

My name is John Dever. I have been a public high school teacher in Maine since 2000. Many things have changed about teaching and learning in that time, but one of the most significant changes has been the widespread use of cell phones by students during school hours. Even when teachers and schools create systems to limit or ban the use of phones during instructional time, the phones remain incredibly problematic. Students feel the phones buzz in their pockets and hear the notification dings from their backpacks. They sense enormous pressure to check and see what the notification is, wondering if it is something important from home or from a friend (or worse, if it represents an act of cyberbullying). They lose focus on the lesson and will often find a way to check their phone (by asking to use the restroom or sneaking it out of their pocket while the teacher helps another student). Phone use by one student is also actively disruptive to other students, with students asking to take phone calls from parents or prospective employers during class time or using phones to photograph or record peers (usually without consent). Students will even try hopping on social media, or even play games or watch movies. Teachers obviously do their best to monitor and restrict these activities, but students are often very skilled at masking their use of phones from even very diligent and observant teachers.

I have a phone myself, of course, as do my own sons, who recently graduated high school. I understand that they are useful tools and are vital communication devices between students and their homes or in an emergency. But the constant struggle to monitor and restrict phone use in classrooms has become an enormous task that pulls teachers away from their primary task of helping students learn relevant skills and content.

Last year Morse High School, where I teach, began to require students to use "Yondr" pouches while in school. These magnetically-locked cloth pouches have proven to be a game changer. Students still have their phones in their possession, but they cannot access them during the school day. In a true emergency, students would not need to scramble to their locker, to the teacher's desk, or to a rack on the door to try and find their own phone. In dire circumstances, students are already in possession of their phones and could force open the pouch to access their phone.

Not only has this new policy lifted the enormous burden of individual teachers monitoring phones, it has created a climate where students have several hours a day without their phones dominating their minds. They don't have to track and worry about notifications and responding to notifications. They can tell employers that they are not available for work calls until the end of the school day. Students do not have to worry about being recorded without their consent or cyberbullied while they are at school. Student focus has dramatically improved and students do more face-to-face interactions throughout the day. I have rarely witnessed a policy change have such a dramatic positive effect on school climate and student engagement.

I fully support a law that will give this gift of a few cell phone free hours a day to all Maine students.

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