

## Schools Say No to Cellphones in Class. But Is It a Smart Move?

By Alyson Klein

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Sexting. Cyberbullying. Googling test answers. Taking a picture of a quiz and sending it to friends who have the same class later in the day. Paying more attention to Instagram notifications than biology class.

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Smartphones have transformed the way we communicate, but there's no question they can be a major headache for teachers and administrators.

That's why a flurry of schools have recently put in place restrictions or bans on students' use of cellphones in school. The changes represent a pivot away from the more open student cellphone policies that districts instituted in previous years. But not everyone thinks the new restrictions are a step in the right direction.

The recent changes are fueled by frustrated educators, who worry that by allowing students to spend so much time on their devices, they are feeding an addiction and stunting students' development of face-to-face communication skills.

That was a big reason why the Forest Hills district, near Grand Rapids, Mich., decided at the start of this school year to ban cellphones throughout the school day, even during lunch.

"We really wanted to provide a clean break for students and not have the frenetic energy that can happen if kids start texting each other or social-media posts start going," said Dan Behm, the superintendent. The district piloted the ban last school year and found that students said they were less anxious when they weren't so attached to their devices, Behm added.

More than 30 schools, or in some cases, entire districts have enacted or stepped up some sort of cellphone restrictions beginning in either the 2018-19 school year or the start of this academic year, according to an Education Week analysis.

California recently passed legislation that allows school districts to restrict or prohibit device use in class, although it's not a requirement. And at least four other states debated putting significant limits on the devices.

Other countries have had more success enacting widespread bans. Ontario, a Canadian province, is restricting student cellphone use during instructional time. (The restrictions, which are scheduled to go

into effect later this year, include an exception for classroom activities and health and other emergencies.) And in 2018, France passed a law outlawing the use of cellphones in schools for students up to age 15.

But banning cellphones can come with its own vexations. Enforcement can be difficult, and districts are wary of taking on liability for holding a student's confiscated phone. Many teachers like using some cellphone-based applications in class, such as online microscopes and polling applications.

What's more, some experts say it's better to keep cellphones in school and help train students how to use them responsibly, rather than just banning their use.

Plenty of educators agree.

Brian Toth, the superintendent of Saint Mary's Area school district in northwestern Pennsylvania, said he'd never consider nixing student cellphone use in school—even though some of his teachers have asked him to do so.

Toth said the devices can be a great teaching tool. Educators in his district check for student understanding using cellphone applications like Kahoot, or they send their students on scavenger hunts that also rely on cellphone technology. And the district's instructional-technology coach focuses on teaching students to use their devices responsibly.

"Anybody who wants to ban it is just hiding from reality," Toth said. "It's just common, everyday practice these days that you have a cellphone."

### **Parents' Big Concerns**

Restricting cellphone use is a lot easier said than done. There are big concerns, for instance, about school safety. How could parents get in touch with their children during a school shooting or a dangerous weather event?

One school in Wisconsin had a low-tech solution: Families could call the front office, just like they did before cellphones were so ubiquitous, said Jo-Ellen Fairbanks, the assistant principal of Portage High School, which requires students to keep their cellphones in their lockers during the school day.

And during an emergency, students are best off making sure they concentrate on following through with a safety plan, not staring at their cellphone screens, said Adam Gelb, the assistant principal of San Mateo High School near San Francisco, which recently required students to keep their cellphones in a pouch that renders them inoperable during the school day.

"Nowhere in any [safety protocol] does it say get on your cellphone and notify a family member," he said.

But some parents want to be able to reach their children at any time—even if it means texting them in class, educators say.

Reaction from families to a recent ban on cellphones in the Warwick district near Providence, R.I., has been mixed. Some are supportive. Others "have said, 'You can tell us what to do when you pay our phone bill,'" said Karen Bachus, the chairwoman of the school board.

What's more, enforcing a ban can bring with it its own set of

### **Cellphone-Restriction Legislation**

Canada's Ontario province and France have enacted significant restrictions on student cellphone use in schools. But measures restricting cellphone use have been much harder to pass in the United States. Here's a list of the states that have recently considered some sort of student cellphone restriction:

**California:** Allows school districts or charter schools to limit or prohibit the use

administrative hasssles. The nation's largest school district, New York City, dropped its cellphone ban in 2015, in part because it was being enforced more harshly in lower-income schools than more advantaged ones.

