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CFUW Ontario Council News



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But today's education system has far more to be concerned about than just readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic. Previous generations faced the challenge of acquiring information under strict discipline; today's students face the opposite threat - an endless barrage of digital noise that destroys their ability to process information at all. Among the many issues facing our schools, which include funding shortfalls, mental health gaps, and repair backlogs, it is this steady erosion of students' *cognitive autonomy* that worries me most.

In the context of humans, cognitive autonomy is the ability to think independently, form beliefs based on evidence, and make self-directed judgments free of external pressure, in other words, the freedom and capacity to think.

In the short-term, erosion of cognitive autonomy in youth cripples their ability to read long texts, structure arguments, or solve complex problems. Without attentional self-regulation, quiet tasks trigger anxiety, leaving youth reliant on peer validation, vulnerable to online outrage, and unable to identify bias or question social media sources.

In the long term, this unchecked decline threatens democratic sovereignty through widespread susceptibility to propaganda. As reasoning capacity fades, innovation dies, conformity reigns, and individuals surrender decision-making, and ultimately their sense of self, to automated systems and dominant groups.

Is this decline inevitable? Not at all. But reversing it requires aggressive advocacy and heavy investment in pedagogy. Students must master critical thinking, debate strong counterarguments, examine their own biases, and ground their claims in verifiable evidence.

Higher education is already adapting: professors across various universities are stripping technology from their classrooms. By enforcing handwritten notes, discussion-based problem-solving, typewriter assignments, and rigorous post-presentation Q&As, they are rebuilding student engagement and shutting down AI shortcuts.

However, rebuilding attentional stamina must start long before university. K–12 students need structured class time to solve problems independently before searching online, alongside dedicated hours for physical books, handwritten journals, face-to-face debate, and fact-checking.

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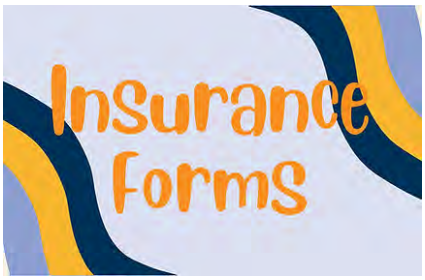

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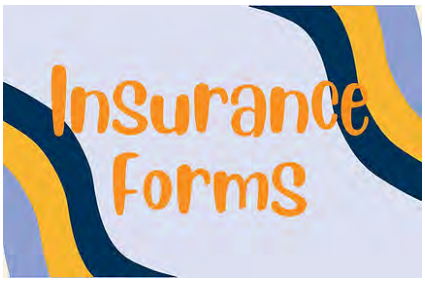

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