

NDP Episode 1 FINAL

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Hi everyone, welcome to Navigating the Digital Playground, a new podcast from the Stevens Point Area Public School District. I'm Sarah O'Donnell, Director of Communications, and I'm really glad you're here. This series is designed to continue a conversation that began last year through our digital age sessions, really focusing on how technology shapes students' lives and how we can work together to help them use it in healthy, positive, and balanced ways.

Today, to help set the stage for this series, I'm joined by Superintendent Cory Hirsbrunner and Director of Secondary Education Jeff Mlsna. Together, we'll talk about why this focus on digital citizenship matters now and what we're hearing from families and how schools are partnering with parents to support students' digital wellness. Cory, Jeff, thank you so much for joining us today.

I have the privilege and honor of working with both of you each day, but for those that are listening and may not know your background or kind of how you got into the positions you're into, I would love to have you just give us kind of a little bit of a history of your time in the district expertise. Absolutely. Thank you, Sarah.

I am Cory Hirsbrunner. I am the Superintendent of the Stevens Point Area Public School District. This is my ninth year in the district and my 34th year overall in public education, and it's been just a real treat to be here in Stevens Point.

We've got great community, great families, wonderful staff, and I feel very fortunate to be part of this district. Thanks, Cori. Jeff? So my name is Jeff Mlsna.

I am the Director of Secondary Education for the Stevens Point Area Public School District. I've served in this role for four years. I was previous to that, spent about seven years out in the Colorado area, but had to come back home because this is a phenomenal community.

I'm a Pointer graduate, and I was a teacher at P.J. Jacobs for 10 years, and then I was a technology integration specialist for a year after that. Thank you so much. I'm really excited to have you both here with us today.

Thank you, Sarah. Thanks, Sarah. Cory, can you tell us a little bit about why digital citizenship is an important focus for our schools right now? Absolutely.

Now more than ever, technology is playing a big part in all of our lives, and it's really important for us to make sure that we're teaching kids how to be responsible learners and how to be responsible with any sort technology that they have. Things are moving at a pretty quick pace in the world these days, and just trying to stay ahead of that with parents and with students and school working all together. Jeff, can you talk to me a little bit about our digital age

conversations with families, specifically thinking about digital citizenship curriculum we have in schools and just really your background with that tech integration specialist eye? Sure, Sarah.

You know, when I think about digital age citizenship, I think one of the biggest things that kind of brought it up to me and got close to my heart was over the last two years, we've done some parent engagement forums. Through our parent engagement forums discussions, we really started diving into our district data, and that's where that technology integration specialist role came in. We started to see some disturbing patterns with the number of students identifying cyber bullying being an issue that was affecting their learning.

We started hearing from parents that they really didn't know how to manage some of the things that we were having at our school sites, especially like when their kids were bringing Chromebooks home, and then they had to figure out how to manage cell phones as well. So we really kind of shifted into that idea of teaching and trying to integrate that more into our classrooms. We do lessons both at the junior high level, they do six there with digital citizenship, and we use common sense curriculum for that, common sense media, and then our elementary levels, that's taught by our librarians, and all students get access to that.

And that does a great job setting the foundation, and really the ultimate piece we talk to kids about is once you put something out there, your digital footprint is there. You don't get to pull that back. So we've spent a lot of time trying to provide training and support to both our students and now our parents as well to make sure we're helping them stay informed, and we're not telling them how to manage at home, but we're giving access to the tools so they can make the best decisions for their home.

Yeah, and I know I'm a parent too, right? I've got kiddos that are later teens now, but certainly I think a lot of questions come home to parents that like it's tough to know how to navigate that, and I know when we think about ways that school can support families and support students and parents outside of that just core classroom teaching, I think it's been really helpful to just have some of that information introduced in a way that helps me parent and helps me have those conversations. So when we think about, I think digital wellness has been definitely kind of one of those buzzwords that we've heard when we're talking just kind of overall to families and even to students. Cory, can you tell me a little bit about what that digital wellness piece means to you when we're thinking kind of more holistically? Sure.

