

Spotlight Transcript_Ep8_Brian_Nagel_2025

What Haverhill Public Schools Learned from Monitoring Student Activity, And Why It Changed Their Approach

Hello and welcome to Spotlight, the Coria podcast where we unpack all of the most interesting stories, strategies and learnings on student digital safety by schools, for schools all around the world. I'm your host, Yasmin London, and I'm incredibly excited to welcome today's Spotlight guest, Brian Nagel from Haverhill Public Schools. Now, Brian is the Assistant Director of Technology at Haverhill, which is based in Massachusetts.

in the United States. Welcome Brian, how are you today?

Brian Nagel (00:44.003)

Great, thanks. Pleasure being here for sure. Thank you.

Yasmin London (00:47.179)

It's so good to have you here. I'm really excited to dive into some fantastic anecdotes, stories and strategies that we've been talking about for our listeners today. But I think it's always really important that we know a bit about you. So we've talked about you being a fourth and fifth grade teacher. You've got quite an interesting journey into the world of education. Can you share a bit about your journey and why you love working in schools?

Brian Nagel (01:14.424)

Yeah, I we all take various paths to get to where we are, right? You know, and I know for me, you know, I was a music technology and education major at a school in New Hampshire. And when I finished with my education degree, I started teaching fourth and fifth grade. And that same time, just, you know, family needs and budget being what it is, I worked part-time at Apple. So I was teaching full-time and I worked part-time at Apple and,

I eventually took a full-time job working for Apple as a trainer for about four, almost five years. It was during a time, you know, technology was booming. Apple just released the first iPhone, if we can go back that far. I started with them two weeks after the first iPhone launched in 2007. And so it was quite an exciting time, you know, being around technology, using my education degree to be a trainer for that company.

Yasmin London (01:55.917)

Nope.

Brian Nagel (02:11.438)

based out of the retail stores and with small businesses and things like that. but I would always wear that teacher hat. And as I continued to do that job and I worked with small businesses, one of the businesses I worked with was, were school districts. You know, I worked with a lot of teachers and a lot of school administrators doing what I did there. And it brought me back to working out of schools again, but just in an IT role. So I had started, I left Apple.

And I started in Haverhill running a training center to just support technology integration. And I've been there almost 14 years now. In the last few years, I've put on the assistant director of technology hat, doing a lot of system integration and continuing training when I can.

Yasmin London (02:58.393)

Sounds like a really interesting journey. As you say, you know, we can come from so many different facets of the world and end up in the world of education, I guess, trying to help that next generation learn the skills that they need to be, I guess, the exciting and productive members of our society. And I think that was something that you mentioned a little while ago when we spoke earlier that you get excited about how you have that input, that impact on the vocations that they choose beyond school.

Is that still something that kind of lights you up, sets your heart on fire when it comes to education?

Brian Nagel (03:31.758)

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you like to see the impact you, know, or what you do on the daily grind have long lasting impacts. And one of the things that we see is you set up systems like something as simple as Google workspace, right? You know, we use a system like that for online productivity and everything where Google district, like many public institutions are with Chromebooks and all the Google online tools, but seeing students actually use them for

professional skills, you know, learning how to navigate email and calendars and collaboration and online storage and file management. Like that stuff is important for sure. But then, you know, I get a chance to be involved in, in design teams that focus on vocational technology programs, engineering, 3d printing, robotics, things like that. I had a chance just a couple of weeks ago to be part of a ribbon cutting where there was a brand new engineering lab that was built out of our

school with a vocational program there for engineering students and they have like just legit equipment, professional CAD machines and laser printers and all this stuff that's pretty exciting

to see them be able to use practical things and play a small role in making sure that things are working, number one, and that they get the right equipment that fits their program.

Yasmin London (04:54.015)

So exciting. think, you know, we get stuck in this world of fear sometimes when we think about technology and education and students and the unknown, but actually there's quite a few misconceptions around that. I mean, you've just shared some really great examples of, of, students learning how to use these skills or use these tools for, you know, the rest of their professional lives and the value in that. So we've got to sort of, I guess, lean into that world of tech, even if, if, even if we don't understand it.

at times. What do you think is one of the biggest misconceptions around digital safety and technology in schools?