The Marshall school district, in the southwestern corner of Minnesota, also dropped its cellphone ban several years ago.

What the policy largely prompted was kids texting under their desks or hiding their phones under big sweatshirts, said Principal Brian Jones.

A total ban "sounds great, I just don't think it's realistic. I don't like to have unenforceable policies," Jones said.

What's more, he added, "for some students, the anxiety of not having that device with them caused more harm than good. It reminded me of the cartoon [Peanuts and] Charlie Brown and Linus with his blanket."

Now, the district allows students to use their phones after school, during lunch, and at some times during the school day, if it is for educational purposes. "They've got to learn how to self-regulate once they leave us," Jones said.

### **'Have a Plan, Not a Ban'**

That philosophy jibes with recommendations from Common Sense Media, a nonprofit based in San Francisco that focuses on children, technology, and media.

In an April survey, Common Sense found that 80 percent of schools implement some kind of cellphone policy. About a quarter of teachers find cellphone policies difficult to follow, while roughly two-thirds find them easy to follow, according to the survey. High school teachers were more likely to report that implementing cellphone policies was difficult.

Educators should "have a plan, not a ban," said Elizabeth Kline, the organization's vice president for education. "There isn't a real reason to have a ban, but there is absolutely a big need to have clear guidelines and guidance for both students and parents around personal devices."

Cellphones can be an important teaching tool, Kline pointed out. Kids can create their own videos using cellphones, and teachers can integrate special apps for understanding concepts or investigating questions.

There's also a big equity issue, she said. Some students may not have laptops—or even internet connectivity—at home. So their cellphones may be the only way they can complete some technology-focused assignments.

Still, expectations need to be clear.

"If you're using the phone for learning, then the whole class has to agree that they are not going to be snapchatting in the middle of a lesson on velocity," Kline said.

And educators need to make sure they model those behaviors, which means not checking their own

of smartphones during school hours.

Status: Enacted.

**Arizona:** Called for a public policy that portable electronic devices should not be used in classrooms unless specifically authorized by "the individual having authority over the public school classroom."  
Status: Failed.

**Maine:** Required the department of education to adopt rules restricting the use of cellphones by students. Allowed students to use their cellphones in the front office of the school in the event of an emergency.  
Status: Failed.

**Maryland:** Established a task force to study the impact of student cellphone use in classrooms on student learning and teacher instruction and report its findings to the legislature. Status: Failed.

**Utah:** Required individual public schools to develop a policy on the use of cellphones in school and submit that policy to district officials every two years. Status: Failed.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures;  
Education Week

text messages during class, she said.

### **Extremes Miss the Point**

Kline emphasized that by absolutely prohibiting cellphones, districts could miss out on an opportunity to teach their students how to use the devices responsibly and in moderation.

"There are moments at school or at home that should be device-free moments," Kline said. "Letting kids go wild with no norms or rules is not the right thing to do. Both extremes are missing the point."

The Novi district, in the Detroit suburbs, strives for that balance.

Cellphones must stay in lockers all day at the middle school and are not allowed in elementary schools. But at the high school level, students are allowed to have phones in class, under limited circumstances. The teacher sets a color—red, for no phones allowed; yellow, which signifies that phones can be out if the class isn't moving forward with new content; and green, which is typically used when the devices are part of a lesson.

To be sure, the district, like most in the country, still sees its share of problems stemming from cellphones, including a lunchroom of students texting each other instead of engaging in conversation. ("Like adults do in restaurants," said Steve Matthews, the superintendent.) But the district also wants to instill social-media lessons, including showing students how to be careful about what they tweet out or share on social media.

"There are times it would be easier to just ban [phones] altogether, but we don't want to communicate to kids that school isn't relevant to their lives," Matthews said. "We're trying to help them use it in an appropriate and meaningful way."

*Librarian Maya Riser-Kositsky contributed to this story.*

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