

Schools Lock Up Cellphones to Keep Students Focused

Educators cite classroom distractions and states aim to limit use, as the U.S. warns of mental health risks

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A student places her phone in a holder at a Utah school. PHOTO: RICK BOWMER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

High-school history teacher Tambi Lewis rarely goes more than a few minutes during classes without stopping to say to a student, “Put your phone away.”

Clark County School District in Las Vegas, where she works, prohibits phone use during class, but she said students know enforcement beyond a call home is rare. So all day she catches students scrolling social media, texting each other and watching YouTube videos when they should be completing assignments in their U.S. and world history classes, which are required for graduation.

Lewis's school will soon participate in a pilot program requiring that cellphones be stowed during class in nonlocking pouches that block cell signals. Clark County, the country's fifth-largest district, will require all students in sixth through 12th grades to keep phones in the pouches starting next fall.

"We have to do something," Lewis said. "There's no learning going on because of the phones."



Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont wants schools to take steps to prohibit phone use through eighth grade. PHOTO: JESSICA HILL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The decision to disable or lock up phones, [while still far from the norm](#), is taking hold in thousands of schools across the U.S.—a sign of growing concern among policymakers and educators. Many states have proposed or enacted new school cellphone restrictions, and a bill in Congress would study the effects of phones in

schools. Many teachers say phones have become an in-class distraction, but phone bans might face pushback from parents accustomed to regular contact with their children.

A 2023 study by nonprofit Common Sense Media found that students receive a median of 237 phone notifications a day, a quarter of them during school. [The U.S. Surgeon General warned](#) last year that social media can have detrimental effects on youth mental health.

Indiana passed a law this month that will prohibit cellphone use during classroom instruction. Florida did the same last year. Massachusetts created \$800,000 in grants this school year to help districts adopt phone restrictions. Connecticut legislation would create a model policy on phone limits in schools.

“We hear from teachers all the time that they’re distracting,” said Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, who is encouraging schools to ban phones through eighth grade, by using pouches or other measures.

Most schools already have some rules in place that [limit phone use in class](#), according to survey data from the U.S. Department of Education. But teachers say these policies are difficult to enforce. It is unclear whether any of the proposed laws would be more effective.

Administrators and students say social-media use on phones can become toxic, as when fights or embarrassing moments are shared instantly or when social drama plays out online.

Cheryl Fountain, a principal in Montgomery, Ala., said a particularly damaging situation involved nude photos of a ninth-grader that circulated throughout the school, which ultimately prompted the child to seek counseling. Montgomery Public Schools began using magnetically locked pouches to store phones this year and says fighting and misbehavior have fallen almost 24%.

But banning phones from the first bell of the school day to the last remains unpopular with a segment of parents who say they want access to their children in case of emergency. Some educators and parents also argue teenagers need to learn to use phones responsibly.

A recent national poll found that only one-third of public-school parents [supported a ban on cellphones](#) during the school day. “Having open lines of communication with our kids is something that we are really comfortable with, accustomed to, and we’re not willing to give that up,” said Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union, the nonprofit that commissioned the poll.



Yondr phone pouches are opened with a magnetic key. PHOTO: ANGELA WEISS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Vendors are cropping up to help schools curtail phone use by locking them up. California-founded company Yondr, which makes pouches that cost \$30 a student and [need a magnetic key to open](#), said it worked with 3,000 schools and districts last year.

“We’re in this all-or-nothing situation,” said Sabine Polak, a Pennsylvania mother who co-founded an advocacy group called the Phone-Free Schools Movement. “As soon as you allow a little bit of it, it becomes a nightmare for schools to manage.”

At Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in New York City, students seal phones in a pouch each day when they enter the building and only unlock them as they leave. Principal Jeffrey Palladino said it has become so habitual that there is little pushback from students or parents. If anything, he feels a bit jealous of the chance for a device detox.

“I wish my phone was in a Yondr pouch a lot,” Palladino said.

High-school junior Kylie McClusky said that since her district, Florida’s Orange County Public Schools, banned phone use during the entire school day, she has felt a newfound

sense of camaraderie and social interaction on the 2,500-student campus and more focus in classes. “Before, if I was having a bad day and didn’t feel like talking to anyone, I would go on my phone and zone out,” she said.

As the year has gone on, however, she has seen teachers grow lenient. Fewer are requiring backpacks to stay piled in a designated corner of the classroom, with phones stowed out of reach. She is back to checking texts at lunch, less concerned about her phone being confiscated.



Banning cellphone use at school remains unpopular with some parents, who say they want access to their children in case of emergency. PHOTO: RICK BOWMER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Glenn Robbins, the superintendent of a small elementary- and middle-school district outside Atlantic City, N.J., said he has no plans to restrict phones because they can be a helpful research tool and students should be taught about cybersecurity and cyberbullying. “If we’re not teaching them, then who?” he said. “It’s not going to go away.”

In Pennsylvania, 16-year-old Grace Polak said signs are plastered on doors at her high school saying phones must stay in bags or lockers. But she said teachers have largely given up on telling students to put them away. The high-school junior, whose mom co-founded the parent advocacy group to ban phones, said she saw her grades and mental health erode as a freshman and sophomore because of her dependence on social media.

She said when she finds herself with down time in class, she opens her phone and turns to Netflix, TikTok or Snapchat.

The school's ban is designed to limit access to phones, but it doesn't work out that way, she said. "If teachers did enforce it, everybody, including myself, could just do a lot better," Grace said.

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