Well, you know, I think that it's really important that we teach students to be good consumers of everything that's coming across their phones, their computers, on the web, and teaching them just to be responsible with the decisions that we make. Technology's not going away, so it's just really, really, really important for us to make sure that parents have all the information that they need to help children when they are at home, and we're working in collaboration and in partnership with them while students are at school. So we want students to be well socially, emotionally, and with any sort of, you know, digital information that they consume on a daily basis.

Yeah, absolutely. When I think of the critical thinking skills that we are really teaching in the classroom every day, Jeff, tell me how you think those critical thinking skills can kind of shift into that digital space? Are they different? Are they the same? What does that look like? It looks different every single day. I think that's the fun part and the scary part about technology.

Because it's changing so fast, we're constantly having to support our teachers, support our parents, and support our students looking at that piece of it. I think one of the things that we're really seeing right now is AI and its effect in our classrooms. So we've provided professional development for our teachers.

Buildings have been able to bring that in and utilize that piece where they see fit. That looks different, obviously, at elementary level than it will at high school, but also engaging students in conversations. And that's one of the things I think I've tried to talk the most to parents about is the value of having a conversation with your child, whether it's utilization of AI.

It can be a great tool to help you work more efficiently, but we want it to support learning, not supplant it. So how do you help a student understand how those two things look different? And that's an ongoing conversation. And we really try to take that same idea and use it when we talk to parents and talk to students about social media.

We want it to help their lives. We can't take it away, even though sometimes we might want to. It's always there, but really having those conversations and letting a student know if you get in somewhere where you might have made a mistake, it's okay.

Stop, talk to the people around you you can trust, and take care of yourself. Yeah, yeah. What advice would we give to parents who are trying to guide their child's tech use right now? I think the biggest single thing I would say, speaking from experience, is the conversation.

Show some interest in what your students are using. I know when my students started using Instagram, for me, it was really spending some time in understanding the vocabulary that comes into that. I don't live in that space, they do.

I think on top of that is understanding what you have access to as a parent to help manage what your kid is doing online. I really love utilizing parent or parent controls on phones. So we spend a lot of time talking about that, talking to parents about where those are located, because every phone does that differently.

Every one of your operating systems that looks a little different. And we have some great resources that we're going to include with this to help parents with that. And then there's also ways just to learn more about the different apps that are out there.

I'd like to add to that, Jeff did a great job there, but also parents aren't alone. All parents are struggling with how to help their children with technology. So network, have conversations not only with your children, but maybe with other parents to learn how they're managing it at home.

And then put those controls on. We've put new cell phone policies in our schools. And what we've learned is that students actually appreciate it and they're learning more.

So not only do we monitor at school, but make sure you monitor at home and be mindful about where you're storing or having children store their phones in the evening. I had a student that shared with me, she was a third grade student just recently, that she gets up in the middle of the night and might be on her phone for a couple hours in the middle of the night. And that's some of the data that Jeff talked a little bit about earlier.

We need to minimize the number of hours that students are in front of technology. I want to circle back to talking about how the digital age series came to be in its physical iteration, how we started that a year ago. I think some of that background would be helpful.

And then why we're shifting into this podcast. Jeff, can you give me just an overview of when we started that digital age series, what really the goal was for that and what we saw there? Yeah. And that's a great segue from what Cory brought up.

Really that came from starting with looking at our data. I had mentioned before the cyber bullying was a huge piece of it. But the other thing, and Cory mentioned it, was the amount of time our students were spending on their devices, especially in the late evenings, was really kind of mind-blowing when we looked at that.

Well over 50% of our junior high and high school age students spending time much later than they should at night on these devices when we really need them to be sleeping and be healthy. So what kind of came out of that is a conversation we had at the district level. Cory gave me the green light to pursue working with the police department.

