

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

If Schools Won't Ban Kids' Cellphones, Some Lawmakers Say They Will

Florida now bans cellphones during class, and lawmakers elsewhere like the idea.

Source: Elaine S. Povich, OklahomaVoice.com, March 19, 2024

At David H. Hickman High School in Columbia, Missouri, the rule is that students must keep their cellphones out of sight during class. In reality, the teachers tasked with enforcing the rule are no match for teenagers' "almost compulsive" need to be on their phones all the time, said science teacher Noelle Gilzow.

Gilzow confiscates offenders' devices and drops them in a basket on her desk she calls the "phone jail." But she knows that she is fighting a losing battle.

"I cannot compete with Netflix," she said.

More than three-quarters of U.S. K-12 public schools prohibit non-academic cellphone use, according to a report from the 2021-2022 school year. But only 43% of public high schools have such a rule. And at many of them, like at Hickman High, the so-called bans are enforced weakly, if at all.

Last year, Florida became the first state to require all its public schools to bar students from using their phones during class. Now governors and legislators in at least a half-dozen other states are pushing their schools to follow suit — through persuasion or by law.

Indiana Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb just signed into law a bill that requires school districts to prohibit cellphone use during instructional time, with some exceptions. A similar bill is advancing in Oklahoma, and legislation has been introduced in Kansas and Vermont.

Connecticut Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont has praised schools in his state that have restricted cellphone use, and he has introduced legislation that would direct the state board of education to adopt a model policy.

"Social media is often anti-social, and too much smartphone makes you stupid," Lamont said in his State of the State address this year.

In Utah, Republican Gov. Spencer Cox in January sent a letter to school leaders throughout the state urging them to get cellphones out of class.

"Placing cellphones in backpacks or lockers during class time allows students to give their undivided attention to lessons, to fully participate in discussions and to build relationships with their peers," Cox wrote in an opinion piece published in the *Deseret News*. "Our students deserve every advantage and removing cellphones from learning time is one proven way we can help our children succeed."

Cox and other proponents of such measures cite research showing that even the presence of a cellphone is a distraction, and they argue that removing them from classrooms will boost academic performance, reduce bullying and improve students' mental health.

Not surprisingly, many students are loath to give up their phones. But much of the pushback against phone-free classrooms comes from parents, who want to be connected to their children throughout the day, especially if there is an emergency.

"I like that it's with her all the time. I want to keep my eyes on her 24/7. I want to know where she is at all times," said Elisabeth Rice of Portland, Oregon, who has a 14-year-old daughter. "If she leaves the school, she won't leave her phone behind, right?"

Oregon leaves it up to school districts to determine cellphone policies. The high school Rice's daughter attends has a "silent and away" rule for phones in class, but the device does not have to be stowed in a cubby or signal-proof pouch, which other schools require.

"We've all seen how schools handle emergencies," Rice said. "I would like to have a direct communication with my kid and see what the safest option is."

Eliminating distractions

To Indiana Republican state Sen. Jeff Raatz, one of the lead sponsors of the proposed ban in his state, the argument for taking phones out of the classroom boils down to one word: distraction.

He was speaking about civics at a Henry County high school last fall, he recalled in an interview, when he noticed the students were unusually attentive. It took him awhile to realize why.

"It was weeks before it dawned on me that there wasn't a single cellphone. I was thinking, 'How come nobody's looking at their phone?'"

Without phones, he said, "instead of texting your friend, you are paying attention. We are struggling as a nation in attaining educational outcomes. One way [to help] is to eliminate distraction."

Oklahoma Republican state Sen. Adam Pugh came to the same conclusion after talking to a few classrooms recently at an Oklahoma City suburban high school. “In every single class,” he recalled, “half the kids were on their phones the whole time. I can’t imagine ever having a guest lecturer when I was in school and not being focused.”

His bill would require local public school districts to develop policies banning students’ phones from campuses. It awaits a vote on the Senate floor.

A 2019 survey of college students in 37 states (plus Alberta, Canada) supports the assertion that digital devices distract students: On average, respondents spent 19.4% of class time using digital devices for non-class purposes.

Barney McCoy, a journalism and mass communications professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the author of the study, said it’s not surprising that students sitting in class have a hard time resisting their devices, since they are so accustomed to checking them constantly when they are outside the classroom.

“If we are standing in line at the grocery store, we are going to pull out a smartphone,” McCoy said. “If you are in the middle of a conversation and a device beeps, boops or rings, you are going to look at it.”

Some research suggests that banning cellphones from class can have a significant impact. A Norwegian study published earlier this year examined the effect of cellphone bans on middle school students, concluding that girls’ grades and mental health improved significantly and that bullying declined among both girls and boys. The effects were greatest among lower-income girls.

Too broad?

“If you look at social media, if you look at what the kids are doing, a lot of the bullying we see is because of video taken on cellphones,” said Kansas Republican state Rep. Adam Thomas, chair of the House Committee on Education and the father of five children.

But after Thomas’ committee held a hearing on the bill, he decided that districts, not the state, should decide what cellphone policy would work best for them.

Indiana state Rep. Ryan Dvorak, one of the eight House members who opposed the ban in his state, reached a similar conclusion.

“There is not a school in the state of Indiana that doesn’t have their own policy on cellphone use already,” said Dvorak, a Democrat and the father of three school-age children. “Teachers deal with them every day. Every classroom has a different way their teacher likes to deal with it. I don’t like when the legislature gets involved in classroom minutia.

“Everybody understands kids have problems with being sucked into devices. But creating some absolute law that says this can never happen is counterproductive.”

Roni Cohen-Sandler, a clinical psychologist and the author of “Anything But My Phone, Mom!,” a book for parents on dealing with electronic devices, agreed that statewide bans for students of all ages don’t make sense.

“Technology is part of our kids’ lives,” she said in an interview. “It’s important to help them evaluate when technology is appropriate and when it’s not.”

Cohen-Sandler said phones don’t have any place in elementary schools and that it is “highly unlikely” that they serve a useful function in middle school classrooms. She also said that students who text too frequently with their parents aren’t developing the ability to deal with their own feelings, “undermining a lot of development that is taking place and impeding kids from being resilient.”

High school students, however, should be mature enough to use phones appropriately, “in the service of learning,” Cohen-Sandler said. “You can’t infantilize 16-, 17-, 18-year-olds. I hope they have the judgment to use cellphones more responsibly.”

McCoy, the Nebraska professor, said teachers should take responsibility for engaging students. “We have to be more innovative as instructors,” he said. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve called on a student who is engaged on their device and they will look up and say, ‘Can you repeat the question?’ That’s a challenge to myself as an instructor.”

But many parents of high school students, perhaps remembering the cellphone-free days of their youth, don’t think phones have any place in the classroom.

“Kids don’t need phones in school — period,” said Vince Moody of Huntsville, Alabama, who has four children, including a ninth grader. Moody said that if he had to get in touch with one of them, he’d simply call the school office and leave a message.

“I don’t know that there are a lot of benefits to having phones in schools, other than that parents can reach their little snowflake in school,” he said.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about banning cellphones in school? 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.