

CALIFORNIA

Harvard-Westlake blocks TikTok and Clash Royale on student phones. How's that going down?



Students prepare to check in with their phones at Harvard-Westlake School in Studio City on Dec. 18. The school's new cellphone policy went into effect this fall and requires students to use an app that blocks some social media and gaming platforms. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

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Dec. 31, 2025 3 AM PT

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- Harvard-Westlake blocks “distracting” apps from upper school students’ phones.
- Students say they prefer their school’s approach to magnetically locked Yondr pouches.

- The app is an alternative to outright phone bans.

English teacher Jocelyn Medawar has noticed a new vibe at Harvard-Westlake School this school year: Upper school students are chatting in the halls and greet her as they enter class.

They no longer have their “faces glued to a screen,” said Medawar, who has taught at the elite private school for 35 years. “The whole feeling on campus has generally changed.”

At a time when school [cellphone bans or limits](#) are [the law in California public schools](#) and in at least 34 other states — a growing national movement to get distracted students off their devices and focused on learning — Harvard-Westlake has found a way to enforce their restrictions by turning to — what else? — a mobile app that partially locks down phones and flags the front office when students attempt to break the rules.

Students in grades 10 through 12 must install a custom-programmed [app called “Opal”](#) that blocks a list of social media and gaming apps that Harvard-Westlake educators have identified for now as scofflaws during school hours: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X, Discord, Threads, Pokémon Go, Roblox, Clash Royale and Reddit.

Students at the Studio City campus are allowed to keep their cellphones with them and can use them to contact parents or hail a ride only in an administrator’s office.



Students walk to class at Harvard-Westlake School in Studio City. A QR code sign allows them to check in their cellphones before class. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

But if a student disables Opal to use a banned app, school officials are notified on an office dashboard. The app represents one strategy designed to shore up the loopholes that have emerged in other popular enforcement tools, including lockable magnetic phone pouches that can be broken into or outright bans that sneaky students skirt.



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Confiscation. Calls home. Sealed pouches. Why schools struggle to ban cellphones

Dec. 2, 2024

After the first semester under the new rules, Harvard-Westlake school leaders reported promising results — and some students said they no longer are reflexively reaching for their phones and are sleeping better.

“The overall process ... has made an impact,” said Jordan Church, dean of students at Harvard-Westlake upper school.

During lunch, “students are engaged,” he added. “They’re talking with each other, they’re having fun, enjoying their time, and cellphones aren’t a part of that process anymore.”



Security guard Earl Saunders checks student phones as they enter Harvard-Westlake School. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

Phones stay in backpacks

As students arrived on campus on a recent morning, they pointed their phone cameras at large QR code posters placed around entrances. The scanned code blocks the forbidden apps until the end of the school day.

Before Opal, the upper school did not have a policy governing phone usage, with teachers allowed to set their own class rules. During free periods, students would be distracted by their phones, instead of working or engaging with peers, Church said.

Multiple students said they preferred their school's approach over the magnetically locked [Yondr pouches used in L.A. Unified](#) and other large public school districts, because their phones are not completely shut down.

"Locking away phones could be a dangerous mistake," said sophomore Miro Katan, who previously worried pouches could hinder him from texting his parents during an emergency.



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'Turned off and stored.' LAUSD reveals details on school cellphone ban to begin Feb. 18

Nov. 13, 2024

Several students, including sophomore Alexander Ahn, regularly use the app after school.

"It's improved my study habits and time management skills," said Ahn, who used it to free himself of distractions while preparing for a modern world history exam.

One student, senior Sydney Assil, was indifferent. "I'm not bothered much by Opal," she said. "I find it a little bit unnecessary because I don't really have a hard time following the phone policy."

Assil supports phone restrictions and felt the characterization of students ignoring one another in favor of scrolling on phones was overblown. "I don't think we're that level of zombie," she said.

The ban hasn't eliminated social media use, and some students use their laptops to access Snapchat, Assil said.

But junior Simren Bindra, a student council member who tested Opal last spring, said she's seen changes. Students can no longer scroll as they walk, she said.

"It's a lot better that we're learning to manage distraction than having our phone completely stripped away," she said.



A student checks in with her phone at Harvard-Westlake School. The school requires students to scan a QR code when they enter and check in to an app that blocks them from using some social media and gaming sites. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

A testing ground for the app

Opal was originally built for working adults to improve productivity by turning off distractions, but is finding a niche among high school and college students, who make up most of the app's new installs, said Chief Executive Kenneth Schlenker.

When Schlenker received an email in early 2025 from Ari Engelberg, Harvard-Westlake's head of communications and strategic initiatives, inquiring whether the company had a product for educators, collaborating on a new usage seemed like a natural next step.

Harvard-Westlake asked student council members to try the Opal app in the spring. Feedback was positive, so the company built Opal for Schools, a paid version that also gives administrators a dashboard to track rule compliance.

"It's much more effective for the school to be able to know if a student isn't complying and is able to engage in a conversation with them rather than ... a blanket ban," Schlenker said.



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A magnetic pouch is key to enforcing school cellphone bans. Kids are getting around it

March 24, 2025

Church, the Harvard-Westlake dean, said the school passed on [Yondr pouches](#) after learning teens could buy tools to bypass the locks. He said he hoped the app would help students self-manage their phone use.

“Every tool has a work-around, and teenagers are smart, so we haven’t really made Opal be the enforcer,” Church said. The school may use the dashboard to identify rule-breakers in the future, but for now, teachers and staff are simply confiscating phones on sight, he said.

Engelberg acknowledged some students sneak glances at their phones. “Our goal is not to make it to zero,” he said. “Our goal is to bring it to a better balance.”

Although students have adjusted well to the rules, some initially feared the school could use Opal to peer into their phone screens, said junior Charlotte Im, another student council member who tested Opal.

Opal does not give schools the ability to view a student’s activity within apps, Schlenker said. The dashboard, built to resemble an attendance sheet, shows when students log on and off Opal and whether they tampered with the school’s block settings.

The council held an assembly in September to address privacy concerns. “[A]fter that, nobody really had any ... negative things to say,” Im said.



A Harvard-Westlake student scans a QR code. The school's new cellphone restrictions require students to scan a QR code to activate an app that blocks social media sites including Instagram and Snapchat. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

More schools seek middle ground

Schlenker said that private schools have been the first to use the app, but that public schools could also purchase it. Opal's basic app is free to download, but some features require a paid subscription. School plans start at \$20 per student per year, Schlenker said in an email.

San Francisco's the Bay School had volunteers try the app in the fall and plans to pilot Opal for Schools — the version with administrative controls — with a larger group in the spring.

Benjamin Bingham, the Bay School's technology director, said the school is still mulling over options. It tried going phone-free for a week but found that students relied on the devices for note-taking and scheduling, and some parents were uncomfortable without a direct line to their teens.

The school sought an option that would allow students to have phones and reduce distractions, Bingham said.

Bingham has also been in talks with companies [Bloom](#) and [Unplug](#), which make tap cards and key chains blocking certain apps. Cost has been a key consideration for the school of roughly 400 students, which ruled out Yondr pouches.

Bingham declined to share details of Opal's quote, but said it was "significantly less" than Yondr's, which averaged about \$35 per student. A Yondr spokesman said in an email that its packages typically cost \$25 to \$30 per student in the first year and include training and support. There is no fixed annual fee and pouches are not sold individually.

Medawar, the Harvard-Westlake teacher, said that the new app has made her job easier and that she no longer makes students deposit phones in a caddy at the start of class.

"I don't have to be as much of a policeman," she said.

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