Brian Nagel (05:32.844)

Well, I think there's the misconception that just because the kids are on technology all the time that they understand what they're doing. and, and, and that's just not true. Just cause you're around something doesn't mean you know what it's there for. and I'm sure we can say that of ourselves too. I know a lot of folks that, you know, say they can do Photoshop, right? but they're not professional graphic designers. They just know how to crop an image.

Yasmin London (05:57.241)

No, been on Canva once or twice.

Brian Nagel (06:00.726)

Yeah, exactly. Right. And so there's levels to understanding, right. And I think that's the one of the misconceptions is just because you have a device in your face all the time. Doesn't mean that one year you're using it to its full potential. but two, just understanding what exactly you're doing on that. and, I think that's where like that safety conversation kind of comes into play is that there's a lot of activity on screens and on devices that we manage in schools and.

And a lot of communication is going out, a lot of research is going out, but is it actually beneficial? Is it healthy? Is there some coaching that's needed related to that? Not just the academic side of things, of course, but what about the social and emotional aspects of just our culture these days?

Yasmin London (06:49.527)

Yeah. What have you done to address that at your school? if you were to suggest to our listeners, some, some easy wins that you've learned through, trying to empower people, I guess, in the school community to, to learn more about how to do it. What have you done?

Brian Nagel (07:03.458)

Yeah.

Yeah, I mean, that's great question. mean, I think everybody approaches this type of topic a little differently. I know for me and my role, being in technology, a lot of times we get a bit of a bad rap where all we're doing is just blocking websites and turning things off and saying, no, right? That's what IT folks do. Or we just give somebody a list of, here's a bunch of websites that your kids are spending too much time on.

Yasmin London (07:27.331)

Mm.

Yasmin London (07:34.476)

Okay, do you see it?

Brian Nagel (07:36.014)

And so like, it comes down to that idea of, you know, we're collecting data, even just from a filtering standpoint, right? We're, have filtering rules and things that we have to do, but like, what do we do with that data? Like, can we use it to actually educate the students a little bit more, or even the staff a little bit more on what are the trends? What's our community actually focused on? What are they spending time on?

and, and rather than it just being simply a list of blocked websites, can we use it for, you know, not to throw out a canned phrase here, but data-driven decisions, right? Take data that we have, we apply these types of data-driven decisions and curriculum and all that, but can we also take it from a filtering or, a scanning, know, protocol and involve the correct people to positively impact where students are at.

Yasmin London (08:14.041)

Mm.

Yasmin London (08:31.703)

Is that a difficult thing to do?

Brian Nagel (08:34.062)

No, a hundred percent. Yeah, it's very difficult. takes a little work for sure. I mean, I think it's, to be honest, I'll say yes and no. think the, the, the difficult part is just making sure you get the right people involved. Cause it's not just a technology issue. Once you, really get into the nitty gritty of it. That can be the difficult part. You know, you gotta do some good old teamwork. You know, you got to involve the right people that can impact on a day to day.

Yasmin London (08:35.801)

Yeah.

Yasmin London (08:58.457)

Yep.

Brian Nagel (09:03.594)

rather than just firing off reports. But I'd say the no part about it being difficult is that we have tools available that pretty much do a lot of the work for us in terms of the data gathering. Whether it's filtering tools, whether it's red flag reports, whether it's text-based notifications and alerts based on levels and categories, we have a lot of those tools available to us. So that's the easy part, if you will.

Yasmin London (09:06.285)

show.

Yasmin London (09:32.406)

Yeah, I guess that's where technology can really work for us. And I want to talk more about how you used data to uncover, I guess, hidden risks within your school community. But before we jump into that question, I just want to loop back quickly, because you mentioned having the right people involved. Who are those people? Who are the roles that really need to be part of this process?

Brian Nagel (09:54.454)

I know for us, when we first started really thinking about this, it was just myself and my director. We were just on the technology front, kind of handling reports and red alerts and things of that nature ourselves. And we really found that, hey, we can look at the data, but we don't know the students the same way the schools do. for us, was definitely involving the leadership team of the school's principals, assistant principals.

the folks that are kind of used to managing their school and any behaviors associated with that. But then going to that level of adjustment counselors, school counseling teams and having them involved because they're the ones that are actually working with students day to day. A lot of times naturally within their normal check-ins and sessions that they have, but then now they can have some extra data to have conversations with their students.

