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

New Evidence Shows School Phone Bans Are Gradually Improving Test Scores

Previous results were mixed, but the first national study to track individual students' growth shows bans may help reverse declines.

Source: Claire Cain Miller, *New York Times*, November 17, 2026

School cellphone bans are beginning to modestly improve students' academic performance, according to the first large national analysis that compared students' test scores before and after the bans.

Schools with strict bans — requiring students to lock their phones in pouches all school day — saw math and reading scores improve as if students had an additional week or two of school a year, the study found. It was published Tuesday by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard.

U.S. students' test scores began falling over a decade ago. The drop coincided with the rise of smartphones, raising questions about their role in the decline. The evidence so far on the academic effects of phone bans has been mixed. But the new study indicates they are starting to have an influence.

"The earlier studies on cellphone bans have been dismissed as implying small impacts, and in-school cellphone use has been ruled out as playing a big role in the decline," said Thomas Kane, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an author of the study. "But we think that's mistaken."

The study looked at 3.3 million students between 2021 and 2026. They were in third through 10th grade, attending 4,600 U.S. schools. Using scores on MAP tests, which track achievement from fall to spring, it compared the performance of students at schools that put in strict phone bans with those at similar schools that did not have such bans.

The annual gains reversed about half the annual loss that an average student experienced in the years leading up to the pandemic. (Students lost even more ground during pandemic closures.)

Two earlier studies reached mixed conclusions. One, of a single district in Florida in 2025, found small increases in test scores by the second year of the ban. Another, using schools' average scores on a variety of standardized tests nationwide, found no statistically significant increase in scores.

The new study is different because it assesses individual students' scores on the same test, looking at growth over the school year, across the country and through 2025-26. The findings don't necessarily contradict earlier ones, researchers on all three studies said. They all found small growth in at least some test scores — some more significant than others — and evidence that growth increases with time. That makes sense, they said, because just as declines added up gradually each year, improvement could also be gradual.

Brian A. Jacob, a professor at the University of Michigan and an author of the previous national phone ban study, said the new study showed effects "quite similar" to what his research team found. In his study, the positive effects were too small to be statistically significant, but in the new study, they weren't.

He cautioned against being too optimistic about modest achievement gains, but added that "if they accumulate over time, year after year, that could be really important and really meaningful."

Test scores in the United States, which had been increasing since 1990, began a sharp decline in the mid-2010s. Researchers say there are probably several reasons, including the end of the federal

school accountability law called No Child Left Behind, followed by pandemic school closures and an increase in absenteeism. The mass introduction of phones is another — by 2018, nearly all teenagers had one, and most said they used them daily at school.

Forty-six states now have school cellphone bans or restrictions. The rules are different among states, and schools also enforce them differently, which makes it hard to assess the effects. While some schools require students to lock away their phones, others let them keep phones with them, and some allow students to use them during lunch and between classes.

The study indicated that strict bans — physically restricting students from accessing their phones — had the largest effects on academic growth. The gains were in both math and reading, for students at all levels of achievement. This surprised the researchers, who expected low performers to benefit most because achievement losses were largest among them.

"I think it's really interesting and useful to know there's no difference," Professor Jacob said.

In reading, the bans also cut down on sliding backward — fewer students had their scores decrease over the year. Researchers say that reading seems to be more affected by screen use because it requires sustained focus, and because screens often displace time spent reading.

The study also looked at less rigid policies, like relying on students not to use phones during class. It found that these also led to academic gains, but the researchers said they were less confident in the results because the schools with and without these bans were different in other ways.

Banning phones probably won't be enough on its own to turn around test scores. Research shows that successful schools do many interventions at once, and that execution matters. Still, even if the academic effects are modest, bans are an inexpensive solution.

The ubiquity of screens both in and out of classrooms could dilute the effect of phone bans. In interviews last year, several teachers said students had turned to their school-issued laptops to message one another or use the internet in class. Time spent on devices outside school could also be affecting student achievement, researchers hypothesized.

A major impact of phones "is almost certainly due to out-of-school use — the reduction in sleep quality, changes in mental health, distraction, displacement of time that might have been spent on homework," said David Figlio, a professor at the University of Rochester and an author of the Florida study.

Teachers and researchers said test scores were only one potential benefit of cellphone bans. They could also improve student well-being, such as by decreasing cyberbullying, boosting social skills or encouraging engagement in class discussions.

The theory is that phone bans are not only "about instructional time, but about self-esteem and mental health and connectiveness to your peers," said Sarah Novicoff, a research fellow on K-12 education at the Public Policy Institute of California. "Those are the questions I don't think we know the answer to yet in the literature, and are important alongside test scores."

Before Jill Anderson's school banned devices, her third-grade students in Westchester County, N.Y., would text their parents during class, or phones would ring while she was teaching. Without them, she noticed benefits that went beyond academics: "When kids don't have devices on them, they spend more time socializing, chatting, playing."

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about banning cell phones 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.