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Why School Cellphone Bans Are a Bad Idea

To help students catch up, we should be leaning into technology

By Brandon Cardet-Hernandez — November 14, 2024

If you are an educator or a parent, it's hard to look away from the growing trend of smartphone bans in schools. As of this writing, eight states have passed policies banning or restricting cellphone use in schools, notwithstanding countless actions at the county, district, and school levels to do the same.

These bans come from a place of appropriate and measured concern: Parents and students alike are troubled by well-documented impacts on students' mental health, their capacity to remain engaged during class, and struggles to focus for long stretches of time without task switching.

As a parent and educator, I deeply understand and share these concerns. I've been a student, teacher, and principal in some of the most complex and under resourced schools in the United States. I care deeply about two things—kids learning how to read and kids developing meaningful relationships with adults. Both are powerful predictors of positive outcomes from social stability to economic success, and I have dedicated my career to building classrooms that foster both.

That's why I believe we cannot look away from the strong relationship between students and their phones. When I was a teacher and later a principal—and as a member of a different generation—it took time for me to understand this fully. Phones felt like a barrier between me and the students I taught. I had 10th graders reading on a 3rd grade level and I needed to understand how to close the gap that I knew could so dramatically change their health and socioeconomic prospects.

Something clicked for me when I recognized that a device could be a tool and a gateway for learning, not just a barrier. The reality of today's classrooms is that students are accustomed to having their phones around—and they have been conditioned to engage fluently with technology. For many kids, especially in districts that lack resources to provide alternative devices to students, the phone serves as a calculator, translator, mini-computer, and a door to information.

Meanwhile, educators have seen an explosion of powerful digital tools for learning, many of which are app-based. These tools allow students to remain engaged for longer periods of time, progress their learning journeys at an individualized pace, and free up valuable teacher time for small-group instruction and social-emotional learning.

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I recently spoke to a teacher who uses a group vocabulary video game in the classroom. Students play the game while she leads instruction with a small group. The small groups have enabled her to build relationships with her students, helping her understand who can handle more instruction and who needs to switch up their learning method and try something different. Each student has their learning and social-emotional needs met, even though their activities are structured in different ways.

Extensive classroom experience and research already suggest that a technology-assisted approach to classroom instruction can help. Many teachers have turned to digital tools to personalize math instruction, and rigorous research has confirmed the positive impacts of some of the programs. Individual districts are enthusiastic about 1-1 computing and digital innovations for instruction, citing greater student engagement and collaboration that boost learning. At the Savannah-Chatham County public schools in Georgia, for instance, voice-recognition technology is credited with lowering the number of students reading below the 25th percentile by 7 percent.The promise and potential of rapidly evolving generative AI gives us even more opportunity to use technology to maximize the value of the time students spend in the classroom by eliminating barriers that have often plagued underserved communities. In a classroom where students might range widely in reading levels, technology is a powerful tool for customizing the learning experience. Adaptive tools can personalize reading materials by translating content and explaining vocabulary, for instance, allowing teachers to support students across literacy levels, including English-language learners, students with learning disabilities, and advanced readers.

Many will point out that cellphone bans don't necessarily prohibit the implementation of new learning technology. And they are correct: Providing 1-1, state-of-the-art device access for all students would solve the problem. However, 1-1 technology implementation frequently falls short, with small budgets, outdated devices, and limited home access holding many low-income students back. Meanwhile, according to the Pew Research Center, over 95 percent of teens own or have access to a smartphone—a near-universal reality for youth even of different socioeconomic backgrounds. And according to the National Center for Education Statistics, over half of students who lack access to Wi-Fi at home through a computer retain access through a smartphone.

In short, we are turning away from technology at the exact moment when we could and should be leaning into it. Yes, it requires research, care, and thoughtful implementation, but doesn't all good instruction?

We must recognize that not all screen time is created equal. Managing appropriate dosage and responsible technology use will be crucial as we move forward, but the consequences of continuing the instructional status quo are dire, especially for the least-advantaged students.

We are in the midst of a literacy crisis. In 2022, 71 percent of 8th grade students in the United States scored below "proficient" in reading, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. We are seeing subpar literacy gains year over year and lagging achievement. Barring the ability to ensure state-of-the-art, 1-1 technology in every school, we need every tool in our toolbox. To take smartphones away under present conditions is nothing short of a fool's errand.

https://www.edweek.org/technology/opinion-why-school-cellphone-bans-are-a-bad-idea/2024/11

BU TODAY

News, Research, Community

Mass. Lawmakers Introduce Bills to Restrict Cell Phone Use in Schools

BU researcher says the issue around "social media addiction" and phones in schools must be handled not only by the schools, but by supportive parents as well

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Editor's note: *On January 28, 2025, just over a year after this story first appeared, a group of Massachusetts lawmakers, along with Attorney General Andrea Campbell, have* [filed bills](#) *that would restrict the use of smartphones by students when they're in school, hoping to reduce the time they spend scrolling platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.* BU Today *reached back out to researcher Joelle Renstrom for reaction to the news. Her answer is below.*

Parents, the next time you are about to send a quick trivial text message to your students while they're at school—maybe sitting in a classroom—stop. And think about this: it might take them only 10 seconds to respond with a thumbs-up emoji, but their brain will need 20 minutes to refocus on the algebra or history or physics lesson in front of them—*20 minutes*.