Yasmin London (10:48.611)

Yeah, essentially they're the eyes and ears, but then the data that comes in can really help them in terms of picking up, I guess, the gaps and the risks that students might be falling through. Now, you mentioned that you use data to uncover these risks. You've used monitoring tools, filtering systems. And I think, you know, in many, many instances when we start to implement tools like this,

We uncover risks that we hadn't seen before. know, maybe our assumptions that certain students are okay were really disrupted. Tell us a bit about your experience with that and how you created visibility with those tech tools.

Brian Nagel (11:28.534)

Yeah. So I mean, I think the common conception with students is middle school boys, right? We know what they're searching for and what they're finding or, you know, and that, that, you know, there is certainly some truth to that stereotype. But I think for us, what was kind of surprising is, is, is how young students are searching for mature things and not just from adult content, but even just from

Yasmin London (11:35.289)

Mm-hmm.

Yasmin London (11:52.737)

Yeah, explicit content.

Brian Nagel (11:57.504)

know, anxiety and depression or, you know, drug related things or loneliness type of stuff, know, suicidal tendencies, like all of those types of things that you can use the tools for now. Like they, they happen at a very young age, like, know, down to elementary school. so being able to see some of that just from a data perspective and then share it to the schools. like it, it opens up that idea of.

you know, hey, it's whole child education here, start early, start having conversations about what does it look like to have positive mental health? What are resources you can have available to you within your school day to check in, to talk through things, you know, all of that stuff becomes possible just by looking at data and then acting on it.

Yasmin London (12:47.513)

Do you think that that sort of information can be really helpful to use as an engagement tool for parents as well? Because often I think, you know, when we speak to parents, they suffer from this, what we call not my child syndrome, know, not my child, no, then they'd never be the one that'll look that up, especially at a really young age, like elementary school, right? So this data is really

Brian Nagel (13:02.35)

Thank

Yasmin London (13:11.637)

inarguable in many ways. Is that something that you've used to engage parents in conversations in your school community to help them understand the risks that might be around?

Brian Nagel (13:22.55)

Yeah, yeah, for sure. mean, me personally, no, just because of the role I play, but I know, I know our principal team and our counselors definitely leverage that is, you know, data is, is data numbers don't lie at some level. Yes, they tell a story and sometimes, you know, there's some disagreements about that story. But it's, you know, knowledge is power, you know, to use a cliché again. And so any information is helpful.

And, you know, as a parent of teenagers myself, you know, you find that you're trying to figure out how much do you want to be involved and how much do you want to block and monitor. And if there's just a tool or tools that give your school is kind of helping with that same conversation that you're trying to have at home, you know, that that's all good, right?

Yasmin London (14:11.417)

Yeah, absolutely. Does with this sort of technology, does it help with early warning signs that are, guess, kind of the breadcrumb trail that leads to the gingerbread house, I suppose. while you might not, there might be many kids that are looking up explicit content, obviously know that's not so good. But how do we intervene earlier? How do these tools

help you see that breadcrumb trail for that young person who may ultimately be looking at some fairly serious content. mentioned, you know, suicidal ideation, for example, mental health, that's where it's getting really, really serious. So how, how do you intervene early with this? What are some of the early warning signs that you've seen that have helped you identify problem problems with students?

Brian Nagel (14:50.317)

Yeah.

Brian Nagel (15:00.918)

Yeah, I think it just comes back to that whole child aspect. I think, you know, schools can focus too much sometimes on in-class behavior and grades. Whereas these types of monitoring for what students are typing or what websites they're visiting or how long they're spending just like on certain sites, that gives you a broader picture on what they're actually mentally thinking about.

and where they're at from a maturity level too. And so it's that idea back again about whole childhood. It is that whole picture. if you, and any good teacher will tell you that if you understand where the child's coming from, you can empathize a bit with either their situation or what they're processing, then you can become a better teacher, even just from the academic and behavior side that you do day to day, you know? And so, you know, from, I'll,

defer to my counseling friends in terms of what the actual early signs are. But to me, some of it is pretty simple. It's like, hey, are you searching for stuff? Are you finding things? Are you spending time in things? Or are you doing a check-in that rates a little lower this week than it did in previous weeks? Things like that all help with those regular conversations that schools are having.

