

Should we ban phones in schools?

by Daisy Turnbull

- 1 Every Sunday morning, my phone will get a screentime notification of how much (usually too much) time I've spent on my phone in the past week. I use my phone a lot. I am writing this on my phone. I also know when not to use my phone, when to have it on silent, and when it is using me more than I am using it. I have learned how to do this because sometimes that screen time notification is a bit too high.
- 2 Screentime gets a really bad rap, and most of the time it is deserved. However, not all screen time is equal. Grouping all screentime as equal is like saying all "paper time" is equal – reading the newspaper, going through your bills, making paper aeroplanes, writing letters. Our phones house most of our lives now – camera, wallet, important documents, banking, social lives, and of course, a phone. Our phones are also the scene of a lot of darkness, especially for young people. Social media can at once provide community and connection, as well as cyber-bullying and dangerous behaviour. It has been linked to deteriorating mental health in teens. And yet, I'm no fan of statewide phone bans at high schools.
- 3 Phones are definitely a problem, but more than anything they are symptomatic of the problem. Parents want their kids to be on their phones less, but they also want to be able to contact their kids whenever they need. In my time in the classroom, the phone accidentally pinging in a blazer pocket is more often than anything else a parent changing plans for that afternoon or reminding their child of something.
- 4 Besides interfering with parental routines, a statewide phone ban also takes away principal autonomy. "I'll tell you how to run your school, thank you very much." And yet, at the same time, the message is: "I've made this new rule. You figure out how to police it." I've been at a school at the start of a phone ban, and while it was successful, the first few months involved a lot of running around by teachers and writing student names on Post-its and sticking them to phones, hoping they didn't fall off while carrying them down to reception to be collected after the school bell. Can we all agree that 15 amid a staff shortage might not be the best strategy?



- 5 Seven out of 10 high schools already practise phone bans during the day. But there are situations where students do need their phones, and it is up to principals and teachers to manage that. Schools deal with the intricacies of individual situations on a daily basis, and rules that cover everyone do not allow for the compassion needed when working with students and their families. For some students in BYOD (bring your own device) schools, their phones are their device. They may not have access to a laptop or tablet as well as their smartphone. Some students are responsible for their younger siblings. Some have a job to help support their families. Some are awaiting calls about a health condition, or that of a relative.
- 6 Politicians would do better to focus on what they can do with social media companies and continue to work with the eSafety Commissioner to make the online world a safer place, rather than limiting access entirely. Schools will continue to educate students about digital citizenship and their online responsibilities. And for parents, role-modelling and talking to children about the online world is the best way to help them navigate an ever-changing landscape and create clear boundaries around phone use. Finally, put your own phone away for a bit, for your own mental health.

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