

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN SUPPORT STUDENT WELL-BEING

A Q&A With Justin Reilly, CEO at Impero Software

Digital devices provide students with access to potentially harmful information but technology can also help protect student well-being both online and in real life, says Justin Reilly, CEO at Impero Software.

Reilly, whose company helps schools manage student devices and well-being, talked about the challenges around student wellness and some ways in which technology can help educators keep students safe.



Justin Reilly

JR: The sheer scale of the concern around well-being is extremely daunting. So the worst thing you can do is put your head in the sand and consider it to be tomorrow's problem. I don't for a second propose that school district leaders are doing that, but because it's so daunting, you have to take a step back and think both holistically and also on a daily basis.

It's really worth understanding that a student's

well-being directly impacts student attainment and their performance as a student. That's something intuitively we've always known. When I was a teacher 20-plus years ago, we always knew a happy student, a safe student will produce better results. That's nothing new there. But the links between the two are starting to be forged much more rigidly, and so school leaders should be not just saying that well-being is something that we've got to tackle and then let's get back to our day job of attainment. They should look at how one feeds into the other.

What role should the school play in helping parents support student well-being?

JR: We have to recognize that the learners are only in school for a portion of their daily lives, they're not in there the whole time. Students are smart. So if they want to research eating disorders, they won't do it on a school device, because that device is monitored. I think there has to be a much stronger relationship between the parents and the school. Bearing in mind, of course, that that depends on context, because if you're talking about flagging domestic abuse, the very people you don't want to convey that to are the parents.

What have you seen in the changes in student well-being over the past 5 years?

Justin Reilly: There's a lot more risk for students just in terms of the sheer volume of what they can get into. The number of devices that students were able to access has gone up so you don't tend to see a student with a phone, it tends to be a phone, an iPad, a PC, access to devices at home. Impero and other companies have been driving the charge away from only looking at the reactive to say, we need to be much smarter about this. We've got to be pushing to be proactive and then to preempt. The reactive piece is when we spot something really serious is going on. We've seen children's suicides and student suicides going up. We've seen depression going up at unprecedented rates. When you see something of that nature, quite rightly, somebody hits the red button, everybody dives in to go and sort the problem out. But now the journey is much more trying to get to a point where we can predict which students might be more at risk of certain behaviors, and intervene accordingly.

How can school district leaders ensure their staff has the needed support to attend to student wellbeing?

Assuming that we're talking in the round, there has to be a means by which schools are providing key information to the parents that is actionable. Alongside that, it's not just about saying, "Hey, we've spotted that little Johnny has been researching eating disorders and appetite suppressants." It's also "...and here's some advice or here's somewhere you can go to get advice that will then allow you to tackle that."

How can technology support student wellness and address the shortages in wellness experts?

JR: My view here is that technology has a central role. We're in a position to be able to monitor children at scale. We're monitoring tens of millions of children and their use of digital infrastructure and we do that across the world. Seeing issues that pop up, we can localize that to districts and regions and everything else. We monitor keywords. We monitor what they're doing on school networks, using school devices, their browsing, the whole thing. We analyze that and we remove the false positives, and we then categorize and boil it down. Effectively, we're boiling the ocean to get those key bits of information that are relevant.

How can districts manage student wellness proactively rather than waiting until a situation becomes critical?

JR: As an industry, we should be absolutely pushing for this. So number one, let's put the learner at the center of what's going on digitally. It shouldn't matter what the device is. Then alongside that, don't just look at the browsing history because they can well be having conversations on the shared documents on the network that are not being tracked. You've got to track it all. You've also got to be looking for trends in what they're doing and early signs of problems. I tend to use eating disorders as an example because it grows over time. Nobody wakes up in the morning and has a very extreme eating disorder. Something has led them to that point. And what technology can be doing and what districts



can be doing is focusing on the early signs. And even if that creates a much bigger fishing net that catches many more fish, that doesn't matter, because that becomes a moment of education, rather than hard intervention.

This doesn't mean you're going to fix everything. But if you can get a percentage of the students and prevent them from continuing that journey then you're doing good work.

How can districts gather a more holistic snapshot of a student's overall well-being?

JR: You take your safeguarding tools, which are the ability for teachers and counselors to enter manually their own observations around the student bruises, changing attitudes, whatever it may be, combine it with the well-being tools that are digitally monitoring activity, and combine it with the filtering history. That's where you start from, that gives you a very unique but distinct sort of pattern.

You add in the school information system, which can be recording attainment. So, if there's a drop in attainment, you can start to see that it's related to well-being. You bring in more and more information from a variety of different data sources. You connect that to the information you get in communication with the parents. You have the conversation with the child, you give them the ability to record their own feelings. I mean, they do it every day on social media. So should we be monitoring social media output?

One of the goals I have is to involve extracurricular clubs as well. Students are all in different environments, dealing with different people and those people will have opinions on their well-being and wellness and they will also be able to spot things that the teachers won't because the teacher is looking at 30 or 40 children. We need a mechanism whereby we can confidently and privately feed the right intelligence into a system to monitor. So to get to that holistic snapshot, we've got to be looking beyond individual tools and we've got to be willing to integrate with other things that are out there.