

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

### **Students Can't Get Off Their Phones. Schools Have Had Enough.**

*Administrators see them as an intensifying distraction — or, worse, a tax on students' mental health*

Source: Donna St. George, *Washington Post*, May 9, 2023

When students returned to school during the pandemic, educators quickly saw a change in their cellphone habits. More than ever, they were glued to the devices during class — posting on social media, searching YouTube, texting friends.

So this year, schools in Ohio, Colorado, Maryland, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia, California, and others banned the devices in class to curb student obsession, learning disruption, disciplinary incidents and mental health worries.

“We basically said: ‘This has got to stop,’” said Dayton Public Schools Superintendent Elizabeth Lolli. “We’ve got academic issues that are not going to be fixed ... if our students continue to sit on their phones.”

Most school systems already had cellphone bans in 2020, according to federal data, but the pandemic brought more urgency to places with lenient rules or lax enforcement. Some invested in ways to lock up phones away during school hours. Others forced students to keep them hidden away — with strict penalties for violations.

The stakes are higher after the covid-19 years, with many districts behind academically up to a year or more and doing all they can to help students catch up. Some have come to see social media — accessed via students’ phones — as a major contributor to poor mental health. A string of school systems has filed suit against the platforms.

But many students — who use their phones for listening to music, arranging rides home, and checking on grades or assignments — are unhappy with the crackdowns. Some check in with parents or coaches by text. Some think the decision should be theirs, not a school dictate.

Parents have been split on the issue, with many critics insisting their children need phones in case of an emergency.

“We’re not trying to infringe on anybody’s freedom, but we need to have full attention in the classroom,” said Nancy J. Hines, superintendent in the Penn Hills School District, in the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

Hines said cellphone problems in her diverse 3,000-student system intensified after returning from remote-learning during the pandemic. Hoping to switch the focus from scrolling to learning, the district tried a ban last year in its middle school. Homeroom teachers collected phones every morning and locked them in zippered storage cases. Students picked up their cellphones before heading home.

This year, the district went a step further, expanding to the high school level. There, students slip their phones into locking Yondr pouches (about \$16 each) that they carry with them all day and that they can open by tapping it against a magnetic device as they leave.

The experience has not been perfect. Some students gamed the system by putting an old cellphone in the pouch and hiding their current device. But it generally has gone well, Hines said. “Do we have 100 percent compliance? No. But the majority of our teachers would say that it is much better. There are fewer distractions.”

In Philadelphia, 27 public schools use Yondr pouches, said spokeswoman Monique Braxton. Schools request approval from the district and pay for them out of their own budgets, she said.

Principal Megan Wapner rolled out the pouches at her K-8 school in Philadelphia this year for students in fourth grade to eighth grade. Now, she said, she sees children talk to one another at lunch, rather than text or scroll. If a parent needs to reach a student during school hours, the school’s staff promptly relays messages, she said.

But in Virginia Beach, with 64,000 students, district officials considered the pouches too expensive given the number of students who would need them. They discussed several approaches, deciding that “there has to be some personal responsibility on the individuals that come to our schools to follow the rules,” said Matthew Delaney, chief schools officer.

A new regulation this school year forbids cellphone use during instructional hours or in a school setting. Middle-schoolers now must keep phones stowed in their lockers. High school students may carry phones — and use them during lunch or between classes — but not in class.

Teachers refer offenders to an administrator, who may give them a warning, in-school detention or another punishment.

Delaney said the district has “seen some great strides,” but challenges continue: Teachers have to monitor the issue, and parents have to support the district’s desire to restrict them.

“It’s a consistent area of concern that we try to get ahead of and at times we have to react to,” he said.

Andrea Palomino-Jayo, 17, a high school senior in Virginia Beach, doesn’t like the change. Teachers were strict as the school year started, she said, and continue to remind students from time to time. She keeps her phone off and tucked into her book bag — and likes that students are involved in class discussions instead of “what’s on their phone,” she said.

Many teachers are all for new limits.

In Kansas, teachers have raised the issue during contract negotiations — which are ongoing — asking the district to ban cellphones in class. The goal is for a districtwide discussion of the issue, said Katie Warren, president of the United Teachers of Wichita. Previously, teachers had asked principals for schoolwide restrictions, with varied results.

The timing is ideal, said Mike Harris, a high school teacher and union vice president. As a result of the pandemic, Wichita students now have district-provided Chromebooks they can use in class for research or other online work. “They don’t need their cellphones to learn,” he said.

Superintendent Bill Wilson, who leads a system of 1,400 students in Brush, Colo., about 90 miles northeast of Denver, said nearly all of student discipline issues last year were the result of phones or involved phones. Social media posts and texts during school hours often led to conflicts, bullying or other infractions, he said.

This year, the rules are the same in every classroom: No phones. If students are caught in class or even in a hallway, they must go to their school’s office and wait for a parent to come to collect their phone. If they need to read messages on their phone — say, about a ride home or a team practice — the rules permit them to visit the office and view them there.

“When they’re finished, they put the phone back into their backpacks and go on their way,” Wilson said.

He said he sees more interaction between teachers and students, more focus, less conflict in hallways. And only a handful of students are second-time offenders, he said. “The majority of our students, when we surveyed them, were thankful for it because it has reduced the stress in their life,” Wilson said. “They’re not worried about what their friends are saying, at least not during school time.” Several parents were critical early on, he said, but most have been accepting.

For other parents, the higher priority is being in touch in a crisis. Rachel Whitemore, who lives in the suburbs of New York City, said she noticed her 13-year-old son was visibly anxious about a proposed cellphone ban at a previous school, having grown up with a steady drumbeat of news about school shootings. His school now allows students to carry phones as long as they don’t use them during school hours — which works for him.

“I’m afraid that if something happens, I won’t be able to contact anyone ... to tell people I’m okay or I’m not,” the eighth-grader said. “Worst-case scenario: You can at least say goodbye.”

But educators and experts say students need to focus on their surroundings during a crisis, not their cellphones.

People peering into phones “lose all awareness of what is going on around them,” which can increase the likelihood of being hurt, said Jaelyn Schildkraut, a researcher on school and mass shootings and executive director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in New York.

“You’re putting yourself at greater risk because you’re not actively working to protect yourself,” she said. Phones should not be pinging with messages either — or even used in silent mode during an active shooter incident, she said. After the crisis subsides, students can connect with parents, she said.

In Danbury, Conn., Kristy Zaleta, principal of Rogers Park Middle School, switched to a new approach this year, too: Phones are off limits except during the school’s three-minute transition periods and its 30-minute lunch. “Any other time, they’re taken away,” she said.

The result: “There’s a calmer sense,” she said. “It definitely feels like the air has changed.” The previous year, she said, “almost broke us.”

### **Possible Response Questions**

- What are your thoughts about cell phones and schools? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.