Increasing Real Life Engagement while Decreasing Time on Technology

I had another one of my enjoyable experiences of finding what initially seemed like disconnected pieces of information overlapping in an insight. The initial seed was a news broadcast about people disconnecting from technology through the Offline Club. The clip featured a two-hour gathering at sundown with a simultaneous phone shut off. While no phones meant not taking pictures, people commented on staying in the moment.

Matt Mavir, an organizer of "no phone" celebrations, reports that people find huge value in living in the moment.

"It's about forging real connections, whether that's bonding over a wild experience or laughing together without someone whipping out their phone to film it. Removing screens from the equation lets everyone just be present and truly enjoy the time together. The trend has also had a positive impact on group dynamics. Without distractions, groups are reportedly building stronger connections, and new friendships are forming more naturally – especially where not all attendees may know each other beforehand. It's refreshing to see people prioritizing connection and memories over likes and followers. We've noticed that the anxiety surrounding phones can be a real dampener. Going tech-free is a game-changer for a lot of groups who say they feel re-energized after a weekend free from their devices."

Thinking about the need for tech-free time reminded me about earlier podcast conversations I had with Dr Mark Williams, a neuroscientist who has explored the negative impacts of excessive technology especially on students. In "**Are Smart**

Phones Making Us Dumb?," Williams wrote:

"The use of 'apps' on smartphones has a dramatic impact. A key feature of applications on your phone is that they are often designed to be addictive. The more often you use an app, the more money the tech companies make! Have you ever tried to turn off the notifications? It is possible but often difficult. Why? Because those buzzes and peeps that happen intermittently are a great way to get your attention. In fact, it's been suggested that some of the social media apps schedule notifications such as "likes" in a way to increase or retain users on their sites. They do this using very sophisticated modeling techniques and artificial intelligence. They are designed to get you hooked."

I found an interesting link to this need for a break from technology in the Engage IRL (In Real Life) program implemented in Spokane Public Schools in Washington. Elementary and middle schoolers must keep smartphones, watches and other internet-connected devices in a backpack, pouch or out of sight and in high schools, phones are allowed during meals and between classes. But district leaders and community partners in Spokane didn't simply want to take away phones. They also wanted to engage "in real life," or "Engage IRL" as the district's campaign is called. School officials created a plan to get every student involved in some after-school activity, club or sport every day.

Examples of Engage IRL Programs include sports as well as academic, creative and cultural activities like Debate Teams, Reading Clubs, a Ukulele Club, a Pre-engineering club, a Girls' weight-lifting club, a yoga club, fishing club, multi-cultural club, and indigenous student club. These programs are supported by "engagement navigators" assigned to each of Spokane's five high school feeder patterns. These navigators collaborate with students and families to identify interests and reduce barriers to participation, such as financial constraints or transportation issues. The district has

launched EngageIRL.com, a centralized platform where families can explore available activities sorted by location, age, interest, and cost. This resource aims to streamline the process of finding and enrolling in extracurricular programs.

Initial positive outcomes include:

- Increased Student Engagement: Participation in extracurricular activities has nearly doubled over two years, with over 6,000 students across 58 schools becoming involved.
- Improved Attendance Rates: The district has consistently maintained attendance rates above 90%, a significant improvement compared to previous years.
- Enhanced Student Well-being: There has been a noticeable decrease in students' dependence on smartphones, contributing to better social interactions and mental health.

We know all of this. The evidence is in front of us: neuroscientists, educators, and even the students themselves recognize the value of stepping away from screens to engage with real people and real experiences. The successes in Spokane, the testimonies from Offline Club participants, and the research from experts like Dr. Williams all point to the same conclusion—our brains, our relationships, and our well-being benefit when we disconnect from our devices and reconnect with the world around us.

Yet, knowing is not enough.

This is the time to close the gap between understanding the importance of real-life engagement and taking purposeful action to create it. The pull of technology is powerful, designed to capture and hold our attention. Overcoming it requires intentional choices: educators crafting more opportunities for students to connect face-to-face, families

setting tech-free times and spaces, leaders like those in Spokane investing in structures and supports that make real-life engagement accessible and inviting.

It’s not just about limiting screen time—it’s about expanding lifetime.