



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Victoria should make the ACT think about its headlong rush into screens in schools

Toni Hassan

Canberra Times

July 1 2019

The Victorian Government ought to be congratulated. From next year it will ban the use of smartphones during school in all state schools.

Schools are where we expect our children to be safe, to develop co-operative and pro-social skills, and to grow their capacity to focus and become critical thinkers. Smartphones blunt those skills. They are (in the main) a tool for distraction and a weapon for online-bullying. Social media is fueling anxiety and a mental health crisis.

If adults are distracted and harassed by technology in the workplace, then you can be sure that children and young people are too, except that it's worse for them because they have less wherewithal to withstand it. The part of the brain that controls decision making and considering consequences is less developed.

Limiting access to smartphones won't stop bullying. It's an old-age problem. But it will help.

France and Canada have adopted similar bans. In NSW, smartphones are not allowed in primary schools. In time, we might see the results in NAPLAN scores.

School-aged children can tell you immediately which teachers they like. They are the teachers who take an interest in them, who are good at listening and create spaces for respectful learning. Their favourites don't sit at the front of the class checking notifications. So too, teachers expect students to tune in. They resent wasting time managing phones and having to remind students to put them away. A whole-of-school or better still, whole-of-state approach, makes it easier.

Victoria's decision suggests that finally there is real resistance to the digital revolution. Parents were told, without caveats, that it would benefit their children. Parents were made to feel guilty for not providing smartphones, laptop and 24 hour connectivity, as if it's a childhood right. Others, seeing the impacts and wanting to slow technology's march (like me), were frustrated by the mandated take-up in schools, especially here in the ACT, where it's offered little obvious support for managing screens.

Some parents will complain that the Victorian ban means they can't contact their children in school hours. Frankly, when I send my kids to school I look forward to not hearing from them until after the bell rings. Front office staff have always known how to connect students to parents when needed. High school principals lament the development of smartphones, because they allow children to contact their parents about problems before they speak to their teachers. Students go missing after parents picked them up without frontline staff knowing.

Smartphones have been with us for a decade. I have seen and felt their impact. They offer a kind of freedom - the freedom to connect and to be transported somewhere else. But they have made us dependent on them and their social media functions make us more fractious.

Victoria's ban ought to improve the general wellbeing of its students. Researchers at the University of San Diego have found that teens who spend a lot of time in front of screens playing computer games, using social media, texting and video chatting are less happy than those who invest time in non-screen activities such as sports, reading newspapers and magazines and interacting face-to-face. The happiest teens use digital media for less than an hour a day. After one hour, they get increasingly unhappy as screen time rises.

On the other hand, social media is now so pervasive that it is sometimes needed to strengthen offline connections. Young people say they need to be online to know about social gatherings. Asking them to unplug is not straightforward.

Schools are only one battleground. The other is the home. The main time Australian teens are online is 5pm to 10pm. More than a quarter are still online between 10pm and midnight.

Digital space has become an important place - part of an indivisible whole for children who were never taught or who have lost the art of doing things without their screens. Thankfully, after a decade, the pendulum seems to be swinging back towards creating some kind of balance.

Some universities are limiting screen use in class. Exchange programs are reviewing successful applicants' use of smartphones while on exchange in order to ensure they experience cultural exchange with their hosts.

Other Australian states ought to think about following Victoria's lead. The ACT Education Directorate in particular ought to reexamine its shambolic headlong rush into digitising children's lives and consider pressing pause.