

Get Phones Out of Schools Now

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In May 2019, I was invited to give a lecture at my old high school in Scarsdale, New York. Before the talk, I met with the principal and his top administrators. I heard that the school, like most high schools in America, was struggling with a large and recent increase in mental illness among its students. The primary diagnoses were depression and anxiety disorders, with increasing rates of self-harm; girls were particularly vulnerable. I was told that the mental-health problems were baked in when students arrived for ninth grade: Coming out of middle school, many students were already anxious and depressed. Many were also already addicted to their phone.

Ten months later, I was invited to give a talk at Scarsdale Middle School. There, too, I met with the principal and her top administrators, and I heard the same thing: Mental-health problems had recently gotten much worse. Even many of the students arriving for sixth grade, coming out of elementary school, were already anxious and depressed. And many, already, were addicted to their phone.

To the teachers and administrators I spoke with, this wasn't merely a coincidence. They saw clear links between rising phone addiction and declining mental health, to say nothing of declining academic performance. A common theme in my conversations with them was: *We*

all hate the phones. Keeping students off of their devices during class was a constant struggle. Getting students' attention was harder because they seemed permanently distracted and congenitally distractible. Drama, conflict, bullying, and scandal played out continually during the school day on platforms to which the staff had no access. I asked why they couldn't just ban phones during school hours. They said too many parents would be upset if they could not reach their children during the school day.

A lot has changed since 2019. The case for phone-free schools is much stronger now. As my research assistant, [Zach Rausch](#), and I have documented at my Substack, [After Babel](#), evidence of an [international epidemic](#) of mental illness, which [started around 2012](#), has continued to accumulate. So, too, has evidence that it was [caused in part](#) by social media and the sudden move to smartphones in the early 2010s. Many parents now see the addiction and distraction these devices cause in their children; most of us have heard harrowing stories of self-harming behavior and suicide attempts among our friends' children. Two weeks ago, the United States surgeon general [issued an advisory](#) warning that social media can carry "a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents."

[From the December 2019 issue: The dark psychology of social networks](#)

We now also have more precedents: [many more examples](#) of schools that have gone entirely phone-free during the school day. So the time is right for parents and educators to ask: *Should we make the school day phone-free? Would that reduce rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm? Would it improve educational outcomes?* I believe that the answer to all of these questions is yes.

What Phones Do to Kids in School

Think about how hard it is for you to stay on task and sustain a train of thought while working on your computer. Email, texts, and alerts of all kinds continually present you with opportunities to do something easier and more fun than what you're doing now. If you are over age 25, you have a fully mature frontal cortex to help you resist temptation and maintain focus, and yet you probably still have difficulty doing so. Now imagine a phone in a child's pocket, buzzing every few minutes with an invitation to do something other than pay attention. There's no mature frontal cortex to help them stay on task.

Many studies have established that, despite schools' rules against it, students [check their phone](#) a lot during class, and that they receive and send texts if they can get away with it. Their focus is often and [easily derailed](#) by interruptions from their device. [One study](#) from 2016 found that 97 percent of college students said they sometimes use their phone during class for noneducational purposes. Nearly 60 percent of students said that they spend more than 10 percent of class time on their phone, mostly texting. Many studies show that students who use their phone during class [learn less](#) and get [lower grades](#).

You might be thinking that these findings are merely correlational; maybe the smarter students are just better able to resist temptation? Perhaps, but experiments using random assignment likewise show that using or just seeing a phone or receiving an alert causes students to underperform.

For example, consider this study, aptly titled “Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One’s Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity.” The students involved in the study came into a lab and took tests that are commonly used to measure memory capacity and intelligence. They were randomly assigned to one of three groups, given the following instructions: (1) Put your phone on your desk, (2) leave it in your pocket or bag, or (3) leave it out in another room. None of these conditions involve active phone use—just the potential distraction of knowing your phone is there, with texts and social-media posts waiting. The results were clear: The closer the phone was to students’ awareness, the worse they performed on the tests. Even just having a phone in their pocket sapped students’ abilities.

The problem is not just transient distraction, though any distraction in the classroom will impede learning. Heavy phone or social-media use may also have a cumulative, enduring, and deleterious effect on adolescents’ abilities to focus and apply themselves. Nearly half of American teens say that they are online “almost constantly,” and such continuous administration of small pleasures can produce sustained changes in the brain’s reward system, including a reduction of dopamine receptors. This shifts users’ general mood toward irritability and anxiety when separated from their phones, and it reduces their ability to focus. That may be one reason why heavy phone users have lower GPAs. As the neuroscientists Jaan Aru and Dmitri Rozgonjuk recently argued: “Smartphone use can be disruptively habitual, with the main detrimental consequence being an inability to exert prolonged mental effort.”

But smartphones don’t just pull students away from schoolwork; they pull them away from one another too.