That was just one of the many findings in a recent report from a 14-country study by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) that prompted this headline in the [*Washington Post*](#): "Schools should ban smartphones. Parents should help." The study recommends a ban on smartphones at school for students of all ages, and says the data are unequivocal, showing that countries that enforce restrictions see improved academic performance and less bullying.

It's a fraught debate, one that prompts frustration among educators, who say students are less focused than ever as schools struggle to enforce cell phone limitation policies, and rage from some parents, worrying about a possible shooting when they can't get in touch, who insist they need to be able to reach their children at all times. And, perhaps surprisingly, it prompts a collective yawn from students.

In fact, students openly admit their cell phones distract them and that they focus better in school without them, says [Joelle Renstrom](#), a senior lecturer in rhetoric at Boston University's College of General Studies. It's an issue she has studied for years. She even [performed an experiment](#) with her students that supports what she long suspected: Cell Phones + Classrooms = Bad Learning Environment.

BU Today spoke with Renstrom about the latest study and research.

Q&A

with Joelle Renstrom

BU Today: **What's your reaction to this latest news, bills that would limit the use of smartphones by students while in school?**

Renstrom: The measure affects cell phone use **in school,** not at home or in other places. Reacting as though this prohibits students from using phones at all misses the point—it's about what students do in a place where learning is the primary objective. The data is clear that phone use in school is problematic and facilitates everything from distractions to cheating to bullying. Introducing measures to support student learning (and teaching) is entirely appropriate and is long overdue. My hope would be that such a measure draws attention to the seriousness of the problems that stem from social media addiction, which isn't limited to schools. Phones in themselves aren't bad, of course, but they provide a portal to platforms that facilitate all kinds of harm, including misinformation and mental health problems that

stem from addiction and overuse of social media. Schools often set the tone in their policies, so perhaps enacting this one could get parents and students to think more deeply about their phone use in general, which can only be a net positive.Let me get right to the point. Do we as a society need to be better about restricting cell phones in classrooms? It seems so obvious.

Of course. But it is easier said than done. It's hard to be consistent. We will always have students with some kind of reason, or a note from someone, that gives them access to technology. And then it becomes hard to explain why some people can have it and some people can't. But student buy-in to the idea is important.

But is getting students to agree more important than getting schools and parents to agree? Is it naive to think that students are supposed to follow the rules that we as parents and teachers set for them?

I have made the case before that addiction to phones is kind of like second-hand smoking. If you're young and people around you are using it, you are going to want it, too. Every baby is like that. They want to reach for it, it's flashing, their parents are on it all the time. Students openly acknowledge they are addicted. Their digital lives are there. But they also know there is this lack of balance in their lives.

I do think buy-in is important. But do it as an experiment. Did it work? What changes did it make? Did it make you anxious or distracted during those 50 minutes in class? I did that for years. I surveyed students for a number of semesters; how do you feel about putting your phone in a pouch? They made some predictions and said what they thought about how annoying it was. But at the end, they talked about how those predictions [played out], and whether they were better able to focus. It was very, very clear they were better able to focus. Also interestingly, not a single student left during class to get a drink or go to the bathroom. They had been 100 percent doing that just so they could use their phone.

Should we be talking about this question, cell phones in classrooms, for all ages, middle school all the way through college? Or does age matter?

It's never going to be universal. Different families, different schools. And there is, on some level, a safety issue. I do not blame parents for thinking, if there's someone with a gun in school, I need a way to reach my kids. What if all the phones are in pouches when someone with a gun comes in? It's crazy that we even have to consider that.

What's one example of something that can be changed easily?

Parents need to stop calling their kids during the day. Stop doing that. What you are doing is setting that kid up so that they are responding to a bot 24-7 when they shouldn't be. If you're a kid who gets a text from your parent in class, you are conditioned to respond and to know that [the parent] expects a response. It adds so much anxiety to people's lives. It all just ends up in this anxiety loop.

When kids are in school, leave them alone. Think about what that phone is actually meant for. When you gave them a phone, you said it's in case of an emergency or if you need to be picked up in a different place. Make those the parameters. If it's just to confirm, "I'm still picking you up at 3," then no, don't do that. Remember when we didn't have to confirm? There is a time and place for this, for all technology.

This latest study, how do you think people will react to it? This isn't new. How many studies have to

come out to say that cured meat is terrible and is carcinogenic. People are like, "Oh, don't tell me what to eat. Or when to be on my phone." This gets real contentious, real fast because telling people what's good for them is hard.

I can understand that—but in this case we're not telling adults to stop being on their phones. We're saying help get your kids off their phones in classrooms, for their health and education.

Studies show kids' brains, and their gray matter, are low when they are on screens. School is prime habit-forming time. You should not sit in class within view of the professor, laughing while they are talking about World War II. There is a social appropriateness that needs to be learned.

Another habit that needs to be addressed is the misconception of multitasking. We are under this misconception we all can do it. And we can't. You might think, I can listen to this lecture while my sister texts me. That is not supported by science or studies. It is literally derailing you. Your brain jumps off to another track and has to get back on. If you think you have not left that first track, you are wrong.

So what next steps would you like to see?

I would like to see both schools and families be more assertive about this. But also to work together. If the parents are anti-smartphone policy, it doesn't matter if the school is pro-policy. If there is a war between parents and schools, I am not sure much will happen. Some kind of intervention and restriction is better than just ripping it away from kids.

The UNESCO study found it is actually even worse for university students. We are all coming at this problem from all different ways. Pouches or banned phones. Or nothing.

https://www.bu.edu/articles/2023/why-schools-should-ban-cell-phones-in-the-classroom/