Yasmin London (16:19.085)

Yeah, I guess it's really about helping you see the full picture. know, you're not directly, I guess, involved in the counseling element. But when we're working in a multi-stakeholder group, as you mentioned before, where we're bringing the right people to the table, and we have that really informed conversation based on the data that you've implemented, it makes it much easier to execute much easier to defend your position, I guess, in terms of what your choices are and how you're going to try and address this.

So it is really, I guess, getting the right people together as well, isn't it?

Brian Nagel (16:53.154)

Yeah, yeah, I'd agree with that for sure.

Yasmin London (16:55.447)

Yeah. Any other solutions that you tried before? you'd gone to, mean, filtering is obviously essential monitoring tools, not necessarily to the degree that you've used them. So how were you, I guess, addressing this as a school community before you had the monitoring tools involved?

Brian Nagel (17:13.45)

I mean, yeah, mean, honestly, I don't know if I can honestly say we were, you know, and not that you don't care about that, but some of it is like, you don't know what you don't know until you have the tools that kind of show it to you. Right. And so I think, you know, the schools would do things on their own and whoever is maybe motivated or extra passionate about certain things that they would do it. now that we

are more systematic with the tools we use. It allows us to have more consistency across all the different schools we have. And we're a 17 school district. So there's a lot of transition between buildings. And so you want to be consistent with curriculum and be consistent with support resources.

Yasmin London (18:00.163)

Yeah, absolutely. so measuring success, how did you know what you were doing was working? Was there a specific moment, an incident, a student? How did you know that it was that you're on the right path?

Brian Nagel (18:15.968)

Yeah, I mean, we, you know, without getting into specifics, we have had those monitored alerts that result in a level five where police are involved and students are safety is, you know, is preserved because of the interaction of the monitoring tools and with the team that's approached things. And, and so I, I know, you know, I've personally been involved in a couple of those situations and I know they've come up over the last few years.

But even then just also feedback from our counseling staff, that idea of, you know, thank you for bringing this to our attention. This is information that goes deeper than what we knew. Right. And so, you know, it comes down to the idea of, okay, we had this data. We involve some people just to get the information out there. And yes, there's probably a lot of noise, you know, if you really want to break it down.

Some of it might not quote unquote matter because boys will be boys or whatever you want to say. But if you can impact the life of even just one, that's why we're in education. That's why we do what we do, right? Is to just at least make an impact at whatever capacity you can.

Yasmin London (19:33.823)

look, I think that's why we're all in this business. And we've probably had that experience that's, you know, it may only be one child or one instance, but it's enough to, it's enough to change people's lives. I mean, that that's a reason that I got into the online safety space. I was a police officer for 13 years. I had a situation with a young person who was suffering suicidal ideation over a cyber bullying related incident, incident, and that was enough to

change the trajectory of my life because in the end, if it's one child, one situation, one family that you're able to impact, then that's worth it, isn't it? Yeah. So in terms of your learnings, how has this transformed your school's approach to digital safety? I mean, you said before that you weren't perhaps doing enough or too much around monitoring. We've seen the impact that it's had.

Brian Nagel (20:10.124)

Yeah, no, 100%.

Yasmin London (20:27.961)

how has it sort of impacted the wider school community?

Brian Nagel (20:31.758)

Well, probably if I'm being objective, we're probably still not doing enough. you always have that mindset as a teacher and educator that there's more that you can do. There's more you can learn. There's more that you can kind of involve and do better as you continue to grow and learn. But, you know, I would say like, I'm happy with the progress we've made as a community. Like there's a lot of consistency in the conversations we have as

as an administrative and leadership team. There's a little bit more of a single focus where, hey, this is important. And these are the tools that we use to make that impact. And so I think that kind of stands out to me right now, just having that consistency these last couple of years as we continue to figure out, know, because, you know, technology changes, students change, the community changes, you know, as year over year. And so

just kind of building with that. And I think these tools do kind of help us have a little bit of a leg up.