The psychologist Jean M. Twenge and I have found a global increase in loneliness at school beginning after 2012. Students around the world became less likely to agree with survey items such as “I feel like I belong at school” and more likely to agree with items such as “I feel lonely at school.” That’s roughly when teens went from mostly using flip phones to mostly using smartphones. It’s also when Instagram caught fire with girls and young women globally, following its acquisition by Facebook, introducing selfie culture and its poisonous levels of visual social comparison.

One way that phones have hurt our relationships is through “phubbing” (a contraction of *phone snubbing*), when a person breaks away from a conversation to look at their screen. Research shows that it interferes with the intimacy and perceived quality of social interactions. People who are more addicted to their phones are, unsurprisingly, the biggest phubbers, which may explain why people who are the heaviest users of phones or social

media are also the most depressed and lonely. Once some students start phubbing others, then the others feel pressure to pull out their own phone, and in a flash, the culture of the entire school has changed.

If you have any doubt that phones in school stunt social connections, just talk to students about what happens at lunch time. My undergraduate students at NYU tell me that having real conversations is difficult, because most of their fellow students keep their phones on the table and frequently break away to check or respond to notifications. A 2018 study by the social psychologists Ryan Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev, and Elizabeth Dunn tested my students' intuition. They invited hundreds of college students and community members to share meals at a restaurant, with family or friends. They randomly assigned participants in each small group to either put their phones on the table or put them away. The results? "When phones were present (vs. absent), participants felt more distracted, which reduced how much they enjoyed spending time with their friends/family."

I've been studying and writing about the effects of smartphones and social media on teens' behavior, development, and mental health for six years now. To help organize the existing research on these topics, I've created a series of open-source Google documents, which I've curated with Rausch. We recently created a phone-free-schools collaborative review, cataloging the studies I've noted in this article and many more.

Consider the words of the MIT professor Sherry Turkle in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*: Because of our phones, she writes, "we are forever elsewhere." If we want children to be present, learn well, make friends, and feel like they belong at school, we should keep smartphones and social media out of the school day for as long as possible.

What Does It Mean to Go Phone-Free?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2020, "cellphone bans were in place in 77% of U.S. schools." But this high number seems to refer to a very low bar: It includes any school that tells students they should not use their phone while in class—unless the use is related to class. That's not really a ban; it's more of an unenforceable wish. Such a policy guarantees struggle between teachers and students, and it means that there are always kids looking at phones hidden in their laps or books, especially in the classes where the teacher has grown exhausted by the never-ending game of phone policing. As long as *some* kids are posting and texting during the school day, that raises the pressure on *everyone else* to check their phones during the school day. Nobody wants to be the last person to know the thing that everyone else is texting about.

Other countries are ahead of the U.S. on phone policy. France banned the use of mobile phones on school grounds through grade nine in 2018 (though the law allows students to keep their phone in their bag or pocket, so students still use their phone stealthily). In New

South Wales, Australia, the use of mobile phones has been banned in elementary schools and will soon be banned in high schools, although schools can decide how to implement the bans.

Some schools in the U.S. have now taken similarly uncompromising stances on phones. For example, the author Mark Oppenheimer wrote earlier this year in *The Atlantic* about St. Andrew's, a small boarding school in Delaware that allows students to use their phones only when in their dorm rooms, not when anywhere else on campus—a move that some students initially resisted but now has widespread student support.

More American schools—arguably all schools—should make themselves into genuinely phone-free zones. How would that look in practice? I think it's helpful to think of phone restrictions on a scale from 1 to 5, as follows:

Level 1: Students can take their phone out during class, but only to use it for class purposes.

Level 2: Students can hold on to their phone but are not supposed to take it out of their pocket or backpack at all during class time.

Level 3: Phone caddies in classrooms: Students put their phone into a wall pocket or storage unit at the start of each class, and then pick it up at the end of that class.

These three levels seem to be the ones most commonly employed by American schools today. I believe that the first two are nearly useless. Many students do not have the impulse control to stop themselves from checking their phone during class time if the phone is within reach. One teacher at Scarsdale High School told me that even when a ban on using phones during class is enforced, some students will say that they need to use the bathroom in order to check their phone.

Phone caddies are a little better for learning, because they get the phone out of the student's pocket, but their effect on school social life may be worse: A likely result of the practice is that *all times between classes* will be dominated by kids looking down silently at their phones, getting the fix they were denied for 50 minutes during class. When they do talk with friends, they'll give those friends only a fraction of their full attention.

So let's move on:

Level 4: Lockable pouches (such as those made by Yondr). Students are required to put their phone into their own personal pouch when they arrive at school, which is then locked with a magnetic pin (like the anti-theft tags used in clothing stores). Students keep the pouch with them but cannot unlock it until the end of the school day, when they are given access to a magnetic unlocking device.