And we were able to bring them in last year. We ran three, we called them parent engagement forums, where we could have them be there, be able to ask questions. The police department was able to present real information on what these cases look like.

And then we were able to provide them district level resources. We did three last year and we've got three scheduled for this year. We've already completed two of those.

We did one in September and one in October. We moved them earlier because we got feedback from parents that they wanted that information right away. And then we're going to end the year with one where we're actually going to bring students in for the first time to talk a little bit about it.

The idea of looking at having this type of format with podcasts really came from we wanted to continue to expand our audience. So we wanted to find more ways to be able to bring parents on board and give them access to content that was consumable for them. Yeah, I think that was something I noticed.

We had these fantastic sessions with a lot of resources and information and we just didn't have

as many parents there, I think, as we would have hoped. It's really tough to be able to make those. We understand that.

So trying to give families a different way to access that information and provide those resources as well. I know, I think it was this summer when I was having a conversation with my own daughter at the gym in the morning, really frustrated about something that had happened on social media and trying to give her some advice about like, well, can't you just do this, you know, whatever that example was. And she's like, that's not how that app works.

Right. And I consider myself to be pretty tech savvy and just really knew that I had some more stuff that I needed to learn and wanted to bring kind of that expertise to our families so we can all support each other and learn together. So we think about both the in-person series and this podcast series.

Cory, can you just tell me what you're hoping families are able to take away? I hope, you know, like Sarah, you said, just I hope that families continue to learn and they continue to support their children. If people are aware of something that we may not be aware of, we're open to learning more and helping other parents to learn more. And I just hope that people enjoy these podcasts and are able to access them when it's convenient for them.

People are really, really busy these days. And while we try to find a date that seems to be the best, there's always something else going on. So I'm hoping that they find these beneficial and they can enjoy them at their convenience.

Jeff, how about you? What do you hope families are able to take away? I think the biggest thing for me is the idea of a partnership. We as a district, we don't want to tell parents how to manage technology in a homesteading. We want that to be a family's choice to be able to leverage technology in the best way that they see for their family.

But we want to be able to be there to provide them with access to resources, be there to answer questions and support when needed. So I think that's the biggest thing for my end. I'd just like to thank the police department for their collaboration.

They really provided a lot of support as we did these series. And parents, you're not alone. Please reach out at any point in time if you've got questions, if you've got concerns.

A lot of things we're not aware of until we hear about them from students or parents. So we appreciate the partnership. You're not alone.

And let's keep working together. And I think for mine, I'd just like to do a big shout out to our IT department. They've worked really hard to make sure that our Chromebooks, Gmail access for our students is extremely secure and safe.

And I'd want parents to know that when in doubt, if you're at home and your students are working on something, have them use their Chromebook. We have some great resources that

are available to free to all of our parents. You can see them on our IT webpage where you can manage student access at home and be able to see what they're using it for.

You have the ability to turn those Chromebooks on and off. And you have an extra set of eyes, I guess, that are keeping an eye on what your students doing if they're using their Chromebooks. Yeah, really good point.

Really good point. Well, thank you so much both for being here. I'm really excited to continue the conversation and I'm just really grateful to have the ability to have the conversation overall for families and for students.

Thank you, Sarah. Thanks, Sarah. This has been Navigating the Digital Playground, a podcast from the Stevens Point Area Public School District.

Our mission is to prepare each student to be successful both in and beyond the classroom. To explore full episode transcripts, family resources, and upcoming events, visit [pointschools.net backslash digital playground](https://pointschools.net/backslash/digital-playground). Thanks for listening and for partnering with us to help every student learn, connect, and thrive safely and responsibly.

This podcast is meant to share ideas and resources to support families. It is not a substitute for professional advice. If you have concerns about your child's well-being or digital habits, please connect with your school counselor or a trusted professional.

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