Yasmin London (21:37.123)

Yeah. mean, change equates to challenges very often. What have been some of the big challenges for you in implementing this and I guess what you foresee in the future, if you were to pick something that you really found pretty tricky and again, for the listeners today, they're considering monitoring tools, they're considering implementing these sorts of strategies, what are the watch outs? What have you experienced?

Brian Nagel (22:04.268)

Yeah, I mean, it's a lot of data. And so if you're not used to seeing the levels of alerts that come through, can be admittedly jarring at some level when you get into a system like that where you're just seeing the amount of things that get flagged. And so it's figuring out.

you know, between your team and just knowing what your community's kind of pulse or trend is to kind of know what's important. You know, some of it, I wouldn't necessarily call it noise, but some of it's not actionable, right? At least yet. And maybe the practical example is like, if you have a monitoring system that goes from level one to five, maybe the one, two and threes aren't as actionable to start.

Yasmin London (22:45.251)

Mm.

Brian Nagel (22:59.458)

You don't need to pay attention to every single one that comes in. If you start to see, this student has a bunch of these level two and threes, then maybe there's a conversation there. But just looking at the sheer amount of everything can be daunting if you don't have a practical perspective on it, I think.

Yasmin London (23:19.947)

Yeah, I imagine when you were making those decisions between levels one to five and perhaps, you know, not paying as much attention to levels one to three, there must have been some concerns from staff about what if we miss something? What if there's something essential there that we miss and that results in a catastrophic situation? How did you manage that part?

Brian Nagel (23:43.382)

Yeah, I mean, it's possible. And I think even monitoring tools aside, you do the best that you can with the tools and the knowledge you have at that time. And that's gotta be the approach, right? And because it is impossible to stop everything, it's impossible to coach everything or to teach everything. mean, I think one of the reasons I, if I can be

you know, honest about it. One of the reasons I left teaching to go to Apple early on is, it's, it's being a teacher to 25 to 30 kids in a classroom is it's difficult if you want to impact every single one of them. And it, you might say that's impossible to impact every single one of them the way they need to. You do your best, but like the reality of one to 30 is, is, is difficult. but that doesn't mean you don't try.

Right. And then you don't keep going and then don't do the best with the information knowledge you have. So I relate that to what we're talking about here is that, that you're just, you're, you do the best with what you have. you present the information, and then, you know, what the, what the people are good at it, do what they're good at as well. You know, don't hold it all on you on yourself.

Yasmin London (24:41.657)

Yeah.

Yasmin London (25:02.99)

Yeah.

I guess it's also about prioritizing tasks, I guess, is figuring out what can we manage? Just because we can't do everything doesn't mean we don't start, we don't try, we don't take that first step. So how did you focus on prioritization when you implemented these tools? What were those first steps that you thought, you know, I can manage this and this is, this is the most effective way forward.

Brian Nagel (25:30.124)

Yeah, I mean, for us, it was kind of building a tool set. It started with filtering and then we went to monitoring of text, know, text monitoring. And then we built to a little bit more of a image scanning and red flag alerts and student check-ins. And so all of these tools, like, you know, I'd say if we had to count them, we were using about four or five of them practically, but we built into it.

Right. and so, I think practically speaking, just using what you have. one of the, one of things we tell our team a lot, just, you know, tech just in a technology system is, you want to exhaust your built-in options whenever possible. so maximize the tools you have first before you go and add a half a dozen more. so from a practical step, I'd encourage that.

Yasmin London (26:20.195)

Yeah.

Yasmin London (26:24.089)

And think sometimes it's a matter of taking the time to review what you've got and making sure it's fit for purpose. So sometimes there might be adjustments, there might be, you know, small additions that you can integrate that mean you don't have to feel overwhelmed by completely uprooting your tech stack. There could just be small, small tweaks and changes that actually do make a really big difference. Now for schools listening to you thinking, wow, you know, we don't have monitoring tools like this. We haven't had the opportunity to

Brian Nagel (26:42.86)

right.

Brian Nagel (26:46.817)

Right.

Yasmin London (26:53.923)

to identify what could be many students in our community that we're missing wellbeing issues on. What do they need to do to implement something like this? If they wanted to implement it tomorrow, what are the steps to take to implement effective monitoring tools?

