

## **OFF AND AWAY: INFLUENCING SCHOOL CULTURE TO SUPPORT HEALTHIER HABITS**

It was long before the pandemic that faculty at Scarsdale High School began realizing the toll the heavy use of wireless phones was having on a generation of students. Beyond the obvious distraction a phone can be in the moment, faculty were also witnessing student interpersonal dynamics changing, mental health concerns growing, and students struggling with longer and complex reading assignments.

A group of faculty members from the English, Counseling and Technology departments formed an informal study group to begin documenting what they were seeing, reading books and reports on the issue, and strategizing ways to support students in achieving their academic and social goals, while strengthening healthier habits with their phones. It quickly became clear that the efforts of faculty within their isolated classrooms would not be enough, and they began strategizing ways to impact schoolwide culture.

Their efforts could have been derailed by the pandemic, because the increased use of technology was essential. However, the faculty group continued to research, document, discuss and strategize about what they were seeing, knowing that things would eventually return to 'normal' and the need would be greater than ever. Towards the end of the 2021-22 school year, they began cementing their approach, worked to generate buy-in from administrators and other faculty, and surveyed students to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the information they had gleaned from their own experiences. It was then the Off and Away initiative was born.

## **OFF AND AWAY: INFLUENCING SCHOOL CULTURE TO SUPPORT HEALTHIER HABITS**

Off and Away became the official schoolwide cell phone policy for 2022–23 school year and beyond. While not an outright ban on phones in school, the goal of the initiative is to help students learn to be more mindful and intentional with the use of phones and all technology, and create a school culture that is less dependent on screens overall. Students are encouraged, ideally, to place their phones in their bags or lockers for the entirety of the school day so they can focus exclusively on coursework and the interpersonal relationships that are such an important part of the high school experience. Students who choose not to put their phones away entirely are encouraged to only check them briefly as needed during homeroom, free periods or lunch, but never during class or hallway passing time, and to not engage in social media at any point during the school day.

To support the initiative, the teacher study group worked with their faculty colleagues to bolster support, and encourage teaching without the use of screens whenever possible and practicable. They partnered with the high school's Parent Teacher Association and wellness committee to deepen that support as well. Both the PTA and the High School administration communicated the initiative to parents and students before the school year began, to help prepare them for the change. A pair of parent informational workshops on teens and cell phone use were also hosted by the PTA and the teacher group, to help parents understand the challenges faced by teens in today's world, as well as understand the initiative. Student ambassadors were identified and recruited, and signs and posters explaining the initiative were placed around the school. The work was also supported through articles in the local newspaper, as well as a story on a major local television station.

## **OFF AND AWAY: INFLUENCING SCHOOL CULTURE TO SUPPORT HEALTHIER HABITS**

Faculty and parents alike reported early success with the initiative. There was a notable increase in chatter during passing time, as students talked with their friends between classes instead of catching up on social media. Faculty reported increases in both attention and retention as the lack of constant stimulation allowed students' brains time to process and digest what they had just learned.

To renew interest and remind students about the initiative, a special 'Off and Away Day' was planned at the start of the second semester. A student-run graphic design club was tapped to make new posters and flyers about what Off and Away means. Students voted, and winning music was played during passing time, instead of the typical bell. With PTA support, tables with snacks and reminders were placed around the school building. In the building's lobby, a center for activity in the school, the PTA had a collection of non-digital games for students to play, fun stickers about joy and wellness, and even polaroid photo booths. Once again, the efforts were supported through communication from the administration to parents and students, as well as through publicity in local newspapers and a major area television station.

*(continued)*

## **OFF AND AWAY: INFLUENCING SCHOOL CULTURE TO SUPPORT HEALTHIER HABITS**

An additional round of student and faculty surveys revealed the Off and Away initiative is beginning to have a measurable impact:

- More students (12%) are reporting that they are rarely or not using their phones at all once they arrive at school.
- The majority of students (56%) report they are using their phones less during the school day than they were last year.
- Many (11%) report using their phones less outside of the school day as well.
- Student also report improved dialogue and interactions with classmates and friends.
- Faculty report students are far less distracted by their phones than in years past, and at least some improvement in attention, retention, and ability to complete homework than in the past.
- Faculty also report students are encouraging each other to employ healthier habits throughout the day, such as reminding each other to put their phone away and asking if their phone use is helping or hurting their academic goals.

Efforts are already underway to expand and improve the initiative for the 2023–24 school year.