing “Wise Phones” to regulate students’ access to digital technologies. From Years 4 to 5, these devices allow only calls and texts. In Years 5 to 7, students can access a camera and selected apps, such as payment and learning tools. By Years 8 and 9, features like chat groups, Spotify, and Bluetooth are added, with full functionality restored by Year 10 (SMH, 18/11/2024).

At Thomas Hassall Anglican College, where mobile phones are banned during the school day,

students are required to store phones in secure pouches. The Senior School operates a BYO laptop program, where teachers determine device use based on lesson plans. Digital textbooks also play an essential role, providing resources students can access as needed.

Some schools are exploring alternatives like school-issued laptop banks, which provide controlled access to devices when necessary.

At our school, we strive for a balanced approach. However, I am concerned about students relying solely on laptops for notetaking. I regularly remind students of the cognitive benefits of handwriting. Research supports this:

“Handwriting requires fine motor control and forces students to focus on their actions. Typing involves mechanical, repetitive movements that prioritize speed over awareness. Our findings reveal that handwriting activates more complex neural connectivity, stimulating the brain in ways that typing does not.” (Source: Frontiers in Psychology, 26 January 2024)

Finding the right balance between leveraging technology and preserving traditional learning methods remains a critical challenge in education today.

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