

Schools clash with parents over bans on student cellphones

November 4 2022, by Brooke Schultz



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Cellphones—the ultimate distraction—keep children from learning, educators say. But in attempts to keep the phones at bay, the most vocal pushback doesn't always come from students. In some cases, it's from

parents.

Bans on the devices were on the rise before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since schools reopened, struggles with [student behavior](#) and [mental health](#) have given some schools even more reason to restrict access.

But parents and caregivers who had constant access to their children during remote learning have been reluctant to give that up. Some fear losing touch with their kids during a [school shooting](#).

Shannon Moser, who has [students](#) in eighth and ninth grades in Rochester, New York, said she felt parents were being pushed away when the Greece Central School District this year began locking away student phones. There's a form of accountability, she said, when students are able to record what goes on around them.

"Everything is just so politicized, so divisive. And I think parents just have a general fear of what's happening with their kids during the day," Moser said. She said she generally has liberal views, but many parents on either side of the political divide feel the same way.

Amid heightened scrutiny of topics such as race and inclusion, some parents also view cellphone restrictions as a way of keeping them out of their kids' education.

Over a decade ago, around 90% of [public schools](#) prohibited cellphone use, but that shrank to 65% in the 2015-2016 [school](#) year. By the 2019-2020 school year, bans were in place at 76% of the schools, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. California and Tennessee recently have passed laws allowing schools to prohibit phones.

Now, in particular, educators see a need to keep students on task to recover from pandemic shutdowns, when many students [lost the](#)

[equivalent of months of learning](#).

And many [school officials](#) may feel empowered to ban the devices, given growing concern among parents about pandemic-era screen time, said Liz Keren-Kolb, clinical associate professor of education technologies at the University of Michigan. But she said parent views on the debate run the gamut.

"You still have the parents that want to have that direct line of communication and have concerns over their child not being able to have that communication," she said. "But I do think that there's more of an empathy and an understanding toward their child being able to put away their device so they can really focus on the learning in the classroom, and wanting that face-to-face experience."

Washington School District in western Pennsylvania implemented a ban this year as educators increasingly found cellphones to be an obstacle. Students were on their cellphones in the hallways and at the cafeteria tables. Some would call home or answer calls in the middle of a class, [high school](#) English teacher Treg Campbell said.

The superintendent, George Lammay, said the ban was the right choice.

"We're looking to increase engagement and academic progress with kids—not try to limit their contact with families. That's not the point," he said.

In some cases, pushback from parents has led to adjustments in policy.

At the Brush School District in Colorado, cellphones were banned after teachers flagged concerns over online bullying. When parents spoke out, the district held a [community meeting](#) that lasted over two hours, with most testimony against the ban. The biggest takeaway, Superintendent

Bill Wilson said, was that parents wanted their children to have access to their phones.

The policy was adjusted to allow cellphones on campus, although they must be turned off and out of sight. The district also said it would accommodate a handful of students with unique circumstances.

"There's not an intention to say cell phones are evil," Wilson said. "It's a reset to say, 'How do we manage this in a way that makes sense for everybody?'"

At the Richardson Independent School District, near Dallas, [student cellphone use](#) had been prohibited during instructional time before officials proposed buying magnetic pouches to seal them away during the school day. Parent feedback around the cost of the pouches and concerns about safety in emergencies led to a scaled-back plan to pilot the pouches at one of the district's eight [middle schools](#), Forest Meadow Junior High.

"We used to get in touch with our kids when we wanted to," said Louise Boll, president of the Forest Meadow parent-teacher association. "There was a lot of pushback and a lot of concern in the beginning of what this would look like, how this would unfold, how is it going to affect us getting in touch?"

Kids and their parents have largely adapted to the new policy, she said.

In parent activists' online discussions, there are plenty of defenders of cellphone bans. Some others, however, have railed against bans as efforts to keep parents from seeing "violence" and "indoctrination" inside schools.

Legal action by parents remains rare, with one exception being an

unsuccessful lawsuit by several parents against New York City's school cellphone ban in 2006, which ultimately was lifted in 2015. Still, petitions against school [cellphone](#) bans have increased on Change.org this year, a spokesperson said.

There's no perfect formula for cellphones in schools, said Kolb, who said the pendulum will likely swing back away from bans depending on how attitudes change regarding technology in schools.

"It really comes down to making sure that we're educating students and [parents](#) about healthy habits with their digital devices," she said.

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Citation: Schools clash with parents over bans on student cellphones (2022, November 4)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2022-11-schools-clash-parents-student-cellphones.html>

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