



Schools should be phone-free zones

The School District of Philadelphia has been debating the merits of phone-free schools. Here's what it should know.



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by Melissa G. Hunt, For The Inquirer
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Adolescents are addicted to their phones. This isn't their fault. The devices and the apps that run on them (especially social media sites like [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Snapchat](#), and [TikTok](#)) are designed to be addictive — to give developing brains little hits of dopamine every time they pick them up. That is how the

companies that make those apps make money.

The School District of Philadelphia has been [debating the merits of phone-free schools](#) and has recently paused the discussion about whether to contract with a company that makes magnetic pouches to contain students' phones during the school day. These pouches are already used by school districts in New York, Detroit, and Boston.

Kids should not have access to their phones during class time, and phone-free schools, for the full day, are a great idea.

There are a number of ways to accomplish this — some low tech (say, hanging a shoe rack with multiple pockets at the entrance of every classroom), and some high tech (like the magnetic pouches) — but having a consistent, enforceable phone-free culture in schools would go a long way toward improving our children's

learning and their overall quality of life. Most public schools nationwide [prohibit cell phone use by students](#), but the rules are often applied inconsistently — for instance, students can use their phones in hallways or during lunch. Philadelphia public schools leave it to individual schools to decide.

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Social media companies' ad revenues rely on keeping as many eyes as possible glancing at phones as frequently as possible, viewing as much content as possible, for as long as possible. Many young people quickly develop [nomophobia](#), or fear of being unable to pick up and check their phones constantly. The pull is

similar to that of addiction to chemical substances and is extraordinarily difficult for young people to resist, even when they want to.

It is not just the amount of time our kids spend on their smartphones, but also the [pervasiveness](#) of smartphone use, that should concern us. Kids check their phones throughout the day, multiple times per hour, often in inappropriate contexts. Doing so makes kids disengage from what they are supposed to be focusing on — whether it's what their friend across the lunch table is telling them or the lesson their teacher is trying to impart.

Phone use at family meal times, while trying to do homework, in bed at night when they should be sleeping, and especially at school have all been linked to a number of [negative outcomes](#), including behavioral difficulties, lower quality of life, reduced well-being, and poor school performance. A

number of studies have found that smartphone use is correlated with **worse academic performance**, including lower scores on standardized tests and lower GPAs.

What is most concerning for our school-age children is that using smartphones **during class time** has a huge impact on overall performance. This is not surprising. Smartphones, and the world of digital media they contain, are incredibly distracting. Using a phone (even just glancing at it to register a text message or notification) can disrupt attention and focus and can cause a student to lose track of what a teacher is saying.

Pervasive smartphone use is strongly associated with worse academic outcomes.

The overall finding of the empirical literature is that pervasive smartphone use is strongly

associated with [worse academic outcomes](#). Ask any teacher, and they will tell you that an enormous amount of time, energy, and educational opportunity is wasted in class trying to get kids off of their phones. Parents may not realize that kids are watching Netflix during math, checking Instagram during English, and scrolling through TikTok videos during bio labs — but they are.

Some young people are able to deploy smartphone [management strategies](#) such as turning off notifications, turning the sound off entirely, or placing the phone out of sight and out of reach in a bag to reduce distraction and improve focus.

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These self-regulatory strategies can help moderate the negative impact of phones on academic performance. But relying on kids to use these self-control strategies places the entire burden on the child to fend off the efforts of multibillion-dollar companies that make their products so addictive and enticing that they are almost impossible to resist. It's like sitting a kid at a table loaded with doughnuts and cookies and asking them to eat the one piece of broccoli that's off to the side.

I would argue that it is up to adults — parents, teachers, schools, coaches, choral directors, and others — to help kids set appropriate limits on smartphone use. What does this look like?

Parents should insist that their kids put their phones away (in another room, if necessary) during family meal times. Phones should

be left in the kitchen to charge overnight, not in the bedroom. If your teen uses their phone as an alarm clock, buy them a cheap digital alarm with red numbers instead. It will help their sleep enormously. And perhaps most importantly, schools should be phone-free zones during the day.

I encourage the Board of Education of the School District of Philadelphia to take steps to ban cell phone use by all students while at school, including in classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms. Our children's learning and their overall mood and quality of life will be better for it.

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