Brian Nagel (27:12.3)

Yeah. I mean, it does start on a technology level. It's having a, you know, a software company that you can work with that has the product that's going to fit what you can, you can do, you know, so, you know, with the environment you have from a technology standpoint, having a tool that can encompass all of that, you know, we are Chromebook and Google district, but we're mixed platform. And so we needed a tool that could cover Mac, PC, Google. not everybody does that.

And so I definitely work within your technology environment to find something that works and that can fit in there. And I'd say, you you're kind of, you do have to get some buy-in, you know, I benefit from, you know, being in the leadership position so I can work with my director and we integrate systems. That's what we do or what I'm tasked with. And so having somebody like myself in a role that you can work with together.

to make sure that the system is implemented well, just from a technology standpoint. Because if the technology doesn't work, the data is not going to work as well. And then you can have some culture battles from there. So I know I'm a little biased because I work on the technology side, but you got to have a tech person in your camp for sure.

Yasmin London (28:26.873)
Ha

Yeah. Well, you've to get the basics right, right for it to work. You've got to make sure you've got those foundations. So get that buy in anybody that's listening today, make sure you've got a tech person on your team that can speak the speak that maybe you might not understand. But really, really important to again, go back to those stakeholders who are the who are the people that are the decision makers.

Brian Nagel (28:38.37)
Yeah.

Yasmin London (28:52.473)
who is, I guess, in terms of attitudes and behaviors willing to maybe flex and try new things, because sometimes it is about finding the right people willing to stick their neck out a little bit because we want to progress, but really making sure that, you know, we don't do nothing, right? In the end, would you agree is that kind of the worst thing that we can do is to sort of be paralyzed by perfection?

Brian Nagel (29:15.062)
Yeah, I'd say parallel. Yeah, that's a great, great phrase there. Yeah. Do something. Number one. And then the other consideration, to be honest, and this might be just coming from more of a public school standpoint, but a lot of times regulations come down the pike that you didn't know were coming. And I, not that I can predict the future or know anything, but I wouldn't be surprised if, you know, we're going to be required to do some of this type of monitoring in the future.

And so having a little bit of willingness to get ahead of the requirements might be something I'd throw out there as an idea.

Yasmin London (29:55.289)
That's a really, really good one. My next question was gonna be around bold predictions for the future of digital safety in schools. You jumped ahead of me already, Brian, amazing. Look, my last question for you, I guess, is a bit of a summary question. There's a lot that we've talked through today around monitoring, around student wellbeing, how we identify this, what stakeholders we get on board. There's a lot to think about. So if you had one message around student digital safety in schools,

Brian Nagel (30:00.846)
you

Yasmin London (30:24.493)

that you'd like our listeners to take away today? What would it be?

Brian Nagel (30:31.382)

Yeah, I go back to the just make your data mean something, you know, use the data from a filtering and monitoring standpoint to get down to the student level. Let it not just be a report that said, Hey, we blocked this many websites or we noticed this many red flags. And then you can, you know, go yell at this, these number of kids for finding the proxy sites again, or whatever it ends up being. Right. Use it as a teaching tool or a coaching tool.

I think that that'd be the thing I'd love to put out there. Because it's been a learning experience for myself. put on that tech hat a few years ago as we explored and doing this stuff. But then being able to see now a little full circle what it means to actually get down to the student level with that.

Yasmin London (31:20.323)

Yeah, I think that's really great advice. I think what I'm hearing from you is to try and look beyond the numbers to see the story that the numbers will tell you. Look beyond that, have the right people at the table that can, you know, contextualize what this data might mean, where that student might be going, what the wellbeing concerns might be, rather than just looking at what we can block. We've got to really try and see that full picture.

Look, Brian, so many great insights from you. Thank you so much for joining us today and to everyone listening as well. I'm sure that you've taken so much from this conversation. Monitoring is a kind of a new topic. It's one that not all schools are across, but I think there's been some great insights around the benefits. Obviously the risks and I think the mindset sometimes it's required to sort of step into this world when it comes to schools.

At Coria, one of the things that we say a lot, Brian, is as the digital world evolves, so do we. And you really helped us and everyone listening today to do just that. So thank you so much for joining us. really appreciate it.

Brian Nagel (32:24.441)

too kind. No, happy to have a conversation. Thanks.

Yasmin London (32:27.907)

Thanks a lot.