Level 5: Phone lockers. Students lock their phone into a secure unit with many small compartments when they arrive at school. They keep their key and get access to the phone lockers again only when they leave school.

Both of these practices put any student seen using a phone during the school day in clear violation of policy. They are the only two policies I know of that can create phone-free schools. They are the policies most likely to produce substantial educational, social, and mental-health benefits, because they are the only approaches that give students six or seven hours a day of time away from their phone.

Lockable pouches are low-cost and easy to implement. However, I have heard from some students that their classmates (aided by YouTube videos) find ways to open their pouches and use their phones whenever they think no adult is watching. (A Yondr employee told me that the company is working to improve its pouch lock, and also said that schools should do regular pouch checks, which would reveal the damage from the most common methods of illicit unlocking.)

Phone lockers may be more complicated to put in place, logistically—especially at large schools. But they are the most reliable way to separate students from their phone for the duration of the school day and would therefore deliver the greatest benefits.

A school that goes phone-free would still have to figure out what to do about laptops, tablets, and computers in the classroom. Students would surely use any internet-connected device to send and receive texts, and to reach their social-media accounts. Last year, I banned all screens—even laptops for taking notes—from all of my undergraduate and MBA classes, and at the end of each semester, students strongly agreed that this improved the class for them. But even absent a laptop ban, these larger devices are more easily managed and are not as likely as smartphones to disrupt social interactions outside of class.

Those who oppose phone bans raise a number of objections. Smartphones can be useful teaching tools, for instance, and may make it easier for some teachers to create engaging lesson plans. That's true, but any increase in engagement during a lesson may be offset by students getting distracted during the same lesson. When we add in the costs to all other teachers and the loss of social connection between classes, it's hard to see how the marginal benefit of a phone-based lesson outweighs the costs of a phone-focused student body.

A more common argument comes from parents, many of whom are afraid that something might go wrong at school and want to ensure that they can reach their children at all times. These fears are understandable but are also part of the cause of Gen Z's mental-health problems. In his book *Paranoid Parenting*, the sociologist Frank Furedi describes how a new style of protective parenting swept through British and American society in the 1990s, in response to the perception that risks to children were rising. When parents believe that

everything is risky and they can't trust other adults to protect their children, they take a more defensive approach to parenting. They try to protect their children from all risks, even when that deprives their children of valuable experiences of independence.

But today's parents, who grew up during a period when crime rates were much higher than they are now, generally have fond memories of walking or biking to school with other kids, or just having time away from parental supervision to hang out with friends. I believe that children and teens would benefit developmentally if they were to go six or seven hours each day out of contact with their parents.

What about school shootings? I'm the father of two high-school students, and of course I would want to connect with my children in such a nightmare scenario. But would a school where every student has a smartphone be safer than one in which only the adults have smartphones? Ken Trump, the president of National School Safety and Security Services, warns that using a cellphone during an emergency can increase safety risks. "During a lockdown, students should be listening to the adults in the school who are giving life-saving instructions," Trump explains. "Phones can distract from that. Silence can also be key, so you also don't want that phone noise attracting attention." In addition, it seems to me that 300 parents rushing to the school in 300 cars would probably make things more difficult for first responders.

As the teen-mental-health crisis rolls on and rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm continue to rise, we are not helpless. It would be great if social-media platforms enforced their own minimum age of 13 to open accounts, but all signs indicate that they won't unless compelled by Congress. It would be great if Congress would compel them, and in fact several bills are being considered right now toward that end. It would be better still if the minimum age for using social media were raised to at least 16. The solutions to this crisis are wide-ranging, and some may need to involve the federal government.

But parents, teachers, and school administrators can take meaningful action too, right now. Although it's outside the scope of this essay, parents who have not yet given their children a smartphone can resolve to provide only dumb phones until high school, and they can coordinate with the parents of their children's friends, making that choice easier for all families involved. Schools that are using the lower levels of phone restriction can resolve to move up to lockable pouches or phone lockers, and many schools could implement these changes by September. My hope as a researcher is that a farsighted governor or school-district superintendent will implement these changes experimentally, by randomly assigning some middle schools to implement them as soon as possible and other schools to do so a year later. That way we could gain high-quality experimental evidence as to whether phone-free schools really confer the benefits that I have described.

“It helped me a lot,” one student at San Mateo High School in California told NBC News after her school started using lockable pouches. “Before, I would usually just like curl over in the side of my desk, and, like, check my phone and text everyone. But now there’s no other thing for us to look at or do except for talk to our teacher or pay attention.”

All children deserve schools that will help them learn, cultivate deep friendships, and develop into mentally healthy young adults. All children deserve phone-free schools.

This essay is adapted from Jonathan Haidt’s Substack, [After Babel](#).