

Cellphone ban won't address mental health, classroom concentration issues, say experts

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While a ban on cellphones in Ontario classrooms will temporarily keep them out of students' hands, the move will do little to support the mental health of youth across the province, say Brock University experts.

Assistant Professor Naomi Andrews in the Department of Child and Youth Studies says that while limiting cellphone use in schools might reduce in-class distractions, it won't address many of the underlying problems that impact the mental health of children and youth.

"The focus seems to be on implementing a ban, and then enforcement—what the penalties and consequences are for not adhering to the policy—but that is not getting at the root causes of youth's struggles concentrating in the classroom, such as mental health issues, peer relationship struggles or [social media](#) addiction," she says. "Simply banning cellphones is not going to address all of these challenges, nor will implementing punishments for students who don't adhere."

Andrews, who directs Brock's Andrews Relationships Lab and is part of Brock Research on Aggression and Victimization Experiences (BRAVE), also says that banning cellphones could miss the mark when it comes to targeting the harms of cyberbullying.

"Bullying in online contexts has the potential to be more problematic than bullying in person for many reasons, such as the chance for [bullies](#) to remain anonymous and reduced empathy caused by not being able to see the target's response," she says. "However, there is overlap between cyberbullying and in-person bullying, so bullying is going to persist in the classroom despite not having access to cellphones, and it is going to continue after school or on other devices."

For Andrews, the key is "to focus on building healthy relationships among peers."

"More attention needs to be paid to the underlying causes of these issues and supporting students in gaining critical competencies: social-emotional learning skills, social media literacy and relationship skills," she says.

Professor David Hutchison in Brock's Department of Educational Studies says parents, teachers and social service providers all have an important role to play in supporting young people's mental health.

But, at the center of that conversation should be the youth themselves.

Hutchison says youth should be part of the conversation about the effects of social media and cellphone use on their personal lives.

"Schools should work to create safe spaces for students to discuss how social media and cell phone use intersect with their social identities and feelings of self-worth," he says.

He believes schools can serve as common social spaces for teachers and upper elementary and [secondary school students](#) to discuss the reasons behind the cellphone ban, its goals, and the pros and cons of such a mandate.

"In addition to [cellphone use](#), the stresses of the post-pandemic era are also a significant contributor to young people's mental health issues," Hutchison says. "Banning cellphones in schools is not a remedy for all the [mental health issues](#) many youth are experiencing."

For [young children](#) in particular, meaningful interaction with physical materials in the real world—including nature—is key to healthy developmental growth, he adds.

Provided by Brock University

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