Reimagining Education and Policy for the 21st Century: Addressing the Impact of Social Media on Student Well-being and Education

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Social media is one of the factors that has had the biggest impact on students in today's constantly changing tech world. Students now depend on social media websites and apps like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to learn, interact, and have fun. However, there are also serious disadvantages to their increasing influence. School boards have taken action against companies like Meta, alleging that these platforms foster habits detrimental to students' well-being and academic performance. While social media provides students with access to educational material, it also creates distractions and mental health challenges, pushing them away from normal learning experiences. The impact of social media on students' academic performance and emotional well-being, the evaluation of possible solutions through policy and educational initiatives, and suggestions for enhancing student welfare will be shown.

The foundational issue is the misalignment of incentives motivating social media platforms and their users including students. A majority of social media platforms' earnings are generated through advertisements; platforms attract more advertisers if users stay engaged with their content for a longer period. These companies have algorithms and artificial intelligence platforms to ensure that the users are given content that they are interested in. These platforms are also taking advantage of the fact that humans generally have short attention spans. Humans may engage or interact with a platform with the intention to learn; however, when the same platform offers them entertaining or emotional alternatives, the users are distracted. It should be clear that videos of pet animals such as cats and dogs hold infinitely more attraction for young social media users as compared to education concepts such as the Krebs Cycle. It would be unrealistic to assume that the social media platforms will reduce their revenue for the sake of their users' best interest. Legislation is needed with strict enforcement to protect future generations from wasting away their talents on social media.

It is also worth noting that on these platforms, harassment and cyberbullying are out of control. A Pew Research Centre study from 2018 states that 59% of American teenagers say they have experienced online harassment (Anderson). Teenagers' emotional well-being is negatively affected by their constant need for online approval, which fuels anxiety and depression and remains closely linked to peer perceptions. The rise of social media came with a 52% increase in depression rates among young people between 2005 and 2017, according to UCLA Health, highlighting the emotional toll these platforms may have (UCLA Health).

Furthermore, schools must prioritize digital literacy programs that equip students to manage their screen time, identify harmful online behaviors, and seek mental health support when needed. Research shows that schools implementing comprehensive cyberbullying

prevention programs can significantly reduce the incidence of online harassment. For example, a study found that anti-cyberbullying programs can reduce cyberbullying perpetration by approximately 10 - 15% and cyberbullying victimization by about 14% (Gaffney et al.). Policymakers must also step in by regulating platform designs. School boards like TDSB have banned mobile phones in schools to minimize distractions and encourage healthier learning environments, a practice my own school refers to as a "digital break." The regulation of addictive design features—such as autoplay videos or endless scrolling—could further limit compulsive social media use. Technology companies, too, have a crucial role. Platforms like TikTok have introduced screen-time reminders and parental controls, but these features remain optional. Strengthening regulations to mandate such tools would allow students to develop better digital habits, promoting healthier interactions online and offline (Wong).

To address mental health issues, schools must provide more support systems. Many schools lack resources for mental health, which deprives students of the emotional support they require. The Centre for Disease, Control and Prevention highlights that by connecting students with supportive adults and offering mental health support, schools can play a critical role in promoting student mental health (CDC). Peer support networks and mindfulness exercises like journaling or meditation can also assist students in managing their stress and emotional exhaustion. Creating technology-free zones in schools is another smart move. Research from the (Lambert et al) found that participants who took a one-week break from social media experienced notable improvements in overall well-being. Taking breaks from screens helps real life friendship. These activities help students feel happier and remember how fun it is to spend time with people face-to-face.

To really make a difference for students, we need to add new programs and change some things in schools. While these changes will help fix some problems, we also need to work together and keep checking to see if our changes are helping. Just as Indigenous land acknowledgments must be paired with meaningful action to promote reconciliation, policies surrounding social media use must be more than symbolic gestures. For example, the Brian Sinclair case—an Indigenous man who died of medical neglect - highlights how systemic issues continue despite public commitments to equity and justice (Gerster). In education, similarly, the gap between symbolic and meaningful action must close. To make digital spaces healthier, governments, schools, and tech companies need to work together.

In closing, social media can be a blessing and curse to student well-being. Schools, policymakers, and technology companies must work together to develop strategies that balance technology's benefits with its risks. By promoting digital literacy, increasing mental health resources, and helping students connect in person, we can help students thrive both online and offline. However, achieving real progress requires moving beyond symbolic efforts toward accountable, measurable actions. Just as true reconciliation with Indigenous communities demands follow-through on commitments, the future of education lies in creating sustainable

policies that empower students to use the digital world responsibly. Only through intentional collaboration can we ensure that the next generation does well in both the virtual and real worlds.

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